Sir Hamilton Harty

Herbert Hamilton Harty was born at Hillsborough, Co. Down in 1879. His father, an organist, taught him piano, viola and counterpoint. There was an extensive library of music in the home and the children were encouraged to educate themselves by playing through it; an activity from which his ability to assimilate scores very rapidly, which was later of great value to him, may have in part derived. His mother led the family string quartet, and the piano and violin sonatas of Mozart and Beethoven were household fare.

His first appointment was as organist at Magheracoll Church, Co. Antrim. This was at the age of 12, though from the age of 8 he had on occasion substituted for his father. Succeeding appointments took him to Belfast and then to Dublin. At the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin he came into contact with the Neapolitan Michele Esposito, Chief Professor of Pianoforte at the Academy since 1882, and for many years leader and inspiration of the town's musical life. The extent to which it was a formal teacher-student relationship is unclear. What is certain, however, is that Harty benefited enormously from the association and remained for ever grateful for it.

In 1900 his String Quartet won a prize at the Feis Ceoil and he had similar successes in the following years. However, he felt that Ireland offered insufficient scope to his developing abilities so he moved to England.

London very soon regarded him as an excellent accompanist and as a composer of promise. 1904 was an eventful year for him, his Piano Quartet won the Lewis Hill Prize and he married the soprano Agnes Nicholls. The recitals which they gave together were soon regarded as leading events of the musical calendar. At a Promenade Concert in 1907 his *Comedy Overture* achieved great success; soon repeated at a Crystal Palace Concert and at a concert of the Philharmonic Society. At the Cardiff Festival the same year, his wife was the soloist in the first performance of *Ode to a Nightingale*, his setting of the poem by Keats. In the Queen's Hall two years later a great impression was made when Szigeti gave the first performance of his Violin Concerto in D minor. The Cardiff Festival of 1910 was the occasion of the première of his tone poem, *With the Wild Geese*, and in 1913 in Leeds his setting of a poem by Whitman, *The Mystic Trumpeter*, was heard for the first time. By now he had become well known as a conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra, but during the First World War he appeared often with the Hallé Orchestra. During these years he transcribed the *Water Music* and *Music for the Royal Fireworks* for modern orchestra. Such transcriptions are anathema to the purists of our own time, but in their own day they served well to keep such works alive.

When Hans Richter resigned from the Hallé in 1911 he predicted that Harty would succeed him. In fact Michael Balling was appointed, but he returned to Germany when war was declared in 1914. In 1915, after a season of guest conductors, Beecham took over, but in 1920 he left owing to the pressure of other commitments. It was on Beecham's recommendation that Harty at last became the orchestra's permanent conductor.

Amongst his first actions on taking up the post was to lead the campaign to convince the civic powers that an orchestra is a public institution meriting support from the public purse.

In 1923 Beecham returned to Manchester to conduct the first performance of Harty's Piano Concerto with the composer as soloist. The programme is worth quoting in full:

Hallé Orchestra, conductor Sir Thomas Beecham,

Free Trade Hall, March 15th 1923.

Weber	Overture "Oberon"
Delius	Walk to the Paradise Garden
Mozart	Symphony No.34
Harty	Piano Concerto
	Soloist: The Composer
Méhul	Overture "Les deux Aveugles de Tolède"
Bizet	Entr'acte "The Fair Maid of Perth"
Berlioz	Hungarian March "The Damnation of Faust"

Programmes in which a number of shorter or lighter pieces or excepts from operas surrounded one or perhaps two longer works were quite normal. It was also perfectly normal for a soloist to sing or play a solo or two in an otherwise orchestral concert. For example, in 1921 Lauritz Melchior sang Lohengrin's narration (in Danish) as his sole part in a full programme, and in 1928 Medtner besides playing one of his own concerti, played a group of solo pieces.

Thus whilst there is no suggestion whatever that the pieces on this Compact Disc were ever in fact performed at one concert, indeed to have four leading singers for one excerpt would be unlikely, nevertheless, this programme is within the spirit of its time.

