

A. E. Paw

ALBERT COATES was born in St. Petersburg, now Leningrad in 1882, son of a Yorkshire business man who had settled there and married a ^{English} ~~Russian~~ Lady. He was educated in England, and intended to enter his father's business, but when he returned to St. Petersburg he found it difficult to interest himself in anything but music, so eventually he was given permission to go to Leipzig to study at the Conservatorium. He was twenty at the time, and had the good fortune to become pupil of Nikisch for conducting, Klengel for the 'cello, and Teichmuller for the piano.

Nikisch soon became aware of his pupil's ability and before long appointed him as an assistant conductor and coach at the Leipzig Opera House. It was here that Coates conducted his first opera, "The Tales of Hoffman", and gained the necessary experience to secure him the conductorship of the Elberfeld Opera House in 1906.

Two years later he became joint conductor with Schuch at Dresden, and after two seasons there went to Mannheim for a year. Then, in 1910, he was appointed Chief Conductor of the Imperial Opera House at St. Petersburg and stayed there until the Revolution directing a rich and varied repertoire. By this time he had become well known as a conductor of symphonic work, and was generally looked upon as one of the world's greatest exponents of Scriabin. He made his first professional visit to England in 1910 to conduct the London Symphony Orchestra, and returned in 1913 to share a season at Covent Garden with Nikisch.

His next visit to this country was in 1919 when he worked with Sir Thomas Beecham at Coventy Garden, appeared again with the London Symphony Orchestra and did some fine performances with the Royal Philharmonic Society. Then began his association with the British National Opera Company and the Leeds Festivals, which he conducted in 1922 and again in 1925.

For the past twenty years or so Albert Coates has been travelling all over the world. We find him one year as a guest conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra, the next year directing a special season of the Paris Opera, then back in Russia, then at CoventGarden - until we wonder just where he belongs. But that is typical of him; he loves travelling, and a different orchestra every week would not disturb him in the least. So I hope I may be forgiven for not including in this sketch a catalogue of every important musical event in which he has figured.

How he has been able to find time to compose is a mystery to all musicians. His symphonic poem "The Eagle", dedicated to Nikisch, was an outstanding feature of the 1925 Leeds Festival, and his two operas, "Samuel Pepys" and "Pickwick" aroused no small amount of interest in musical circles when they were first performed in 1929 and 1936 respectively. The former, by the way, was

first given in German at Munich; the latter, in English, at Covent Garden.

From 1939 to March 1944, Albert Coates spent the whole of his time in America, and musical folks in this country were just beginning to presume that he had settled for good in the States when he suddenly appeared in London to work for E.N.S.A.! But before I go on, I must mention one or two of his activities in America. He conducted a substantial number of the Hollywood Bowl Concerts, he appeared frequently with the South Carolina and Seattle Symphony orchestras, and at Hollywood arranged and directed the music of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film, "Song of Russia" appearing in it also as a solo pianist. Shortly before his return to Britain he was associated with "Two Girls and a Sailor", another M.G.M. Film.

Albert Coates was married in 1910 to Madelon Holland, and has one daughter, Tamara, aged twenty-one.

When I met him a couple of months after his return to this country, he had already conducted a large number of concerts here under the auspices of E.N.S.A. He told me that our new audiences of enthusiastic young people reminded him of the musical renaissance that took place in Russia some years ago. The 'ordinary' man and woman in Britain is now learning to love music just as millions of the Russian workers did when their government began to provide music on a nation-wide scale. The only real difference is that most of our new audiences have been prepared by the radio, whereas in the more remote and poorer parts of Russia in those days there were millions who had never heard a symphony concert or seen an opera in their lives.

Some idea of what this means may be gathered from the fact that Coates once conducted before an audience who did not know how to clap! At the end of the concert they sat in silence smiling at the artists, but making no effort to show their appreciation in the customary manner. So at the next concert a few people had to be put in the audience here and there to set an example. These 'Applause-promoters' did the trick very nicely; in fact, the audience let their appreciation and enthusiasm run away with them and made a terrible din. The artists were delighted and bowed in acknowledgement. Then, with one accord, the audience got up and bowed back!

The people of the Soviet Union, Coates told me, are incredibly enthusiastic about opera, yet he can remember the time when they were so 'raw' that they thought the coloratura soprano was laughing when she sang her roulades and cadenzas. It was quite a common occurrence to find the audience heartily joining in this 'laughter'; much to the annoyance of the company! In one Russian village they couldn't understand why in "Carmen" the principals sang the solos all the way through. During the second interval a local leader went up to the conductor and said: "Why do you keep on bringing back the

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same ladies and gentlemen to sing to us? We have heard their songs: now let us hear what the others can do."

I asked Coates how he liked working under the Soviet regime. "At first I disliked it", he confessed, "but gradually it improved, and now I think it is wonderfully promising in every way. It is so much better now that the Church has been cleaned up."

N.B. When we discussed contemporary music, I soon discovered that Coates has the greatest admiration for the contemporary Russian school. He thinks it is a great pity that we hear so little of their work in this country; there are many really fine compositions that are practically unknown to the English audiences. Kabalevsky, who is only thirty-six, is one of the most promising of the Russian composers. A year or two before the recent war, Coates conducted the first performance of his Second Symphony in Moscow, and as a result, the authorities gave Kabalevsky the best opera libretto of the year to set to music.

It will be found that several of the biographies in this book believe that the Soviet composers all write to a pattern. I mentioned this to Coates, adding that it seemed to be the general impression in this country, but he disagreed strongly, adding that as far as he was aware there was no obligation of any kind on the part of Soviet composers to write in an officially approved style. They are quite free to express themselves in their own way, and merit rarely fails to find encouragement.

Coates is very impressed by the musicianship of our orchestral players, particularly by their ability to learn new works quickly, but he deplores our practice of giving concerts with so few rehearsals. In America he was allowed to call five rehearsals for almost all the concerts he gave.

Albert Coates is tall and broad-shouldered, inclined to be stout, and very much the cosmopolitan. His hair, once black and striking, is now grey and genteel. One might easily mistake him now for a successful but still very energetic business man capable of playing merry hell at a board meeting.

As a conductor he excels in Russian music, where his vitality, strength, generosity and love of colour can be unleashed. Give him a programme in which there is plenty of emotion and warmth, and he is happy.

by DONALD BROOK.

Published in "Conductors' Gallery".
in 1947.