



**Norman Hay** muses on the BBC concerts in the 1937/38 season; on its new musical director Walton O'Donnell (succeeding Godfrey Brown); on the artists and programmes; and on the BMS concerts.

*Belfast Telegraph*, Saturday 02 October 1937, page 8

## ***MUSIC NOTES***

### **The Saturday “Pops”**

**Concerts for the People. — “Back to Sixpence” Viewpoint. — Mr. Walton O’Donnell. — His Distinguished Career. — Ulster and Wellington Hall Programmes. — Eminent Artists. — Tempting Fare in Store. — Good Proportion New to Belfast. — Six B.M.S. Recitals.**

Last Saturday I reviewed the prospectuses of the Philharmonic and Celebrity concerts. It remains to complete my review of the season’s music activity by reference to the Saturday concerts and the British Music Society of Northern Ireland. I have already commented upon the high distinction of most of the artists engaged for the Philharmonic and Celebrity events; and that comment applies likewise, I am happy to say, to those now to be referred to.

#### **REGRETFUL THOUGHT.**

There will be a series of four Saturday orchestral concerts in the Ulster Hall, jointly controlled by the Corporation and the B.B.C., and a similar four in the Wellington Hall, of which the joint promoters are the City Y.M.C.A. and the B.B.C. With better trade conditions prevailing, it may be hoped that the prices are within the reach of a fair number of those for whom the concerts were originally intended, and certainly the cost is very low for the fare provided. Nevertheless, with no wish to stir up a sleeping dog, I still give a regretful thought to the old days of sixpence; and let us remember that it was a case then not only of 6d for an unreserved seat but of a very large proportion of such seats — so that Wellington Place and Bedford Street were lined with eager queues of just those people that the promoters wanted most. Recall the slogan, “1,000 seats for 6d!” — a slogan that certainly put Belfast on the musical map as never before. I have an uneasy fear that the present audience is not the old one, except for a few special enthusiasts here and there. Besides, are there now a thousand unreserved seats, even at 1s? I doubt it; but in saying so I have no idea of belittling the splendid work and ideals of the local promoters. In fact it is only right here to recall that when the B.B.C. raised the prices, Mr. Herbert Ireland promoted and sent up a largely signed requisition for the resumption of the 6d regime, and that it was loftily turned down by the mighty men at Broadcasting House.

## **GET THE MASSES BACK.**

I grant that most of those who, even in recent times, have attended the Saturday Pops are far worthier people musically than the “patrons” of the “big” concerts; in enthusiasm, attention and general demeanour they are an object lesson to the listless, fidgety, elite who form the large proportion of the highly-priced events. I dwell on this matter just because I long to see the people back on Saturdays — the Islanders, millworkers and other industrialists — who used to be there in throngs, and made Belfast, for those few years, to be more believed in than ever before or since.

The pity is that in so many ways — and because it ignores the help and guidance of those who could best advise it — the B.B.C. largely nullifies the good of its credit side by an appallingly large debit side. I shall say no more on that score now. I have raised this whole question of the concerts and of the struggling masses yearning for good music because I have hopes that Mr. Brown’s successor is a live wire, who will not only do things but get things done. Mr. Brown worked hard and nobly — all honour to him; but — be it said with no belittling — his methods seemed to me to lack something of “punch” in a crisis.

I fancy that his successor has got the firm hand and the punch, for all his geniality. He has the soft Irish smile and the winsome Irish address; but I should imagine — and I dare hope — that he has also the valuable Hibernian faculty for giving the k.o. in a scrap. I need not remind readers that Mr. Walton O’Donnell had a distinguished career as bandmaster before he went to the B.B.C. as conductor of its (London) military band, and I surmise (though it is to be understood that I have made no attempt to “interview him) that his Army training must have helped to make him “fortiter in re”, however “suaviter in modo” he is by nature. At the same time he has, no doubt, developed plenty of sympathy with the neophyte in the course of his work — as teacher of composition and conductor of orchestral classes — at the RAM. Three things have impressed me about the man: his personal charm, his breezy directness, and his obvious hatred of sham. Good luck to him, man and musician. This evening we greet him publicly in the Ulster Hall.

