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# SACRED HARMONIC SOCIETY'S

## CONCERT.

### DVORAK'S *SPECTRE'S BRIDE*.

Seldom has Nottingham enjoyed a better concert, or one more full of interest, than that given last night in the Albert Hall by the Sacred Harmonic Society. During its progress, and with still more emphasis at the close, the appreciation of a crowded and fashionable audience was shown in many outbursts of hearty applause, as well as by other expressions of unqualified delight. The novelty of the programme was Herr Antonin Dvorak's *Spectre's Bride*, which was anticipated with the more zest on account of the fresh success so recently won by the same composer's *St. Ludmila* at the Leeds Musical Festival. *The Spectre's Bride*, which was composed for the Birmingham Festival of last year, is founded upon the story of a dead lover returning from the grave for his betrothed—a legend common to many nations. It is best known in the form of Bürger's famous ballad *Lenora*, which, through Sir Walter Scott's translation, has become part of English literature. Its pictorial motive is the ghastly ride of the fiend and victim through the midnight air, and that motive has appealed to more than one famous musician. Raff has treated it in his beautiful *Lenora* symphony, and Berlioz illustrates it in a modified form in one of the most powerful numbers of his *Faust*, which, by the way, we shall also have another opportunity of hearing this winter in Nottingham. Coming after such composers as these, Dvorak—the son of a humble Bohemian innkeeper—exposed himself to some risks of comparison, but he has passed admirably through the ordeal. Fortunately, the Bohemian poet, K. J. Erben, whose version of the legend has supplied the libretto, treats it in a way of his own. In the first place his lovers do not ride but walk, which is an important difference as regards musical illustration. Moreover he has rather spoiled the crowning horror of the story with a happy ending. His heroine at the last moment bethinks herself of praying for help to the Virgin. Thus strengthened she tears herself from the side of her spectre bridegroom and seeks refuge in a charnel house, where she is found next morning by the people going to mass, lying by the side of a corpse, and herself unconscious but alive. Having already given an outline of the story in Saturday's *Express*, it is needless now to repeat its details. So far, however, as the musical setting of the legend is concerned, it remains to be noted that Herr Dvorak has treated his difficult subject with the conscientiousness of a true artist. He accepts all the consequences of his gruesome tale. Character is his first object; beauty is a secondary consideration; but in many passages both are combined with rare talent. For all the incidents of the spectral night march the composer endeavours to find musical equivalents, not avoiding even those effects of bold realism where the terrible borders on the comic. The bells of the midnight chimes and of the funeral knell resound in his orchestra. When the cock crows at early morn and dispels the restless spirits, we hear the voice of chanticlear as plain as possible in the flute and oboe. A musician nurtured in the school of Brahms and the classics could not well go beyond this. Further emancipating himself from the traditions of that school, Herr Dvorak adopts the leitmotif. His ghost is recognised by a sufficiently weird theme which consists essentially of the interval of the fifth,—representing tonic and dominant—of course in the minor key. The scheme of the musical design is briefly this. The narrative is carried on by the baritone and chorus—the latter generally (perhaps too generally) repeating what the former has said. At intervals the characters are introduced, speaking in their individual persons, the maiden being the soprano, the spectre the tenor. There is some danger of monotony in the rapid succession of horrors—dogs howling, owls screeching, spectres dancing, and the ghostly bridegroom dragging on his weary bride to an open grave; but these more dismal episodes are happily relieved by a series of tender duets, and the two songs assigned to the soprano. The first of these, which reveals the anxious maiden's thoughts of her long lost lover, is extremely charming. The second solo, embodying the heroine's prayer in her deepest need, rises to a fine climax of religious fervour. Both were admirably given by Miss Annie Marriott, who is only second to Madame Albani in the part of the hapless bride. Alike in vocal power and depth of expression she proved herself equal to all its requirements, which implies no small compliment. In the duets the honours were fairly shared by Mr. Harper Kearton, whose singing, however, was careful, correct, and pleasing, without being otherwise remarkable. His style is somewhat more adapted for the hero's amorous strains than for the supernatural episodes. The character is throughout a strange combination of lover and demon, for the spectre feels, or at least feigns, some tender emotions at the simple faith of his trustful bride. The baritone, Mr. Watkin Mills, did wonders with the difficult narrative music, which required some straining of his sonorous voice to mark it out from the choral and orchestral effects which closely attended his every phrase. The ladies and gentlemen of the chorus fairly earned a cordial meed of praise for their arduous share in the successful production of the work. They had evidently made the study of it a labour of love, and, although Mr. Adcock, chorus master, did not last night occupy his usual place at the desk, he merits honourable mention for having so efficiently trained his harmonious forces. There was only one perceptible hitch, and that was due to an inadvertence of the conductor, who in one passage turned to the altos instead of to the trebles. The mistake, however, was not generally observed, and so slight a slip may well be pardoned in view of the brilliant service otherwise rendered by Dr. Hans Richter and his famous orchestra. The instrumentation of the cantata is full of startling surprises, which defy description, but the Richter orchestra was equal to all its intricacies. At the close of the cantata the gallant two hundred of the chorus enjoyed a well-earned rest, the second part of the programme being exclusively instrumental.

Having written so much about the *Spectre's Bride*, but little space remains to tell of the still richer treat which followed. The works chosen for performance are, however, too well known to call for either criticism or description. In order to suit the convenience of country visitors who might have to leave early, Mr. Allen, the society's treasurer, announced a transposition of pieces, by which the whole audience were enabled first to hear Beethoven's C Minor Symphony, now generally known as No. 5. It is the best known of the immortal series of nine, and may even be classed as a more universal favourite amongst both musicians and the less initiated than any other work of the same class. Never, perhaps, has the great master displayed the witchery of his genius in more captivating form, and seldom have the varied charms of the masterpiece—so full of the "poetry of sound"—been given with greater brilliancy and precision. The symphony, with its wealth of fancy, would alone have amply rewarded the attendance of the audience; but other delights were in store for them. Next in order came Mendelssohn's Hebrides overture ("Fingal's Cave"). It is supposed to reflect the impressions made upon the ever receptive mind of the composer by a visit to the Western Islands of Scotland, and it requires but little imagination to recognise in it the influence of the weird and striking scenery of the rock-bound island of Staffa. The concert concluded with a magnificent performance of Weber's "Invitation à la Valse," as arranged and enriched for the orchestra by Berlioz. As in the case of so many programme pieces, some critics amuse themselves by professing to trace in this composition all the incidents of a ball-room flirtation, even to the grumbling of the old father as he comes upon the scene to reprove the fair dancer, but is mollified by the pleas of her mere indulgent mother. We do not profess to be so clever as to follow minutely those minor incidents of the dance; but no listener could miss being charmed by the sumptuous beauty of the waltz, especially when played to such perfection. At the close of the concert Dr. Richter received, as was his due, an enthusiastic ovation. The Sacred Harmonic Society are to be congratulated upon the signal success of their opening concert. We trust it is only a foretaste of triumphs to be reaped as the season advances.