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 N.E. Pamm.  
ALBERT COATES

Copy of Article in "The Orchestra Speaks" by Bernard Shore.

Born at St. Petersburg in 1882, the son of a Yorkshireman who had settled in business there and married an English lady, Albert Coates is a cosmopolitan figure, with stronger Russian characteristics than English. He was sent to England for his education, eventually passing into Liverpool University as a science student, and at the same time studying music with an elder brother who held an organist's appointment at Liverpool.

On returning to Russia he entered his father's office, but music had already called him too strongly and arrangements were made for him to go to the Leipzig Conservatory where he studied the 'cello under Klengel and the piano with Teichmüller. It was Nikisch, however, who fascinated him; and in his conducting class, Coates quickly found his trade. The 'cello and piano were soon abandoned to make way for his vocation as a conductor, which was sealed by his appointment to the Russian Imperial Opera at St. Petersburg, ~~at~~ a post which he held until the Revolution.

He first became prominent in England in 1913, when he shared the Wagner performances at Covent Garden with Nikisch. But not until 1919 did he become really well known to English musicians and audiences, at a series of concerts with the London Symphony Orchestra. He was then more Russian than English, and Russia must still take more than half the credit for his arresting personality and temperament. No conductor in the world is more impressive, and when he first appeared before English orchestras the players felt suddenly confronted with a Colossus. A man of immense proportions and commanding person; with the drive and power of a superman. All his ideas and actions are on a correspondingly large scale, and his intense, warm-blooded temperament gives an unmistakable character to his performances. Terrific vitality, bulging crescendi, violent contrasts of colouring and great breadth of phrase are always features of his interpretations. His personality is too strong for him to sink himself entirely in the composer; but his bigness of conception generally outweighs the mere seeking of effects.

Russian music in particular takes on a vivid and arresting character in his hands, with restraint completely cast off and pent-up feelings allowed to run riot. Whether he is conducting an opera like Rimsky-Korsakov's "Kitezh", a Tchaikovsky symphony, or a new work by, say Shostakovich, the performance will have an intense feeling and grip that only a Russian can effect. Grip is Coates's first characteristic. He never loses it for an instant, though he is flexible enough not to hamper individual artistry. Players generally find themselves allowed considerable freedom - but if they go too far those beetling brows will gather and a furious look pulls them up short.

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He used rather to terrify some of the younger players, who were relieved not to be placed too near him. His face can become Tartar-like, and little imagination was needed to see oneself running for life from a violent Cossack giant. But that was only a fancy, principally made by his great size and by his animated facial expression that always reflects his feelings. Coates's predominant mood is jovial, and the enjoyment of life his keynote.

Work at rehearsals is strenuous but not over-exacting. Though Coates may not always ask for the last ounce, he spends all his own vitality. Within ten minutes of the beginning of a rehearsal, if the piece is at all vigorous, he will be throwing off cascades of perspiration. He gets hotter than any other conductor, and after a day's rehearsal the studio may resemble the drying-room of a laundry. He is never detached and aloof, either from the scores or the orchestra. Always he lives intensely in the midst of everything. It pleases him to be on fairly intimate terms with the orchestra and he usually calls some of the players by their Christian names; or failing that he will invent nicknames - an almost unheard of thing in a famous guest-conductor.

"Come along, Blackie, what are you doing? I can't hear you, boy. Play it out!" The name was invented on the spur of the moment since he did not know the proper one, and the player had jet-black hair. He used at one time to take an almost childish pleasure in picking up a new name, and when the daughter of a well-known string leader married a distinguished violinist, Coates the next morning exclaimed: "Now then, father-in-law, your children are running all over the place. What's the matter? Do it again by yourself from Letter B with the up  $\lambda$  beat. - Ah, that's better!"

He has many characteristic gestures but never makes a fuss about them; they are all clear and purposeful. One that shows him to particular advantage is the slight tilting back of the head, while his mouth is opened wide to emphasize a deep breath for the brass, before an attack or sustained chord. He uses another very characteristic lead for a quick rhythmical passage needing strong impulse and grip to hold it together. Holding his arm high in front of his chest, he flicks his baton with an electric twist of his wrist, and if there is a long crescendo he gradually brings his whole arm to bear in a short throwing motion, emphasizing this with a similar movement of his left hand. It has the effect of a terrific impulse that is clearly seen by the whole orchestra. His habit is to hold his arm fairly high - a great advantage for those on the outskirts of the string.

