

Modern Composers

VII—ERIK CHISHOLM

An Interview by Watson Lyle

Some nine or ten summers ago I was staying with friends, M. and Mme. Pouishnoff, in a cottage they had taken for the season, delightfully situated at a sequestered part of the rugged coastline of North Cornwall. Through my open bedroom window the voice of the ocean would croon a *berceuse*, or seek with yells to overawe me to sleep, according to its mood; but the character of my *aubade* never varied. Promptly at 8 a.m. began the industrious application of the pianist's pupil, Erik Chisholm, to his morning's work at the keyboard. His afternoons were generally occupied at composition, though occasionally he would trudge off with me along the coast, or go swimming with his teacher while Mme. Pouishnoff and myself, from the comfort of the beach, watched them brave the breakers of the Atlantic. Well into the night, I believe, Chisholm read, or studied the planetary system through an enormous telescope. I suppose there were hours when he slept; but having just completed a commission for a book within scheduled time, his tireless energy seemed a reproach to my righteous laziness of those few weeks. And when I rediscovered him lately, as the moving spirit in the small group of Scottish moderns in music, and looked up his dossier and proceeded to interrogate him for this article, I found him at thirty-two with about two hundred compositions as black-and-white evidence of his unabated energy in the interim, plus the record of a sojourn in Nova Scotia in 1926 as professor at Picton University, where he gave fifty recitals, before coming home to study further at the University of Edinburgh under Professor Donald F. Tovey. Also that he is Hon. President of a society in his native city of Glasgow that has done much to bring before the public there the works of such prominent moderns as Bax, Bartók, Casella, Sibelius, Delius and Hindemith, as well as others who are little more than names to London—Lopatnikoff, Franz Mittler, Othmar Schoeck and Julius Röntgen. Appropriately for the composer's association with it, the society is styled "The Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music," and gives series of concerts to that end each winter season. Erik Chisholm has given himself recitals devoted to the works of Bartók, Kodály, Medtner, Gordon Jacob, Delius, William Walton and Constant Lambert.

He began to publish his compositions in 1926 (Curwens; Senart), his earliest pianoforte music showing descent from Chopin-Debussy, some of the pieces having titles and "programmes" of planetary association. Beginning five or six years ago, however, one notes a steadily increasing individualism, towards a Gaelic nationalistic idiom, which more and more becomes his subconscious expression in the way that Sibelius is "nationally" Finnish, or Vaughan Williams "English." Thus it is that his most recent work (1929-32) is his most representative, including a Concerto for piano and orchestra, Dance Suite for the same ensemble, "Piobroch" sonatina for piano, sonata for two celli and sonata for violin alone. That all are in MSS. can be

explained probably by the inability of music publishers to issue anything during the present financial crisis that does not ensure quick returns.

As we chatted over tea I noticed that he had not greatly changed, unless physically. His black hair had become tinged with grey, but he was less assertive and more quietly sure in conversation, though his dark eyes still glinted brightly at one from behind and over his spectacles. One was still conscious too of the old, underlying energy vibrations beneath the fleshly covering of his lean frame and tanned, eager face; and the odd impression of a native shyness routed by the force of an inward compulsion.

"Fancy you forsaking the musical pursuit of planetary bodies for the more earth-bound contact of a Gaelic folk-idiom!" I remarked. He smiled his quick, good-humoured smile and said: "Most of my works now are of Scottish character, and draw their inspiration from, and profess to be, a legitimate development of the wonderful literature of music for the Highland bagpipe. 'Piobaireachd' (Highland bagpipe tunes) and the smaller pipe pieces, march, strathspey and reel, are definite art-forms peculiar to Scotland, and as such are capable of development along recognised 'Symphonic' lines, like the dance forms—mazurka, polka, valse, etc.—from which Chopin, Smetana, Dvorák——"

"Tchaikowsky, Moussorgsky, Sibelius and so on," I murmured.

"—And other 'National' composers built their music. I now find myself speaking, musically, in the characteristic idiom of the MacCrimmons (a great family of Piobaireachd composers), through a twentieth century technique, and writing for the modern orchestra instead of for the Highland

bagpipe. Virtually a descent of the MacCrimmon line, and I am occupied with the same emotions to which to give expression. My mother is a McLeod, thus giving me descent from two Highland clans."

