

SIR ADRIAN BOULT – A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

By Liveryman John Carol Case

SIR ADRIAN BOULT was the longest surviving member of that circle of English conductors which dominated the musical scene in this country during, and after, the inter-war years. Sir Henry Wood, Sir Thomas Beecham, Sir Malcolm Sargent, Sir John Barbirolli all predeceased him, and some would argue that Sir Adrian created his best recordings in the last decade of his long conducting life.

1973 was the Vaughan Williams Centenary year, and Sir Adrian asked me to be his baritone soloist for the opening of that year's Edinburgh Festival: the programme was all R.V.W., with "Don Nobis Pacem" in the first half, and "Job" in the second. As we walked off the platform together for the interval, Sir Adrian took me totally by surprise when he said to me 'This is the last time I shall conduct a choral concert in public; I find it too demanding'. Then I realised that although he had conducted the performance with his usual elegant mastery, and with no indication of any diminution in his interpretive powers, he was, in fact, in his 84th year. His style of conducting had changed little over the years – so much so that one almost took it for granted, and it was a shock to be reminded that he had reached an age when most people have long since retired. Nevertheless we went on to make a recording together of the 'Dona Nobis Pacem' the following year: indeed it is very gratifying that so many of the recordings we made together are still available on C.D.

Somebody once said to me that with Sir Adrian you got what you saw; in other words no histrionics, no wild gestures, everything meticulously prepared in rehearsal, and then in the performance he liked his soloist to feel free to add that extra "something" of their own to give spontaneity and life to the music. I recall when we were recording Elgar's "The Apostles": during one of the rehearsals the ensemble was rather shaky, and when he stopped the orchestra I immediately apologised for not following his beat. He put down his stick and said 'Mr. Case' – it was always 'Mr.' in rehearsal, 'John' off-



Photo: Courtesy of EMI.

stage, but never when working – 'Mr. Case, you have been working with me long enough to know that it is my job to follow you. You do not follow me!' For me, that sums up his approach to conducting: he was never dogmatic, he persuaded rather than bullied you, so that a soloist would feel unhampered yet at the same time given secure support.

The audience at a concert saw only the minimum of gestures – that long conducting stick which he skillfully manipulated with hardly any arm movement, giving the impression that he was doing nothing, and, I suppose physically he was doing very little; with all the work done beforehand in rehearsal he was content to be presiding genius and trust his performers.

However, when the occasion demanded, he would give all the help needed. For instance: going back to the days when few BBC concerts were recorded, there was a policy of broadcasting a concert on a Saturday evening and repeated the same programme live the next afternoon. Sir Adrian had asked me to be his soloist in Vaughan Williams "Sancta Civitas" for one of these weekends, and although I was free for the Sunday afternoon, I was already booked for the Saturday evening; so regrettably I had to decline. On that particular Sunday when the repeat performance of the Vaughan Williams was due to be broadcast, I had just finished a late breakfast – having returned from my Saturday night

engagement in the early hours – when there was a 'phone call from the BBC to say that their soloist had gone ill and could I take over the Sunday afternoon broadcast due to start at 2.30pm. If I would agree, Sir Adrian would be quite happy to do without a rehearsal, but if I could not manage it then they would have to re-arrange the whole programme with all the problems that would entail. Under those circumstances one doesn't hesitate even though I was then living near Saffron Walden, and I set out at once, arriving at Studio No. 1 Maida Vale just forty-five minutes before the broadcast began. Sir Adrian met me, all smiles, utterly composed as usual, and with no sense of panic. We discussed tempi and any "difficult corners" then went into the studio where he explained the situation to the choir and orchestra. He made it clear that he wanted to concentrate on my part, that they would not get as many "leads" as they were used to – as he said to them 'You did it last night, so you ought to know it by now!' The previous occasion we had performed the work together had been eighteen months earlier in the Royal Festival Hall, but Sir Adrian had such a marvellous sense of tempo he could recall without any problem what had been done before. However, when the broadcast started, I was aware he

"I went to visit Adrian Boult the other evening. He answered the door to me reeking of Horlicks!"

Sir Thomas Beecham.