

The Wesleys as Church Musicians.

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MUSIC being the "Divine Art" and the "Handmaid of Religion," it is not unnatural that a leader of religious thought, and a "Chief Musician," to use the Scriptural title, should occasionally be found united in the same person or family. Ambrose and Gregory in the early church; Martin Luther and our own John Merbecke (both of whom adapted the music of Gregory to the vernacular Scriptures) during the Reformation period; and the Wesleys during the Evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, are conspicuous examples,

It does not appear that either the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, nor the poet of the movement, his brother Charles, possessed any outstanding musical gift. They were interested in the adaptation of tunes to hymns, but nothing more. The latter's two sons, Charles and Samuel, therefore probably owed their musicianship to their mother. Unfortunately, the biographers say nothing of her in this respect. Of the poet's elder son and namesake little need be said. Reports differ as to his playing, though not as to his phenomenal memory: he knew all Handel's choruses by heart! In view, however, of his astounding precocity—he strummed little tunes with a correct bass when only two and a half years old—he was chiefly remarkable for what he did not do. But the great hymn-writer's younger son, Samuel, became the most eminent organist, and one of the greatest English composers of his day, and his son succeeded him in the position. The two dominated English church music for over half a century. "Old Sam Wesley," as he was called, to distinguish him from his son, composed an oratorio, "Ruth," when eight years of age. Nor was it a mere piece of child's play, for in after years, presumably in a revised and enlarged form, it was performed at a Birmingham Festival! At eleven, he not only wrote, but published a book of harp-

sichord lessons, and was sufficiently renowned to call for a portrait of him being engraved. He composed sonatas for the harpsichord or piano ; organ concertos ; chamber music ; symphonies ; songs, duets, glees ; and sacred music for both the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches—anthems and services ; masses and Latin motets. These latter are, perhaps, his best work. He also composed tunes for every metre in the Collection of Hymns, compiled by his father and uncle. His connection with the leaders of the great Evangelical revival makes it interesting to recall that he was strongly suspected of being at heart a Roman Catholic ! Nor was the suspicion entirely without foundation. For in the Paris archives there are letters written by him in his youth to a young lady in a convent school at Bath, betraying a decided susceptibility to the attractions of Roman Catholicism—a susceptibility he kept in abeyance from respect for his father. But in later life he disavowed having ever contemplated a change of faith, saying, that though allured to the Roman chapels through his liking for Gregorian music, the tenets of Rome had never appealed to him.

It was, however, in Samuel Wesley's third son, Samuel Sebastian Wesley, born in London, August 14, 1810, that the reputation of the family among the sons of Jubal came nearest to equalling its eminence in the religious world. For though he wrote both less in quantity and in less ambitious forms than his father, his style was more distinguished. Music did not escape that wave of deadly dullness, that cult of the academic and formal, that worship of the stilted and conventional, which characterized the eighteenth century. Nor, happily, did it escape that rejuvenating influence known as Romanticism, which, beginning in literature and spreading to the plastic arts, has since left no handicraft untouched. And in this musical revival, this insistence on the spirit rather than the letter, Sebastian Wesley took a distinct, if only a small, and possibly unconscious, part. In that disregard of "form," with which the Romantic school is so often charged, Wesley had no part. He wrote nothing in the sphere chiefly affected by it—that of the

sonata and symphony. But he was an avowed enemy of conventionalism in harmony, and aimed at a dramatic expression new to Church music; and he met with the fate usual to a man ahead of his times. That throb of life, that truthfulness to Nature, without which no music would nowadays get even a second hearing, was in Wesley's day anathema. Those anthems and services of his, which are now everywhere regarded as models of Church music, were greeted on their first appearance as almost beneath contempt. "Dull, unmelodious, a tedious exercise, will not be heard again," are among the mildest of the epithets used. J. W. Davison, of the *Times*, was a personal rival of Wesley's, and used expressions hardly fit for reproduction. Wesley's masterpiece, "The Wilderness," failed to win the Gresham Prize as being "not cathedral music." Yet in 1888 or 1889 the Trafalgar Square rioters invaded Westminster Abbey, and interrupted the afternoon service in a way which an eye-witness prefers not to describe. Towards the end, however, the throng suddenly became quiet and orderly, and remained so to the end. It was due to the effect on these roughs of the last movement of "The Wilderness," the beautiful quartet, "And sorrow and sighing shall flee away." There are a few other movements, but very few, in the whole range of music which can claim a similar record.

Samuel Sebastian Wesley died in 1876. Despite the anxiety of Deans and Chapters to secure his services—he was organist of no fewer than four cathedrals—and the offer from Mr. Gladstone's Government of a knighthood, which he declined, and a Civil List pension, his last years were not wholly unembittered by a sense of disappointment, partly due, no doubt, to his erratic and nervous temperament. He had met with many rebuffs, but surely would hardly have felt them could he have foreseen the position his music would occupy when, so far as the outward ear is concerned, he had himself ceased to hear it.