

John McCormack Tells of Old Song That He Sings

When He Said That He Was Going To Be a Musician His Relations Thought He Should Be a Pig Broker

(By JOHN McCORMACK) If ever I inspire them.....Can I Why do I sing? Well, why does a hope that ever I have done that—bird sing? Because it can't help it. It's which is the greatest triumph of a singer and his song? And the simplest the same with me. I can't help it. thing will do it. a lark. But glory be, who am I to Life is full of chords. But above it pretend to rival the blithe songster of all an uncaught bird for ever hovers the morn? And yet the lark, so far as and sings. It is the task of the human we know, has had no singing lessons. singer to try to catch one or two notes When, as a boy, I announced with of that miraculous song. some decision that I was going to be The minstrel sang to the people, a musician, my relatives said: "God and it's a certain thing that music is be between us and harm. What have not for the highbrow. It's for simple we done at all that one of our boys people—that is, sensitive, and not so should be a musician?" phisticated ones. Now, why was that? That was The best songs are simple, though wrong, wasn't it? And yet I believe not all simple are fine—some of them the attitude of mind it discloses is are banal. The right simplicity is that fairly common. A mere musician. of the traditional air, whose, pure When I might have been a pig-broker! melody tugs at the heart. As if music wasn't one of the most wonderful things in the world. Didn't Robert Browning rate highest of the powers of man that "out of two sounds he can make not a third sound, but a star?" And the heart of music is song.

Songs of the People Song is the natural speech of all living creatures, though the song of the cat may not be as pleasing—to the human ear—as the song of the nightingale. Song is the natural speech of man, but a powerful lot of them have forgotten how to be natural, and only recapture song through hard work. Sometimes it's hard work listening to them; because they're thinking of the singer, when all that matters is the song. And how much song matters! Who was it said: "Let me make the songs of the people, and who will may make the laws?" I forget. Anyhow, he was a good judge. I shouldn't wonder if he had "The Marseillaise" in mind. When you hear "The Marseillaise," can't you see those ragged battalions marching? So it's a proud man I am to be a singer, like the old wandering minstrels, or bold Phelim Brady, the Bard of Armagh. I'm proud because I have the fond fancy that people like to hear me sing. It seems that I entertain them and that at times I make some of them happy. If I do, that's well worth doing, isn't it?

Eternally Fresh What is "banal?" That's a difficult one. Who's to judge. What I think Banal another fellow may find thrilling. And vice versa. It isn't mere familiarity. Some of the most familiar tunes are eternally fresh. Others at the first time of hearing seem stale. Perhaps the banal tune is made up of a number of well-used phrases which don't really belong to each other, and are just cobbled together, so that the whole thing doesn't mean anything. That's really it. The banal tune is a farce. It isn't sincere. But then some of the most sophisticated tunes are banal. And a singer must remember that it is his business to entertain. And so he should not scorn to sing a song like—what shall I say?—like "Mother Macree." There may not be much music in it, but it has a genuine appeal. If it causes one of two fellows to think of their mother whom they had forgotten he'll have done well. There are finer songs. My old friend Sam Liddle's setting of "Abide With Me" was the one used by Clara Butt. And I am sure that Dame Clara has touched thousands of hearts by singing it. **Music They All Love** And there is a great simple folk music which all unsophisticated people love. Who, for example is not thrilled by "I know my love by his way of walkin'?" And there are countless other songs

which, because they are generally known, and because of their associations, are liked by the great public which does not consider itself musical. I like to give the public some of those songs, and then to introduce others by composers whose names at first may frighten them. By Brahms, let us say! And what I wish to convey to them is: "Here you have been listening to songs that you know and like. Well, here is one—"In Stille Nacht"—that is just as simple. Never mind the composer's name. Allow yourself to listen without being afraid. And I'm sure you'll like the song." It was so with me when I began. I was frightened to the teeth by the name of Brahms. And when I got to know him I found that he was a charming, simple fellow.

Of course, as people listen to these familiar songs their ears become trained. I detest the word "education" in connection with musical appreciation; for the object of music is to please and a man would be a fool to set himself up as the Pope of music (with all due respect to His Holiness) and say that the public taste should be "improved."

The public is its own best judge. But the practice of any art (and hearing is an art) teaches you things about it.

And so, while, as in duty bound, I give the public what it likes today, I give them too, what I feel sure they will like tomorrow. So I am not at all ashamed of singing "The Holy City" and "The Lost Chord"; they're good songs.

A nation should be very proud and conscious of its traditional music. Its folk-songs are its spiritual history. When Tom Moore showed Robert Emmet his song, "Let Erin remember the days of Old," Emmet said: "Give me that song! It's worth a million men." And yet the tune was an old jig called "The Little Red Fox" that Moore had slowed down to a march. I know more of Irish folk-songs than English. And it seems to me that we have a greater wealth of traditional songs. I think that it is natural that this should be so. For, without trespassing on controversial matters, it is known that there were times when the love of Ireland had to be a hidden flame.

That is why Ireland was called by so many names. Well, I know that she is still "called names," but I don't mean that. I mean that Irishmen had darling names for her as for a sweetheart—Cathleen ne Hoolihan, Dark Hooseleen. And their songs to Ireland had all the passion of thwarted love.

Haunting Melodies It is a great work to collect the old songs of the people. I believe that Sharp has done fine work in England. But I am more familiar with what Herbert Hughes has done for Ireland. There are two songs I should never have known but for him. "She Moved Through the Fair" and "The Forelorn Queen," which has a haunting tune. Hughes embellishes the music (I don't object to that), but he is faithful to the tune. Unlike Tom Moore, I've mentioned one example of Tom's tricks. Another is "When in Death I Shall Claim Reclined," the tune of which, if you'll believe me, was originally a reel! Yet maybe Moore was right. For there is tragedy at the heart of Ireland's gayest song. I may be wrong, but I fancy that the English have not so strong an historic memory as the Irish. They like to trace the descent of their heirs, but not of their airs.

My Concerts Of course, this may not be the whole truth. England has a fine body of folk-music, not all of it yet collected. And I must acknowledge that, though I try to gather fine songs from the world over, I have a special love for Irish songs. You won't blame me for that. It would be difficult to disguise the fact that I am an Irishman. I have never tried. Ever since I began to sing in public twenty-seven years ago I have had a group of Irish songs in each of my concerts. Once I was talking to General John McKeon. I said: "Sean, why don't you pull down all those ruined cabins between Dublin and Kildare?" And he replied: "We couldn't do that. How would we know what patriots and martyrs may not have been born or died in those broken cabins?"

No wonder that in Ireland we remember our songs.

But I've never been able to find the original of the "Londonderry Air"—familiarily known as "Danny Boy." I'd give a lot to find that.

Film actors at Hollywood complain of overwork. To movie patrons, on the other hand, it appears that many of their parts are overplayed.

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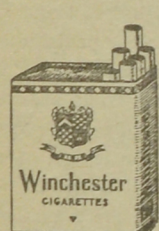
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