

►► Musical Reminiscence-Hunting ◀◀

By MARSHALL KERNOCHAN

THE daily press, for the past fortnight, has been the arena of a verbal battle over Mr. Lawrence Gilman's severe criticism of Mr. Deems Taylor's *Peter Ibbetson*. The opening gun was fired by Dr. Walter Damrosch, who accused Mr. Gilman of taking the tone of a district attorney, prosecuting Mr. Taylor for daring to write an opera. Dr. Damrosch also implied that the time and labor spent by a compatriot on such a work should entitle it to a friendly review. Mr. Gilman and Mr. Olin Downes rightly rejoined that a fair appraisal of any work can only be based on the work itself, never on extraneous circumstances. But neither critical spokesman answered the main imputation of unfairness.

It seems to the writer that Dr. Damrosch could have brought yet another charge against the article in question, a charge which, if less obvious, is really graver. For Mr. Gilman's review displays at times the genuinely harmful critical viewpoint of the reminiscence-hunter.

Reminiscence-hunting, let us explain, is a sport formerly quite popular among musical critics. It consists of reviewing a new piece by the simple expedient of dwelling mainly on its points of resemblance to the work of other composers. It is now, happily, on the wane among the critical fraternity, though still practiced by a few—possibly because it is an easy way to fill space.

The technic of this great sport is best explained by an illustration, which, to avoid heartburnings, we shall cull from the past. Early in the Nineteenth Century there lived a French composer named Hérold, whose sole title to fame is *Zampa*, a grand opera which had a great vogue for many years, later executing a dignified retreat to the attic, in company with Rogers groups, anti-macassars, the poems of Felicia Hemans and moustache cups. Its overture, however, is still occasionally played by brass bands. Now, when Brahms' Third Symphony was first performed in New York, one of our local critics made the startling discovery that the first four notes of its slow movement were the same as those of one of the principal arias in *Zampa*. Immediately this musical sage set up a loud cry of "plagiarism," even trying to christen the Brahms work by the name of the *Zampa* Symphony. The gentleman's familiarity with the literature of music evidently did not extend as far as Bach or Mozart, in whose

works he might easily have found other examples of the same four notes.

One might, along these lines, imagine a criticism of *Meistersinger* something like this:

"Mr. Wagner shows a decided gift for instrumentation, but his music seems deficient in originality, being strongly influenced by Bach, Weber, Beethoven and Liszt. A flagrant example of this is the 'prize song' in the third act, whose first notes coincide exactly with those of the Adagio in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony."

"How preposterous that sounds!" thinks the reader. Yet just that sort of twaddle is often being written today by men who should know better. A little thought will make it only too clear that, were this system of criticism to be impartially applied, no composer, not even the greatest, could escape damnation. Beethoven's music is full of reminders of Bach, Haydn and Mozart. Wagner frequently draws upon Bach, Beethoven, Weber and Liszt. Strauss is indebted to many, ranging from Wagner even to Donizetti. Debussy derives largely from Moussorgsky, Palestrina and the Gregorians. The main theme of Cesar Franck's magnificent Symphony may be found in Liszt's "Les Préludes." One could continue *ad infinitum*.

But what of it? Why waste time worrying over the origin of the bricks, if the structure as a whole be an original creation? In truth, the derivation of the material used in an art-work is of little or no intrinsic importance—it is only the finished whole that matters. Two great painters may use the same subject and composition—and yet how vastly different will be the resulting pictures!

It is, then, a real misfortune that so many of our composers have allowed themselves to be spiritually bulldozed by "criticism" of the reminiscence-hunting type. They become afraid to lead their melodies and harmonies naturally, lest, perchance, they might resemble, even superficially, the music of So-and-So.

It is, perhaps, not quite fair to blame the composer for this unhappy state of affairs. The fault, in the first place, is really not his. Yet it is impossible to acquit him of a certain lack of courage, when he weakly allows himself to be turned aside from the one true gate to Parnassus. To that gate, there is but a single key, which has been used by every great composer since music was born.

That key is "B natural."

Prose and Worse

WE passed on to Mr. Meadowcroft the letter from the lady mouse in Yonkers, Angelique. Though he feels that much of the letter is too personal to be printed here, he permits us to quote the following: "I just know your name is Hubert, and I like Hubert, though one of that name did hunt our ancestors once. This tradition has come down through the family. I used to think that Mickey Mouse was wonderful, but I don't care for that Hollywood set any more . . . I feel I could care for a brave mouse who still would appreciate a quiet home life."

In his reply, which is admirably impersonal and diplomatic, Mr. Meadowcroft says: "I do indeed appreciate a quiet home life, yet until my quest is ended and Rhoda is found I feel that I have no right to form other ties which might hamper me in my search. Nor would I be justified in asking any one to share the dangers of my present life. What the future may bring, who knows? As to my name, it is Herbert (or Hubert?) not Hubert (or Herbert?)"—again, whether purposely or not, his writing is so bad that he has left the lady in doubt.

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The Pope lives in the Vatican;
He hasn't any wife
(He lives beside the Tiber).
I do not doubt that he's a man
Of very sober life
(Of highest moral fibre).