## **ULSTER HALL TO-NIGHT.**

This evening the B.B.C. Northern Ireland Orchestra will play Dvorak’s “Carnival” Overture, Rimsky-Korsakoff’s “Scheherazade”, Strauss’s “Don Juan”, a waltz by Glazounoff and Grainger’s arrangement of the old “Shepherd’s Hey” dance. The singer is Luigi Fort, tenor. Particulars of the remaining Ulster Hall concerts are as follow:— On November 20 — “The New World” Symphony (Dvorak), Ravel’s “Mother Goose” Suite, the “Giovanni” Overture and Vaughan Williams’s “The Lark Ascending”, for violin and orchestra (Lisa Minghetti, solo violin); a very delightful programme. Harold Williams will be the singer. This concert also will be conducted by Mr. O’Donnell. On February 5, Mr. Peter Montgomery will conduct an interestingly unusual set: an overture by Bruckner, the 19th century German who has been fervently acclaimed of late by a coterie in England; Concerto in D (K 271a) by Mozart, for violin and orchestra (Eda Kersey, soloist); part of a suite, “Much Ado about Nothing,” by the much-ado’ed modern, Erik Korngold; and a symphony by the Cambridge professor of last century, Sterndale Bennett. (I find it hard to imagine the last-named as a symphonist; but we can hope. Certainly he wrote that charming overture “The Naiads”, and a good deal more of far better music than the paltry, water-gruel anthem “God is a Spirit”, by which he is best known.) The final concert (March 19) brings Sir Adrian Boult as conductor, and Backhaus to play the solo part in the “Emperor”. Another great event of this concert is Vaughan Williams’s two-years-old symphony in F minor; one of his most considerable works

and a tremendous advance, in modernity and in style of scoring, on his previous idiom. I believe it is a work that will endure, despite certain acerbities and a kind of hell-for-leather heartlessness new to V.W. Anyhow, we shall eagerly await this first local performance. Harty's "The Wild Geese" and Berlioz's "Carnival Romain" will complete this weighty and exciting programme.

### **WELLINGTON HALL.**

At the Wellington Hall there will be a few old-timers we could have been spared. Who wants to hear the "Tannhäuser" Overture or Tschaikowsky's "Capriccio Italien" again — even according to O'Donnell? (But things might be for worse. At least we are spared the intermezzo from "Cav", concert opera of the "Bo. Girl" variety, and other "popular" sops of sad memory.) However, there is, otherwise, a fine array in store. On October 30 an interesting first performance here of the "Classical Symphony" by the ultra-modern Russian, Prokofieff; another novelty in the shape of Chopin's rarely played Concerto in F Minor (Maria Zoldesi, solo pianist); Elgar's "Cockaigne", and a delightful old friend in De Falla's "El Amor Brujo". Miriam Licette will sing. On December 11 Szigeti will be the solo violin in the Brahms Concerto, and we shall have a long-overdue Belfast revival of Stravinsky's "Fire Bird", together with a Haydn overture and — "Tannhäuser." On January 15 a long-due return visit of that fine pianist, Benno Moiseiwitsch; but he deserves a worthier job than — once more, for our sins — Rachmaninoff's dull, prosy Concerto in C Minor. Edward German's "Norwich" Symphony, the overture to Rossini's "Barber" and the aforesaid Tschaikowsky will complete a not over-exciting bill. Mr. O'Donnell is to conduct the above three concerts. Then on February 26 comes Sir Henry Wood to conduct Sibelius's Third Symphony, and that fine artist, Sala, to play solo in the Elgar 'Cello Concerto. Thanks be to all the gods to whom I have prayed for these two, especially Elgar's lovely work. Sir Henry, ever a Sibelius protagonist, has all the seven symphonies on at the Proms this season; and recalling his vital conducting of the 2nd here last season, we shall look forward to the No. 3. A Dohnanyi Suite will complete the programme.

Readers will agree that the above is a very tempting array, with a commendable proportion of music new to us here. All the eight concerts will begin at 7-45 except this evening's, which does not begin until 8.

### **THE B.M.S. PROGRAMME.**

The B.M.S. announces six recitals in the Smyth Hall, Lisburn Road, as follow:— October 8, 'cello and piano recital by Maurice Eisenberg and Harry Isaacs; Nov. 5, the Roth String Quartet (Vienna); December 3, song and piano recital by Roy Henderson and Gerald Moore; January 7, the Whinyates String Quartet, with Sylvia Spencer (oboe); February 11, the Grinke Trio; and on March 4, that unique and ever-welcome pair, Ethel Bartlett and Rae Robertson. All this, giving us that intimate chamber type of music that we do not get elsewhere, for a season ticket price £1. Next Friday we shall have sonatas for 'cello and piano by Brahms (in F major, op. 99) and Valentini, and exceedingly interesting solo groups. Details of the remaining recitals are not yet settled.

Truly, the musical salvation of this city cannot fail for want of good missionaries. Next Saturday I will consider certain forces — chiefly prohibitory — which are at work, unco guid folk who would fain keep Belfast in the artistic darkness which is typical of most of its church music.

### **RATHCOL.**