In 1929 Harty was the soloist in the first public performance of Constant Lambert's *Rio Grande*, the composer conducting. (The recording of Harty and Lambert, made at the time, can be heard on Symposium CD 1203.)

Harty did not hesitate to give his audiences much that was new to them; Bax, Berlioz, Casella, Moeran, Sibelius, Strauss and Walton. Inevitably there were criticisms

of his programming. When he returned from America with *Rhapsody in Blue* he was told not to perform rubbish; but such slings and arrows are the common fate of conductors everywhere.

He revised and largely re-wrote his early *Irish Symphony*. It was well received in Manchester in 1924 and in London the following year.

Mahler's 4th Symphony was first heard in Manchester under Harty's baton in 1927, and in 1930 *Das Lied von der Erde*. Also in 1930, he gave the first English performance of Mahler's 9th Symphony and, two years later, of Shostakovich's 1st Symphony.

The increasing involvement of the BBC in music led to a trenchant attack by Harty. He was particularly incensed by its habit of recruiting players by direct approach; the more so as this included members of his own orchestra.

He left Manchester in 1933. There had been a number of disagreements. His visits to America and his appointment to the London Symphony Orchestra the previous year were used as evidence that he was no longer able to give the town adequate attention. He left an orchestra widely regarded as superior to any in the capital; indeed, a London critic remarked that there was no need to send to Germany to know what was a good orchestra (the Berlin Philharmonic had recently been heard here) the Hallé would do. Its standing was attributed not only to Harty's abilities, but also to the presence of a permanent conductor. His relationship with the orchestra was characterised by his mesmeric ability and by his regard for the players as human beings. He desired the players to play well for their own satisfaction rather than as a response to his will.

Thereafter Harty was engaged mainly in London. In 1934, he directed his new orchestra in the first performance of the first three movements of Walton's 1st symphony. A year later, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, he conducted the complete work.

However, whereas with the Hallé he had exercised complete control of musical affairs, the London orchestra had been self-governing since its inception in 1904. After a brief tenure the arrangement was terminated voluntarily.

In the mid-1930s he began to slow down and to lose interest in things. Eventually a brain tumour was diagnosed. There was radium treatment and there was the loss of his right eye. He recovered sufficiently to compose a little and to conduct now and again. In 1940 he conducted the première of his *A John Field Suite* at a concert at the Royal Philharmonic Society.

His health again declined, but in any case, with the onset of war, the country's concert activities were sharply reduced. As an additional burden, a bomb made his London home uninhabitable. He took a flat in Brighton and there, early in 1941, he died. After the war his ashes were taken for interment in Hillsborough.

The high regard in which he was held was marked by an honorary Fellowship of the Royal College of Music in 1924, a Knighthood and a Mus.D. from Dublin in 1925, and the Gold Medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society in 1934.

He was revered as an accompanist; both with the baton and at the keyboard. Joe Batten reports that he was a fine pianist and first amongst the accompanists he had heard. (To a pianist who frequently interrupted a rehearsal to draw attention to details in the score, he eventually suggested, "Suppose you conduct and I play the piano." This amused the orchestra mightily; they knew he could have done it.)

The press, with its habit of providing convenient handles, said he was a Berlioz specialist. In Harty's case the handle had justification as throughout his career he advanced the music of this composer.

Whilst Henry Wood rushed from Festival to Promenade Concert to provincial choral society, Harty tended to stay put.

Similarly the aura of the international star was not his, though he did tour the United States each year from 1931 to 1936 and Australia in 1934. He was very impressed by musical standards in America; there was praise for the immediate and noticeable improvements in orchestral performance he achieved in Australia.

Comparison with Thomas Beecham is fruitful. They were born the same year, but Beecham lived and was active for two decades longer than Harty. Harty was a poet, very introspective and imaginative and there was in him a streak of the pessimism often attributed to the Irish. If there was anything Beecham was not, it was a pessimist; he was an outward-going bon viveur sparkling with stories and wit.