"But what of the actual themes, apart from folk tunes?"

"Themes come to me generally as a consequence of the mood I wish to express."

"Does melody or rhythm come first in your music?"

"I rather think the rhythmic impulse is strongest; a definite body stimulus which, by its continued reiteration induces a feeling of magnetic attraction (or sheer monotony) is a characteristic of the Piobaireachd, and also in my music."

"And new forms in music?"

"Art-forms are a result of accumulated tendencies, maybe centuries old, requiring years to ripen to maturity. Only when mature do they provide a kind of subconscious background on which the composer projects his ideas. Their choice is one of the greatest problems the twentieth century composer has to solve."

Thus then had the boy of twenty, persistently clambering up the slippery Bedruthan Steps* before me a decade ago, grown into the man with the musical salvation of his country as his goal.

* Gigantic stone "steps" about six miles from Newquay.



Erik Chisholm.

CARDINAL MERRY DEL VAL

Rafael Cardinal Merry del Val.

By F. A. Forbes. 6s. (Longmans.)

"To live by faith and to seek only the Will of God is the way to peace, courage and happiness." "It is only by seeking God in all things, even in those that in their nature are farthest from Him, that we can learn to live alone with Him." "The certainty that God knows all, that He is really our Father and that He does not expect us to use the instrument of praise when it is out of order, should lead us to rest quietly in His arms like a sick child, and to rejoice to do His will." These quotations, selected at random from his writings, form the leitmotiv of Cardinal Merry del Val's philosophy. If Miss Forbes's straightforward character sketch is neither very profound nor very brilliant, she at least succeeds in presenting us with the figure of a sincere and humble-minded saint, whose internal devotion was only equalled by his complete resignation to the will of God. No one can read this short, clearly written biography without being impressed by these characteristics of the great Cardinal, though, as he is careful to point out to an Anglican clergyman on the edge of conversion to the Roman Church, "love is intelligent, especially when it is divine, and it must rest on knowledge." A blind and thoughtless resignation was the last thing the Cardinal advocated.

We are given the portrait of a man whose ambition was "to be a parish priest of a large and poor parish," preferably in the diocese of Westminster, but who was forced by circumstances to occupy a difficult public position as Secretary of State to the Pope. We see the Cardinal performing his multifarious duties, from codifying Canon Law and investigating the validity of Anglican Orders, to talking platitudes with the endless stream of visitors to the Pope and running his boys' club in Trastevere, the slummiest quarter of Rome. "The child of diplomatic surroundings

and traditions" (so writes Cardinal Bourne in his preface to the work), he displayed to the outer world an apparently rigid and unresponsive demeanour. Yet beneath the official exterior of a great prelate was concealed the humble devotion of an earnest priest, continually sacrificing himself in the interests of God's Church. A future Lytton Strachey may find in this conflicting yet simple character as suitable matter for satiric criticism as in Cardinal Manning, and would certainly pounce on the absurdly banal views which Miss Forbes was injudicious enough to include in her life of her hero. Her partiality, in this instance at least, has blinded her literary judgment.

As Secretary of State to Pius X, Cardinal Merry del Val was regarded as chiefly responsible for the issue of the Decree Lamentabili and the Encyclical Pascendi, in which the heresies of the "Modernists" were vigorously exposed and condemned. The Cardinal wrote that the work was the Pope's, "and he takes of course the full responsibility. . . . No Catholic," he adds, "can hold these false theories." It is however undeniable that his own refusal to compromise was on this occasion a chief bulwark of the Pope's attitude. Admitting the premises of the Roman Church, the Cardinal was right. But in point of fact the exclusion, not by any means of all, but of many scientific and intellectual men, has tended to confine her teaching to a limited number rather than to diffuse it in the surrounding world, "shaken," as the Cardinal remarked after the War, "by the onslaught of a new paganism." Such an uncompromising attitude is generally overtaken by its inevitable Nemesis. France, Portugal and now Spain (the Cardinal's own country) have all witnessed the growth of anti-clerical sentiment, separation of Church from State, the burning of churches and dissolution of religious orders. But whatever are the results of such an outlook, we cannot but admire the inflexibility of the Cardinal's purpose and the certainty of his dogmatic beliefs, in an age like the present when indifference to all organised religion is a widespread malady.

PHILIP ROBINSON.

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