



Francis Koeller (1858-1926)

– An obituary by Norman Hay

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FRANCIS KOELLER: AN APPRECIATION

The death of Dr. Francis Koeller [see photograph on page 3], on September 6, removes from amongst us a great musician, the best of whose life was spent in the service of Belfast music, and whose own fame was, indeed, sacrificed to some extent to that service. It is not too much to say that the measure of Dr. Koeller's achievement for the progress of the art at Belfast was also the measure of his comparative obscurity so far as the outside world was concerned. Elsewhere his great gifts might have won for him enduring renown; as it is, his name will survive most probably by reason of the work he accomplished in an uncongenial sphere: work, the fruits of which we enjoy now with gratitude, but work which in its seed-time was scantily supported, and still more scantily appreciated.

Only those who can recall what Belfast was musically, thirty, or (as I can) even twenty years ago, can realise its tremendous progress, both in taste and accomplishment. Doubtless, many other influences have been at work, notably that of the Competition Festival movement; but the influence of Koeller, his enthusiasm, his brilliance as a conductor, and the driving force of his personality, loom over all else as making Belfast what it is — not, nor ever likely to be, a Manchester or an Edinburgh, but at least a community where, amidst the manufacture of linens and the building of ships, music thrives and has a worthy and abiding place in the lives of many.

Koeller's life may be divided into three periods, with two short intervening episodes. A native of Aix-la-Chapelle [born Franz Köhler] and trained at Dresden, Berlin, and Paris (a pupil of [Camillo] Sivori for violin), he was in early life an orchestral and solo violinist, touring extensively in Germany and France. His career as a violinist was suddenly cut short by a nervous affection of the bow-arm. Undaunted, he came to England in his early twenties, and embarked upon a course of study with James Higgs. Already well versed in free composition, he had apparently neglected the more academic side; and in later days he often spoke appreciatively of the help received from Higgs in strict counterpoint. &c. For a short time organist at Taunton (he never had a brilliant technique on organ or pianoforte), he entered upon the second 'period' when he came to Belfast, in 1887, as conductor of the Philharmonic, a post he held until 1912. What he achieved in that period we know best who have the memory of the 'Gerontius' performances in 1905 and 1907 (which many, including the English soloists, felt to be far superior to, and more truly Elgarian than, the early attempts in England) or of his swan-song, the memorable reading of Act 3 of 'Parsifal,' in March, 1912.

Since then the Philharmonic has progressed under Mr. Godfrey Brown, and now ranks amongst the best amateur societies in the United Kingdom. It is, however, no depreciation of Mr. Brown's good work, but merely justice to his predecessor, to point out the vast difference of the present resources from those of twenty years ago. Then, not only the amateur strings, but the best obtainable wind

were very inferior to those of today; indeed the start of good orchestral string playing, of which Belfast is not unjustly proud, dates from the advent of Koeller. As an instructor, he was, like so many gifted men, eccentric and somewhat unmethodical, relying upon impulse and mood. In a word, he lived for the inspiration of the glorious moment — and more, he imparted it by that wonderful magnetic force which, had his lot been thrown elsewhere, would have placed him amongst the world's great conductors. How often did we despair at the afternoon rehearsal! How often he made us surpass our own best hopes at the evening concert!

I recall one occasion in particular — the Mass in D — when our own limited efforts in the orchestra were very poorly supported by second-rate soloists from London, who barely knew their parts. The result at the concert was not ideal; but Koeller pulled us through, and averted disaster again and again in a way that left us gasping with thankfulness at the close. His beat was quiet, his style unobtrusive; only those in front of him knew the power of that glance and that left hand. His memory and grip of a score were remarkable: often did I see him, as I have seen Wood in later days, conduct for five minutes without glancing at the score, and then turn over a dozen or so pages with the utmost sang-froid. Indeed his never-failing 'leads' tempted us to be slothful at times. As a fellow-member said to me long afterwards, 'You could always go out for a drink at the fifty bars' rest, and depend upon Koeller to bring you in.'

Koeller graduated Mus.B. Oxon., in 1886, and Mus.D. in 1898; but it is safe to say that 'Mus.D. Oxon.,' though he was proud of it, was no real indication of his powers. As a 'coach' he was pitifully orthodox and a slave to petty rules: in that respect the victim of the age he lived in. But, away from examination work, no greater iconoclast ever breathed. He loved to overthrow the ancient citadels of academicism, and have a tilt at the school-men. The real value of his teaching was his way of 'You must not . . .'; then, throwing aside the text-book, 'Of course, when the examination is over you may . . .' and he would dash down an illuminating false relation or pair of consecutives, or some brilliant touch of unorthodox orchestration which would have scandalised the Oxford of Stainer's day. As conductor, so as teacher, ever at his best when, untrammelled by precept, he could act by the force of the inner impulse.

As a composer he was born twenty years too soon. Full of romantic feeling, and instinct with dramatic vitality, his best work was worlds superior to that of most of his British contemporaries; but, like his conducting, fated to pass unnoticed. 'Reullura' (his Mus.Doc. Exercise, and also the prize cantata of the second year of the Feis Ceoil — a work of which Parratt spoke glowingly) and the Ode for the opening of the Belfast City Hall were the two largest; but there were also several fine orchestral works. He was a master of orchestration, and in that respect alone, apart from its melodic charm, and the great beauty of its choral sections, 'Reullura' deserved a longer life. Had he been born late enough to feel the influence which has permeated the school of Vaughan Williams (with whom he had, indeed, much in common, spiritually), Koeller might have reached a fuller maturity. As it was, he stopped at Wagner — his idol of idols; and that (plus the dash of Victorian sentimentalism and the cramping environment of Belfast) induced for the listener a sense of tentativeness in all but his best work.

Ill-health brought his retirement in 1912, and an ill-considered emigration to Australia. After three years there, he returned to Belfast, where he spent the last period in semi-obscurity, still teaching by force of necessity, but amongst a new generation who knew not Moses. Of his eccentricities (many of them merely groundless rumours), or of the charm and the nobility of thought revealed only to those who really knew him, this is not the place to speak; and only passing allusion can be made to his labours amongst the poor and disabled, such as his work with the Cripples' Choir, where he achieved wonderful results.

A sad history, it may be: the history of genius warped and thwarted by its time and environment. But, withal, the history of a great man, loved by the few and revered by all, even by his enemies; a man whose story is the story of a mighty work for art in the North of Ireland.

E.N.H. *

* Edward Norman Hay (1889-1943)



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