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Conductor Passes a Notable Milestone

Mr. E. Godfrey Brown has been associated with the Belfast Philharmonic for 34 years, and on Friday last conducted his 200th Concert for the Society.

He has received the congratulations and good wishes of music lovers on his fine record.



MR. E. GODFREY BROWN, O.B.E., who on Friday last conducted his 200th concert for the Belfast Philharmonic Society, has so constant a change in batons that he has a standing order with a firm in Bradford for them. They are made of lancewood and are despatched to him in dozen lots.

Mr. Brown's association with the Belfast "Phil" goes back to 1912, and naturally he has a store of interesting reminiscences of his work, of famous figures in the musical world, and of happenings out of the ordinary in his career as conductor. He was good enough on request to dip into his memories, to review his achievements, and discuss his ideals with a *Belfast Telegraph* representative who called upon him in his home in Holywood the other evening.

A lover of the works of the old masters and possessed of a discerning eye for the compositions of moderns, Mr. Brown has done much to enrich the musical life of the city. He holds his art in reverence, and seeks to have the full conception of the composer's mind conveyed in the interpretation, and the re-creation projected in all the expressed detail of the score.

"A man conducts with his eyes more than his baton," he said. "Successful conducting requires personality, years of experience and a thorough knowledge of vocal culture, combined with a sound knowledge of the instruments."

"Then we have the importance of environment. Throughout the years the Ulster Hall has been a sort of home to us. To my mind the hall is the embodiment of what a good concert hall should be, except for the seating and artists' room accommodation. Sir Henry Wood once told me that it had the best acoustics of any hall in which he had conducted."

“I think I can claim some of Mr. Churchill’s ‘blood, sweat and tears’ so far as conducting goes, for I have drawn all three. There were occasions in the Ulster Hall when the vast gathering listened throughout the oppressive heat, and perspiration was being frequently mopped from brows. I recall an occasion when we were performing *The Dream of Gerontius* with Sir Edward Elgar as guest conductor, and during the final rehearsal he asked me to take over for a while. He then took his seat near the front, and I remember going down to him at the end to find the great man crying. He had been moved by some new-found significance in the music or had been pondering over a theme which had stirred thoughts of the Passion. Elgar was such a man. He lived inside the theme.”

“And now you are waiting for me to tell you of the other incident – about the blood. Yes, that was an evening in December many years ago when we were performing *Messiah*. My baton got me into trouble that evening. A well-known cross-Channel soloist was taking part, and I was as usual conducting. We were a little cramped. I remember the hair-style of the time demanded that a large comb, more or less ornamental, be worn at the back. During one passage I suppose I became more enthusiastic than usual, and, by accident, the point of my baton caught the teeth of the large comb worn by the soloist and catapulted it into the audience. It struck an elderly gentleman on the head, inflicting a wound which bled for a time, and I remember an uncomfortable moment when the wounded gentleman came to the anteroom afterwards to complain, and how profusely I apologised for the unfortunate incident.”

The first work performed by the Society after Mr. Brown’s appointment was *News from Whydah*, by Balfour Gardiner, and since then it has given almost every modern choral work.

There were times when concerts had to commence at 6.30 p.m.; there were periods when epidemics of influenza depleted chorus and orchestra, and one bleak period when the Society felt the impact of death among the membership due to influenza. Mr. Brown has conducted through two wars, maintained the regular rehearsals during the “troubled times” in the city, and assisted in surmounting every difficulty.

On one occasion during the war of 1914-18 he received a telephone message at 5 a.m. to the effect that the Society’s concert could not take place in the Ulster Hall that evening as the Seaforth Highlanders had requisitioned the building and had moved in during the night. Mr. J. Herbert Ireland when informed of the difficulty made arrangements for the use of the Wellington Hall. Before 11 o’clock in the day the platform in the Wellington Hall had been extended ten feet and sufficient accommodation provided for chorus and orchestra.

There was a concert during the war of 1914-18 when Moiseiwitsch entered Ireland by Larne instead of Dublin, and was held up by the authorities. He had been booked to appear, but at the last moment was detained. A hurried message was sent to the Picture House, Royal Avenue, where a well-known London violinist was appearing, and his services were secured for the concert.

“There is one great occasion which I shall never forget,” said Mr. Brown. “I refer to the Royal Command Performance in the Royal Albert Hall, London, during our 1938-39 season. Eighty members of our Society went over, and London received us very warmly. Indeed we were the only choir encoored on that occasion, but my most thrilling moment came when I was received by their Majesties the King and Queen. The Queen said that when time permitted she always tuned in to the programmes from Belfast in which our Society had a part, and the King enquired what type of people formed the membership of the Society. I replied ‘Anything from a penny tram to a 20-horse-powered car;’ and his Majesty laughingly asked ‘And in which are you?’ I said ‘I think I am the penny tram,’ and his Majesty laughed again’.”

Mr. Brown, who received his musical education at the Royal College of Music, London, has adjudicated at many festivals, including Morecambe. In November next he will cross to adjudicate at the Blackpool Festival.

The war, Mr. Brown believes, did much to re-kindle interest in choral and orchestral music. *Messiah* concerts by the Society are always given to capacity houses, and even three performances are insufficient to meet the demand.

Throughout the years there has been a happy bond between conductor, chorus and orchestra. Here let a member of the chorus pay his tribute – “Mr. Brown has the saving grace of humour, and can come to a point quickly. He can explain in a few words what he wants to get at and what he wants us to give. He has an alert mind and can sort out the details instantly.”

Names stir up memories of useful work performed on behalf of the Philharmonic Society: – W. J. Stokes, J.P.; C. T. Millard, J. A. Milligan, Sir Frederick Money Penny, Mr. Sam Crymble, and that prince of secretaries, Sir Charles H. Brett. What memories are revived by the mention of H. C. Kelly, his Honour Judge Thompson, J B. M’Cutcheon, E. J. Dowdall and Harry MacBratney. Great names they are, and they recall great occasions.

Take up a bundle of old scores. Each one jogs the memory. Elgar’s *The Apostles*, *The Kingdom*, and *The Music Makers*; Holst’s *Hymn of Jesus*, Arthur Bliss’s *Morning Heroes*, Walton’s *Belshazzar’s Feast*, one of the most difficult ever performed by the Society; Dr. Dyson’s *Canterbury Pilgrims*, Bantock’s *Song of Songs*, the well-fingered copy of Bach’s B Minor Mass and this copiously marked copy of Handel’s *Messiah* which has been used in no fewer than 70 performances.

Programmes of some of these 200 performances make interesting reading, and the list of guest conductors includes Sir Edward Elgar, Sir Henry Wood, Sir Hamilton Harty, Sir Granville Bantock, Arthur Bliss, and Dr. George Dyson. Since 1912 no fewer than 4,000 choristers have been connected with the Society, and several hundred orchestral players have sat under Mr. Brown’s baton. Only a few members of 1912 days remain, but throughout the years many singers were brought to the front through the medium of the Society, and many conductors were given their first incentive to take up choir training and conducting.

Mr. Godfrey Brown has a record on which he is entitled to look back with pride and satisfaction and at this notable “milestone” on his journey as conductor he has the cordial congratulations and good wishes of the community.