

Towards a Jewish Musical Renaissance

Remarkable Records by a South African Cantor

THE Jew in music is a paradox and a phenomenon. By nature he is steeped in music. Any teacher will tell you that Jewish children have the most pronounced musical talent. The international concert platform exhibits an astonishing galaxy of Jewish virtuosi: Rosenthal, Godowsky, Rubenstein, Levitzki, Salomon, Moisiowitz, Friedman, Elman, Heifetz, Menuhim and others too numerous to mention. All these, of course, are interpretative artists. With such an apparent richness of musical soil, we might reasonably expect that there would be a magnificent outcropping of creative achievement. And what have we to show for, say, the last hundred years? Mendelsohn, Goldmark, Halevy, Meyerbeer, Offenbach! Second and third and fourth-raters as grading goes in the grand art. Why is this?

WELL, two gramophone records just issued by H.M.V. help us to answer that question. They have been made by Cantor Backon of the Benoni Synagogue and to the writer, they seem to have a significance transcending every previous Jewish musical experience. Cantor Backon sings four simple folk songs. I give the titles: "Gott in Hemmil is a Fotter," "Der Barditschewer Kaddisch," "Mai-Ko-Mashma-lon," and "Az Ich volt gevehn der boireh Ho-oylom." I do not intend to say very much about these discs. They are, technically, extremely good and both singer and accompanist (Mr. Hyman Sachs) unite to present a performance of extreme artistic merit. Mr. Backon's voice is ductile and dulcent, and his diction impeccable, but I esteem him most for the way he sensitively conveys the sense and the spirit of the peculiar yearning poesy of the soul of the Jew. He, surprisingly, knows it and understands it and makes his hearers know it and understand it too. That proves him a great artist indeed since no other Jewish singer has brought to me this especial realisation.

THE realisation is that there is a Jewish music after all. There

By
H. E. Brew



Cantor S. Backon,
whose records have now been released in this country.

is a Jewish personality capable of expressing it-self in music.

Grove says that the musical religious services in King Solomon's temple at Jerusalem were the matrices from which the whole art of polyphony has been up-reared. These few folk songs sung by Cantor Backon are evidence that Sir George Grove indulged no mere picturesque exaggeration. The *Fons et origo* of the individual Jewish

self expression survives; and survives where it should obviously be expected to survive and that is in folk song. It has been overweeded by countless centuries of circumstantial repression. It has been vulgarised in the Ghettos and maudlinised by sheer poverty and wretchedness. Hunger and persecution (spiritual and physical) have turned the song of joy into the humble whining dirge of lamentation.

ISRAEL can be a great singer in humankind. The greatest of them all. But he must find and save his own soul. He must cease his mimicry. Where is there Jewishness in Mendelsohn's music? Or in Meyerbeer or Offenbach or in Goldmark? You will search it out in vain for it is not there. Jewish music lies dead in the censored and inhibited soul of the nation, and it will be resurrected only when the nation is restored to its nationhood. Just as Jews have been strutting around the universe behaving as nearly as possible like other people and never like themselves—so does their music sound as nearly as possible like other people's music and never like their own. For centuries we have been astrain with this awful, unnatural mimicry; it has worked its way into us and become a dreadful, a false second nature. It has almost mortified and corroded the Jewish creative genius at its source.

BUT we are living in a wonderful age. A great Jewish composer, like Ernest Bloch, like Darius Milhaud, like Schöenberg and Achron, is weaving music out of a fabric of (Concluded at bottom of next column.)

Attending a Mock Congress

"DELEGATES" ASSEMBLE AT THE JEWISH GUILD

OWING to a "dislocation" in the Continental train service, there was a delay in the opening of the Mock Zionist Congress at the Jewish Guild on Wednesday evening. Finally the curtain of the stage opened and the audience saw the various Zionist "leaders" made up to the very life. There was Nahum Sokolow (J. S. Judelowitz) — old and weary, accompanied by his nurse. There was Rabbi Dr. Stephen Wise (David Dainow) full of vigour, pep and American energy; Mr. Vladimir Jabotinsky (I. J. Kagan) full of military spirit; Ex-Deputy Gruenbaum (I. Cyrkiel) in serious mien; Rabbi Meir Berlin (J. Rubik) well bearded and troublesome; Mr. Abraham Harzfeld (B. Shmukler); and others. Although Dr. Chaim Weizmann (S. Katz) did not attend the real Congress in Prague, he was quite prominent by his presence at the mock congress in Johannesburg. There was also a South African delegate (J. Klewansky), who took a fairly prominent part in the proceedings. Miss Jeanette Sieradzki was the South African woman delegate.

It was all great fun, of course, but there were occasional moments of dullness. It is pretty difficult anyhow to be humorous and satiric at a time of Jewish tragedy like the present. Many of the speeches, however, were witty and represented in a way a subtle criticism of the characters, aims and personalities of the various well-known leaders in the Zionist movement.

The chairmanship of Mr. Leo Motzkin (J. Blumenthal) was really excellent. He managed to keep the various "delegates" in more or less good order.

A considerable amount of work is involved in the arranging of a mock congress of this nature. Praise must be extended to the Nordau Club of Johannesburg for its initiative.

conscious Jewishness. They are trying to evoke out of themselves a true Jewish voice. It may be a hard struggle to disentangle the frail lyric out of the enswathing welter in which it has been wilfully raveled, but it will emerge; with courage and faith it will emerge; and this, surely, is a time of testing courage and of resurg-ing faith. We hear now of the Bruno Walters and the scores of acknowledged masters expelled from high posts in Germany; will they not learn the supreme lesson; the Jew's supreme lesson; and know, at last, that they are Jews? And with that must come an awakening of a Jewish creative consciousness which must contribute greatly to this new movement towards a pure Jewish musical concept.

BUT, as in the beginning, so in the end and our new Jewish music must stream forth out of our folk song. Our future symphonies and sonatas—the seeds of them are all there in our folk music and we must all be grateful to Cantor Backon for providing us with these splendid records. I confidently predict that they will create considerable interest far beyond our own shores.

The records referred to above are obtainable from all H.M.V. agents. The numbers are GX13 and 14.