

THE CULT OF THE ENGLISH CONCERTINA.

A CHAT WITH MISS CHRISTINE HAWKES.

By *NORMAN FRASER.*

LESS than a year ago, had you button-holed that ubiquitous individual of the long ears and short memory—the “man in the street”—and told him that a London West-End audience would ever listen spell-bound to a recital of high-class music on the concertina, he would probably have recommended you to undergo a rest-cure.

Even a musical enthusiast, aged enough to remember what Regondi could do with the English concertina, might well have doubted the possibility of reviving serious musical interest in an instrument which German cheap labour has caused, of late years, to be indissolubly associated in the minds of most people with ‘Arry and ‘Arriet on ‘Ampstead ‘Eath.

Nevertheless, Miss Christine Hawkes has proved once more that it is the unexpected that always happens. Her first concertina recital at

the Steinway Hall in November of last year drew a large and ultimately enthusiastic audience, and this was emphatically not a success of curiosity, nor in any way a “freak” performance.

No doubt the novelty of the entertainment attracted many to it, but Miss Hawkes won her triumph by challenging criticism as a serious artiste. And the reception accorded her by press and

public alike was nothing short of remarkable. And, sure proof of the pudding, the musical public showed its appreciation of Miss Hawkes’s art by demanding and flocking to a second recital given in January of this year, whilst she herself has been inundated with offers from musical agents and with shoals of letters from people anxious to learn the concertina.

It was in view, therefore, of the very general interest aroused by Miss Hawkes’s success that I



(Photo: Russell.)

MISS CHRISTINE HAWKES

sought an interview with this gifted and charming lady, who, by her enterprise and art, has rescued the concertina from ill-deserved oblivion.

The story of Miss Hawkes's career, in so far as it concerns the public, is soon told. A born musician, she was educated musically as a pianist. One day, about seven or eight years ago, she heard the concertina played, and was immediately fascinated by its charm and possibilities, and despite the protests of her piano-forte-master she decided to learn it. Miss Hawkes, however, took up the concertina solely as a hobby, and any appearances she made in public were for charity only. Despite the interest and enthusiasm evoked by her playing, she had no idea at first of a professional career with the concertina, not even when Miss Marie Corelli and Herr Johannes Wolff strongly advised her to challenge a public verdict. That was a rather memorable occasion. Miss Hawkes played at a concert given by the Choral Union of Stratford-on-Avon, which, with Miss Marie Corelli as President, was then making brilliant progress such as it had never enjoyed before. She appeared with such famous artistes as Herr Wolff, Mr. William Green, Miss Ada Crossley, and Mr. Wilhelm Ganz, and it was after this performance that the celebrated novelist and the great violinist strongly advised her to make a professional career. But it was not until last year that private circumstances compelled Miss Hawkes seriously to consider this advice and finally to take it.

Miss Hawkes, as has been said, has received a great number of letters and applications from people anxious to learn the concertina, and I will now try faithfully to reproduce the hints that she was so kind as to give me.

First of all, it must be clearly understood that by concertina is meant the *English* concertina as patented by Sir Charles Wheatstone in 1829, and the first step to mastery of the instrument is to secure a good one. For this a fair price must necessarily be paid. Miss Hawkes's first instrument, which is the one she has used ever since, cost £20, and it was cheap at the price, for she was fortunate enough to light on a concertina of exceptional tone. That was largely a matter of luck,

for, like violins, concertinas are "kittle kattle," and of two apparently identical instruments the one will be great, the other merely mediocre. Moreover, it is impossible to say of the tone of any musical instrument just what it owes to the skill of the maker and what to the skill of the performer. Still, if you go to a first-class maker, such as Lachenal, and pay, say £20, avoiding elaborately carved or ornamental instruments, you will be giving yourself a fair chance of securing a concertina with a "soul."