But folks that live in bungalows,
In cottages and flats
(Or often just in houses)
With wives and children that need clothes
And shoes and food and hats
(And sometimes coats and trousers)

Will listen to the Pope's decrees
Respectfully, and then
(For, after all, he's single)
Will go on living as they please
Among their fellow men
(With whom he does not mingle).

.

The ball went over the fence into an adjoining back yard. "Aw, gee," grumbled one of the players, "look where you threw it! An' that's a speakeasy, an' you have to have a card to get in!"

.

We started life with a joyous shout;
We now emit terrified squeals.
We thought to have the world at our feet;
We find it instead at our heels.

WALTER R. BROOKS.

From the Life

By IBBY HALL

Perpetual Motion

THE island is so small that looked at as we look at the moon, for instance, it does not exist at all. And it is certain that to an ordinary bird flying over in the air it cannot appear larger than a ten cent piece.

But as far as that goes, there is no bird to fly over it at any time. For years ago the little spot was struck aghast by the fury of a tornado; and aghast it is to this day. The trees stand straight and destroyed without a leaf or branch to give them any expression. And the small houses are still bent above the ground, too old and broken ever to lift themselves again. As for the birds they were all blown away.

It is evident that when they saw it coming—the air which had been their substance, had lifted them to adventure and promised them an endless heaven—when they felt it wild and disordered, hard and merciless as rock, they sought protection where there was none. Without wings they would certainly have been safe, but they had never learned a way of holding to the ground, and so they whirled and were tossed as helpless as the leaves, far from the island, far out to sea. Before they could even fold their wings and sink into the water they had been drowned by their own air.

Birds have never found the island since that day. Since that great rushing and destruction of wings, no wing has ever traveled near it. Perhaps the branches do not reach high enough. Perhaps the island is too small for any bird to see.

But small and silent as it is the island has a life of its own.

"Catches folks imagination," says the waiter in the big hotel, and he makes a wild gesture with his arm. Imagination, says the gesture, is the air we breathe.

"It's a great thing," concludes the waiter sadly. "Imagination." It is plain that he is thinking of his own and that it is a torment to him.

If you should encourage him a little—"Well," he announces with sudden irony, "you think I am content to be a waiter all my life. No. No, I am not content." He stares out of the window for a moment, transfixed by what he sees behind his brain. He comes back to you slowly, searchingly. "I am an inventor," he tells you. "You are not surprised?" Seeing that you are not, he tries you further. "I have invented," he

tells you quietly, "a perpetual motion machine."

He gives you time to recover from this one, flicks a few crumbs from the table with his napkin, and frowns.

"They tell you—you can read it anywhere—how it cannot be done. Very well, I say. You can read anywhere how they cannot fly, and while you read men fly above your head. For everything we do there has been a book to say it is impossible. So—I am not discouraged. Some day I shall be rich. Then I shall live."

You think the man is right; or is he crazy? The cheapest word of any has always been "impossible." And now you see that he is looking at you with uncertainty and doubt.

"My machine," he says in a low voice, "is practically finished. There is a wheel that goes up—touches another wheel—and is sent down again. The only difficulty is—how to go up once more? Well, I shall find out. I am working on it. And when I shall be rich—then I shall live."

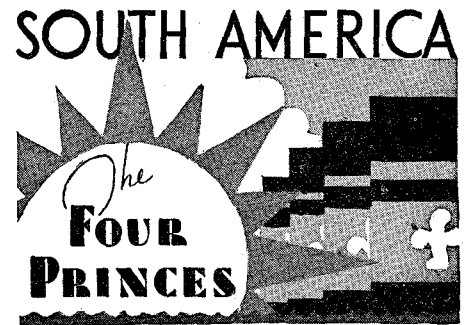
He turns at that and stares out through the window where he seems to see so much. When he turns back again his face is kind and cheerful.

"You know," he says in a genuine burst of friendliness, "I have a lot of time for thinking. I see a lot of people. And what I think is, most of them are queer. They get a lot of money, like the ones at this hotel, and they haven't got enough—enough imagination, most of them, to know what they want to do.

"You take a fellow right here on the island. Going on seventy, and he runs a store. Well, he was out to make money. And he made it. Half a million dollars now that's what he's worth. He never gave away a penny in his life. He never spent a cent he didn't have to. He never took a holiday only Sundays. Sundays he walks to town to buy a paper and if he can't make change he walks up to the store, unlocks it and gets out some pennies from the cash drawer. And week days there he sits. He can't stand up and wait on customers now he's old, so there he sits and looks them over, when they come in. And looks them over, when they go out."

The waiter forgets himself for a moment and leans upon the table. You can see his hand is trembling with intensity. "And what's he waiting for? Only to die!"

You look at him with wonder, in your turn. You are filled with a strange feel-



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ing for all men. Your heart beats pitifully and you remember, without meaning to, the birds.

But you must ask him: "What will you do then—when you are rich—when you have finished your machine?"

His face lights up. "I have always planned," he tells you shyly, "to buy a boat, and ride completely around the island."