Undoubtedly, had he preferred it, Harty could have had a career as a pianist, and as an accompanist he was second to none. He also composed and orchestrated. These were areas into which Beecham did not enter. On the other hand, whether Harty, had it been available to him, would have gleefully spent a family fortune paying orchestras and energetically mounting opera seasons is a matter for those who enjoy speculation.

Such details are not grounds for suggesting that one or other was the better conductor; all that should be said is that they were different. However, Beecham, by living longer, had one possible and one definite advantage. Many people feel that conductors mature and that with longevity the process continues. This is at best a dubious proposition.

Old age and accidents seemed to make Otto Klemperer more powerful and ever more granite-like, but where he recorded a work more than once over a period of years, the earlier one is often even finer.

Furtwängler gave radically different accounts of works in each of the often several surviving versions.

Toscanini was not as inflexible and unvarying as is often said. Nevertheless, in many cases, bits of performances decades apart can be spliced into each other with astonishing continuity.

There is considerable reason for asserting that whilst Beecham all his life was promoting and popularising great music, nevertheless, his development into a great

conductor was relatively slow.

Klemperer, Furtwängler, Toscanini and Beecham lived into the era of "Hi-Fidelity" and each left a cornucopia of "Hi-Fi" recordings. It is this writer's thesis that if Harty had been blessed with similar years, his name would be similarly revered today.

Most of Harty's recordings are technically remarkably good for their time. Copies pressed before 1931 have Columbia's excellent quiet surfaces, and modern equipment enables the noise on later pressings to be reduced to generally acceptable levels without spoiling the sound.

The London Philharmonic Orchestra was founded by Sir Thomas Beecham in 1932 and he conducted at its first appearance which was in the Queen's Hall on October 7th. Three days later its first recording was made, but with Sir Henry Wood conducting. Beecham's first records with it were made on December 12th. The Balakirev piece, recorded on September 12th the following year, was made for the *Columbia History of Music by Ear and Eye*. Four 12" sides would have been more suitable, for the sound is somewhat cramped in the 10" format of the series.

"Oh, not yet another 'New World' Symphony!" However hackneyed this work has become, this performance will make the listener sit up. The recording conveys the warm sound of Manchester's Free Trade Hall and makes one regret its passing. The entire recording was accomplished in one day; perhaps that helped to give it coherence and urgency. The growl of the double-basses and the sizzle of the brass have been less well caught on recordings half the age of this one. The R in the matrix series indicates that the sound was relayed to the recording room by landline; not that it is a re-recording.

The Bax overture is a pastiche, a conscious parody of Richard Strauss, waltz and all. This memorable, high spirited piece was composed in great haste to win a bet. *Till Eulenspiegel* springs to mind, but in a programme note by Bax only d'Artagnan and Casanova are mentioned. The score is dated 13th October 1930 and it is dedicated to Harty. He conducted its first performances, in Manchester on 19th November 1931 and in London on 16th February 1932. [Picaresque-belonging or relating to rogues or knaves; applied esp. to a style of fiction dealing with the adventures of rogues, chiefly of Spanish origin - O.E.D.]

Harty conducted The Apostles on a number of occasions; this record being made shortly after one of them. A contemporary reviewer welcomed it but, perhaps unaware of the state of the industry at that time, regretted that the work was not recorded complete. How this particular excerpt came to be chosen is not clear, though from this work it is probably the most convenient section to stand on its own. The sound is remarkable for its time. The soloists are: Dora Labette, soprano, Harold Williams, baritone, Hubert Eisdell, tenor, Dennis Noble, baritone and Robert Easton, bass.

Berlioz was a favourite of Harty. This astonishingly vivid recording gives a good indication of the excitement he could generate with such a piece.

Acknowledgements: Symposium Records thanks Michael Plant for his help and encouragement in this project; thanks are due also to Paul Lewis, Ronald Taylor and Adrian Tuddenham for assistance with the production.

Copyright Notice: This digitally transferred compilation with its notes is copyright, it may not be broadcast, copied, hired out, publicly performed or stored in a retrieval system without written permission.