Having got your concertina, the next thing is to take the greatest possible care of it. A speck of dust, barely visible to the naked eye, may make one of the keys mute, or, what would be even worse, untuneful. Then, a most important point, never extend the concertina without first striking down a note, otherwise a split reed will probably be the disastrous result. Therefore, beware of allowing strangers to handle your concertina. In short, remember that *the* concertina, as distinguished from the cheap German atrocities with which Bank Holidays make us all too familiar, is a high-class musical instrument of extremely delicate and sensitive interior mechanism.

Now we approach the actual learning of the concertina. Here, clearly, much that may be said in regard to learning the piano, the violin, or any other musical instrument, may equally be said in regard to the concertina. You must have some natural musical talent to make any progress, and a theoretical knowledge of music is certainly desirable. Whether proficiency on some other instrument is a help or a hindrance in learning the concertina is a moot point. The pianist will, at first, probably find himself hampered by the different arrangement of the notes; on the other hand, there being much that is akin in the violin and the concertina, the violinist will probably find himself greatly helped when he attacks the concertina, particularly in regard to the all-important qualities of tone and expression, by his previous experience.

But the main point is that the concertina is not to be mastered in a day. Indeed, enthusiasm and what Madame Alice Esty, in giving advice to would-be

prime donne, once described as "stick-to-itiveness," are very necessary qualities to the concertina-player. It is a difficult and elusive instrument which will only yield itself to the ardent and not-to-be-discouraged suitor.

At the same time, enthusiasm may easily be carried too far. Among the many letters Miss Hawkes has received is one from a gentleman, in which he says that inspired, not by hearing her play, but merely by reading the accounts of her playing, he had bought himself a concertina, and had set to work to learn it, by practising for ten consecutive hours on the first day. The result, he added, apparently both pained and surprised, was that he had to undergo a special course of massage for stiffness, and that he was still more or less bereft of power in his arms and fingers. This, of course, was carrying enthusiasm to excess, and, in Miss Hawkes's opinion, practice for an hour a day is quite sufficient for a beginner, although she herself continues to practise at least two hours daily. The beginner, too, will do well at first to lighten the by no means slight strain on the arms by suspending the concertina from a cord or ribbon round the neck.

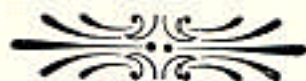
As with other instruments so with the concertina, scale-playing is one of the foundations of success. Miss Hawkes was lucky enough at the beginning to come across a copy of Regondi's "Concertina Exercises," but whether this work is published now she does not know.

Here it may be pointed out that one of the chief charms (and difficulties) of the concertina lies in the fact that it is not one but several instruments, and calls for the most varied powers of execution. A reed instrument, of course, and as such calling for the powers of the flautist, but none the less in the all-important management of the air demanding much of the bowing of the string-player,

while the double set of keys calls for considerable dexterity in note-striking. But the difficulties are soon forgotten in the compensations. The powers of the concertina are infinitely varied, and above all, the player can practically sustain the note indefinitely, whereas even the most expert violinist's power to do this is limited by the length of his bow, while the pianist is even more limited by the tonic resources of his instrument. "I was waiting for the break," said a puzzled accompanist once rehearsing with Miss Hawkes. There is no break in concertina-playing—that is, in the hands of the expert, though naturally the beginner will often wonder where on earth the air, in more senses than one, has got to.

Broadly speaking, however, anyone of average musical gifts and knowledge should be able in about six months to play the concertina in a manner which will, at least, not acutely distress the listener. Much in the earlier, and everything in the later stages of concertina-playing must depend on the individuality of the performer. You may never get beyond a merely mechanical perfection of execution—you may, if exceptionally gifted, be able, like Miss Hawkes, to make the concertina talk, and laugh, and cry; make it sing like a lark or storm like a stentor; dance like a Genée; trill like a Tetrassini; or play with your heart-strings like an Ellen Terry; make the listener, shutting his eyes, think he is listening now to Paderewski, now to Joachim or Sarasate, then to Auguste van Biene; or make him vow again that that was the sweetest clarionet playing he ever heard.

But assuredly you will not win to this goal without infinite pains and striving, or without that touch of genius which enables Miss Christine Hawkes to make of the long despised and neglected English concertina a "thing of beauty and a joy for ever."



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