

Shaw Fire

I wonder how many people are aware that George Bernard Shaw was a music critic before he became a writer of plays. In a trawl through his voluminous writing on music I have uncovered many gems, including the following article, published in *The Star*, November 1st 1889, and entitled 'A Portfolio of New Music'.

'This week, dear reader, we shall have some nice little reviews of recent musical publications. But do not on that account resolve too hastily to skip me: the subject has its lively side, unless you happen to be on the premises whilst the reviewer is trying them over. Publishing enterprise must have recognition and encouragement – when it deserves them. For I must add that one or two eminent firms have seen in the simplicity of my character only something to practise upon with lays that they would not impose on a City Father after a heavy dinner.

'Here are a couple of samples of the sort of thing sent to me on the off – the exceedingly off – chance of my having been born recently enough to describe them respectively as “a graceful and effective drawing room song, compass F to G,” and “a dashing nautical ballad, with a swinging chorus, suitable for a smoking concert, and within the resources of a robust baritone.”

Are they all forgotten?

Moments that are past?

Have they fled for ever?

Moments that are past.

A-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-ah!

Only come again

As you came to me that day

When the sun was on the river

And the scent was in the hay.

A-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-ah!

'Here is the other –

Dead! Men! No! secrets tell

Mer! Cy! But! Scant we shew

Young or old we seize their gold

Then up the plank they go

Jolly good luck to our flag so grim

Emblem of deeds we do

Millions of wealth, long life and health

To the Vam-Pire's crew.

'My readers will hardly believe that such things have been thrust upon my notice; but they have. I do not think I have deserved it. At any rate I decline to put myself in danger of hell fire by calling the people who admire such trash by their proper name.

‘Messrs Novello have treated me far more handsomely. And yet there is one thing in their contribution which I must declare inferior to the Vam-Pire’s Crew, because there are unquestionably idiots in the world who like the Vampire; but no human being ever liked a Church Cantata written to order for one of our provincial Festivals. Here it is, in the familiar Novello buff and brown cover, price two shillings. The words, I blush to say, are by a brother critic. Listen!

Rest thee, my Saviour, rest Thy head meetly.
Angels watch over Thee sleeping so sweetly.
 No dream alarm
 With thought of harm
Till night and its shadows have vanished completely.

‘Take it away, Messrs Novello, take it away. Burn the whole edition, lest any choral society should waste its time on rhyme-jingling that never once rises to the level of blasphemy, and on music-mongering that is enough to make every intelligent student in England forswear counterpoint. I suppose the stewards of the ____ Musical Festival thought they were encouraging English music by ordering a cantata; and I am bound to assume that my colleague of the largest circulation in the world* is honestly and infatuatedly conscious of how detestable his verses are from a literary point of view, and how their essential triviality must jar on all sincere Christians. But there are limits to the allowances I am prepared to make. In future it will be necessary to square *The Star* if the truth about these matters is to remain untold any longer. Either I must have my share of the libretto-making or I blow the gaff.’

*The colleague referred to is Joseph Bennett, music critic of *The Daily Telegraph* from 1870–1906.

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