

MUSICIANS IN ORDINARY (Conclusion)

By Liveryman Bram Gay

DINNER MENUS SHOW THAT THE QUEEN AND HER CONSORT POSSESSED A GARGANTUAN APPETITE FOR MUSIC, happily digesting an act of Wagner before dinner and a symphony concert afterwards

After the death of the Prince Consort such glories were arranged less frequently; usually on some special family occasion or the visit of a Head of State. In that family the two were often synonymous.

Royal visitors sometimes took a lighter view of the band and its music than did the Royal Hostess and her Prince. The memoirs of a player who sometimes played in the band tell of an occasion when "His Serene Highness the Duke of Teck, who was full of good nature, sauntered round the band... and suddenly took up the drumsticks and began to belabour the drums to his heart's content. Of course nothing could be done on the band's part, but presently an Equerry came and enticed the Duke away amidst great laughter and joviality..." The writer mentions two perquisites of the band; as members of the Royal Household its musicians were never called for jury service (something which afflicts players and Orchestra Management at Covent Garden with surprising frequency), and the provision of a half-bottle of port after each performance. The port, he remembered, was supplied in bottles which the players took home in turns. As a deputy, this cellist qualified for neither advantage.

The quality of the playing is unquestioned. The players were the elite of the nation, and they were better prepared, in all probability, than for any other concerts of the time, the band being sometimes augmented to seventy or even eighty performers. A contemporary account states that "no more skilled and accomplished performers could be got together in any country in the world than those who form the Private Band. The Kaiser, who is no mean judge of music, heard them play several times on the occasion of his visit to Queen Victoria...and expressed the greatest admiration for the perfection of ensemble and artistic finish shown by the combination..." There is little doubt that better performances of music were heard at Windsor and at Buckingham Palace than were ever given in public in nineteenth-century London.

When Anderson retired in 1870 W.G. Cusins became Master of the Music. He served for twenty-three years to be succeeded in 1893 by Walter Parratt, knighted by the Queen in 1892, a musician and, as it transpired, a man of quality; the last and by no means the least of the Masters of the Music who conducted the Queen's Band. Professor of Music at Oxford, of the Organ at the Royal College of Music, he was Organist of St George's Chapel Windsor. The complete court musician, then, and a chief who quickly won the admiration of his players.

Parratt's appointment coincided with Her Majesty's renewed interest in the Band following the years of mourning during which there seems to have been some deterioration in its quality and reduction in its size. He urged reconstruction and enlargement upon his Royal Patron, describing the Band as "hardly a quadrille band". His efforts being encouraged and seconded by the Princess Beatrice the State and Private Bands were at last formally amalgamated to become "The Queen's Band".

Once involved the great lady made a considerable stir, asking many questions, some inconvenient, about the two bands which still theoretically existed and whose interlock, begun many years before, was still in some ways shrouded in confusion. Matters came to a head when the Queen again required the attendance of the Band at Balmoral, Osborne, or



The new uniform - black tail coat with light blue facing to the collar and gilt buttons, knee breeches, shoes with silver buckle, white tie and white gloves.

wherever the Court happened to be. This was not popular among its members.

Representations were made on the ground that the Band had already completed twenty concerts, its understood number of performances, in the year. The Queen had no knowledge of such a restriction, and demanded of her servants documentary evidence of it. This was not to be found. The root of the problem almost certainly lay in the "creeping amalgamation" of which the press had complained. There had originally been an understanding that the State Band was required to give only limited time, whereas members of the Private Band were well paid and "in constant attendance". In becoming, almost in its entirety, the State Band the Private Band had assimilated the best of both commissions, an achievement which will surprise no-one with experience of orchestra management. The band included the best performers of the Philharmonic concerts and of the Opera. Concerts in London and Windsor were within their reach by deputising their other work, but they could not give the Queen carte blanche. These arguments, cogently laid before the Queen by a doubtless sympathetic Master of the Music, won the day and what seemed likely to become the

first industrial dispute in British orchestral history was defused.

In 1901 the Queen's Band became, sadly, the King's Band. It was augmented for the coronation by thirty-three others. The list of those who played is a fascinating document, bringing the Royal Band at last into our own historical perspective through the presence of names we recognise; among them some of Henry Wood's rebels, those who broke away from The Queens Hall Orchestra in 1904 to form the LSO. There was a Brain among the horns.

No doubt its members hoped for great things from Edward VII, an enthusiast of the opera and of all the good things in life, but it was not to be. The King frequently dined out, and when he entertained at home he preferred music on a smaller and lighter scale. Those who controlled the Privy Purse complained about the expense of a band which played so rarely. In 1903 the fatal decision was made; the band was to be wound up. From this painful process the Master of the Music emerges as a man of substance. Each letter to a dismissed player, personally written by Parratt in individual and sympathetic terms, brought its respectful response. These remain in the Archive, and they show a man admired by those with whom he worked and played. Only two members of the Band showed rancour at their dismissal, one pointing to his loss of the Liverpool and Hallé concerts on moving to London at the Queen's request; evidence of the scope of the search for talent for the band.

The band, then, was dead, and a long history closed. But the story has a coda. A petition to the King, sent by members of the band then playing at the Birmingham Festival of 1903 suggested a new course of action. Parratt forwarded this petition to the King through the Keeper of the Privy Purse, Sir Dighton Probyn, observing that the document "seems to be written in an exceedingly proper spirit, and it shows an unselfish regard for the honour of serving His Majesty which has touched me greatly".

Within a month a favourable reply was received from Probyn. The King's Band, then, continued to exist. Alas, there is no record of it having been called to perform. But its members were able again to call themselves "Musicians in Ordinary to The King".

Is it complete cynicism to imagine that this distinction was what they prized most, the chief reason for their petition? The distinction must certainly have been important to the players.

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