

RELIGIOUS MUSIC

THE words 'musicology,' 'musicologist,' and the like will not be found in English dictionaries—sufficient evidence that we lack the science which the words connote.

Since Burney's day, English musical history has been either a safe following of 'recognised authorities' or a self-conscious appraisal of national achievements—plagiarism or parochialism, to be perfectly frank. But the 'authorities' have usually been a generation or two out of date, and our national achievements have been too rarely measured with those of other countries; hence our defective sense of proportion and our un-catholic (in the literal sense) outlook.

It is, therefore, refreshing to take up a book embodying the latest research, written by a Frenchman who is also a musicologist, and there to find ordered and logical arrangement as distinct from our own haphazard or individualistic methods, together with a Frenchman's cultural breadth as distinct from our own musical nationalism.

But even M. Aigrain's book¹ has its defects—the defects of its qualities. His orderly and logical mind occasionally yields to the French passion for codification. In too many cases his arguments—which look so flawless to the non-musician—are but an attempt to discuss musical phenomena in terms of something else.

This is noticeable in the medieval section of his book. He expounds plain-chant in terms of rhetoric;

¹ *Religious Music*. By René Aigrain, D.D. Translated by the Rev. C. Mulcahy, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth. To which is added a further section by the Translator on 'English and Irish Religious Music.' (London: Sands & Co., 15 King Street, Covent Garden, W.C.2.)

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he uses the terms *arsis* and *thesis* in the contrary sense to their accepted musical one; he gives a logical exposition of the Modes in terms of the modern Scale, employing the note *Si* for that purpose. But surely the Modes were conceived in terms of the tetrachord, and all modal music (whether plain-chant or polyphony) is explainable in terms of the hexachord, in neither of which systems did *Si* have any place.

To approach ancient music (by analogy or contrast) through the modern is the wrong way. It seems so logical to argue from the known to the unknown that the non-musical may be pardoned if they do not recognise our old friend the cart before the horse—a method of progression as defective in music as in traction.

When a German discusses music he too often bemuses the reader by his inability to see the wood for the trees. But he does at least pay a visit to the wood, and he takes a good look at the trees. The Frenchman looks for the wood on French soil, and if he does not find it there he will deny (or at best ignore) both the wood and its trees.

Before Nagel wrote about English music he came over here, and I found traces of his research in the British Museum years before his discoveries found a place in any English history. M. Aigrain has not crossed the Straits of Dover, and his attitude towards English music (in the century when it really did produce some front-rank composers) reminds us of the couplet about a famous Oxonian :

‘ I am the Master of Balliol College,
And what I don't know isn't knowledge.’

This particular defect of the book has been remedied (in the English edition) by the translator, who contributes a special section on English and Irish religious music.

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But when all faults are noted, M. Aigrain's book remains one which no music lover (and certainly no choirmaster) should be without. We have produced nothing quite so good of its kind on this side of the Channel.

I may add—in passing—that choirmasters who still labour under the impression that carol-singing is a Protestant institution, and that Bach's music is not a seemly adjunct to Catholic worship, would do well to read what M. Aigrain has to say in Chapter VIII.

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