His face, strongly animated both in concert and rehearsal, insists upon warmth of feeling in response. Queen's Hall unheated on a Sunday morning was always a trial to him. Not so much that he feels the actual cold himself, but he leathes a cold sound from the orchestra and in particular from the strings.

"Good morning to you ull!" (a certain little foreign accent still shows in his English). "It's jolly to see old friends again and a perfect miracle every time we come together. I've been round the earth since I saw you last. Let's play the Delius pieces." After a few minutes' cold and flat playing, he breaks off to exclaim: "Oh that's no good! You're making a ghastly sound like a lot of ghosts. I suppose it's because your wretched hall is so cold. Throw away the Delius and let's hammer away at the 'Ride' to get warm. Blow on your fingers, do anything you like, but let's have some of that marvellous tone of yours!"

He is fond of getting the utmost out of the heavier instruments, and from the percussion too. He shouts to this department at the top of a climax. Smash it, boy! Hit everything you can see. Don't be afraid of it! Brass, I want a burst of sound." And he opens his arms to the fullest extent of his reach and his mouth as for an enormous breath - a truly formidable sight!

He is quick to sieze on any unevenness in a department, and in a brass passage such as at the end of the Pathetic Symphony he would warn that brilliant trombone player, the late Jesse Stamp: "Careful, Jesse, you're standing out of the picture too much! It sounds marvellous but keep it in, boy! No.2. and 3, play up to him!"

Scriabin ia a composer whose name will always be associated with Coates. He made Londoners familiar with several of Scriabin's works, of which he has an intimate knowledge. "The Poem of Ecstasy" made him coin a phrase which he still uses frequently when he wants a certain effect of a shimmering background or some such ethereal sound. "It's too heavy and dull, strings; you know what I want - 'Extase' colour! "

Nothing suits him so well as music built on his own scale - "The Ring", for instance, where the great phrases are made to mount towering heights as though in the hands of Wotan himself. After a vocal episode, when he has been keeping the orchestra restrained for accompaning, Coates with something like a whoop will burst out: "Now you can let go. This is ours!" And double fortes become double fifties! Yet he is capable of exquisite tenderness and extreme delicacy. Indeed, Coates is a man of immense range. Half-tones and half-measures are not found in him; that

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intensely vital temperament needs everything or the least possible, glorious colours and extreme delicacy. Careful shading and detail are secondary to power and essential outlines.

He conducts a great deal from an extremely sound memory, which covers a large repertory and enables him to obtain a particularly close contact with the players. He has one curious scheme of rehearsing a new work. Having played it through, possibly with strings only, he will then take the wind and ask for one desk of the string department to remain - an unhappy skeleton. No music he plays will ever be dull. Everything will be intensely alive, and shot through with emotion and fire; and all hampering restraint cast aside.

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EXTRACTS from QUEEN'S HALL (1893-1941) Book by  
Robert Elkin. (on the history of Queen's Hall)

Page 37. "All conductors find it advisable to let their name be associated with some particular composers: Beecham specializes in Mozart & Delius, Harty in Berlioz, Weingartner in Beethoven, Coates in Wagner and Russian music and Wood in almost everything."

Page 42. "A few months after the armistice of November 1919, the masterful Albert Coates returned to this country from Russia and, having conducted a series of concerts in the spring of 1919, was engaged for the whole of the 1919-20 season. A powerful personality such as his was exactly what the orchestra needed in order to restore its pre-war quality. At one of his first rehearsals he devoted about about an hour to the Tannhäuser Overture, which every orchestra thinks it knows pretty well; but the time proved to have been thoroughly well spent. His rendering of Beethoven were magnificently vital; he was the first conductor in my experience to play the quavers at the beginning of the Fifth Symphony as they are written (i.e. without the 'traditional' elongation), and I remember vividly how his cuff-links jingled as he shot out his arm to beat that first tremendous quaver rest.