by doing a good deal of preliminary work upon those notes and vowel sounds that the individual voice can naturally do the best; and, in general, if you are anxious to make your voice of good quality throughout you must practise your good notes much more than your bad ones. The other is merely a different form of the same principle, namely, that if some of the notes of your voice are of poor quality you will not necessarily improve them by continually practising them. The reason for these things lies in the peculiarities of the vocal instrument and its control. A superficial reasoning by analogy goes like this: 'If you are learning the pianoforte and you find that one of your fingers is weak, it is obvious that you must do exercises with that finger; therefore, if you are learning singing and you find one of your notes is weak, you must do exercises on that note to strengthen it.'

If the fallacy in this argument cannot be seen we will put it the other way round. If you have a weak note in your voice you practise it till it gets stronger, so that if you have a bad note on your pianoforte you hammer on it till it gets better. Well, that settles the argument all right. But a cause is not necessarily wrong because it is badly argued, so we must give positive reasons for our paradoxical rules. The reason for singing your best notes most often is to give your ear a good model. The student of singing is bound to hear the sound of his own voice more often than that of anyone else. It is a matter of common knowledge that an Englishman who spends some considerable time in the United States returns with what we are pleased to term an American twang, and the American who spends some time here goes back with what his fellow-countrymen are pleased to term an English accent. Voice trainers have been slow to make use of the hint given by such facts. So far as quality is concerned, voice-training is not a matter of making the vocal muscles stronger, but in learning a more exact and subtle co-ordination; this can only be done through the ear. The poor notes are produced by just the same muscles as the good ones. Mere scales and exercises have no tendency in themselves to improve the quality of a voice; in fact, a bad tone may easily be stereotyped through their means.

To sum up: When we consider that the singing of a single syllable involves the exact co-ordination of three complicated sets of muscles—those of breathing, phonation, and articulation; that the control of the first set is partly automatic and partly conscious, so that the rate and extent of inspiration are, within certain limits, under the control of the will; that the second set—certainly as far as pitch is concerned—is entirely under the control of the auditory centres of the brain; and that the third set (the muscles which are responsible for movements of the jaw, lips, tongue, and soft palate) are connected with a veritable maze of visual, tactual, muscular, and—most important of all—auditory sensations; when we consider that the sensations connected with the singing of such a syllable are partly due to the feelings of muscular tensions in the first and last sets of muscles (rendered more puzzling by the absence of corresponding sensations in the second set), partly due to the vibratory motion of the air in the resonators and to the sympathetic vibrations set up in the bones of the face, nose, and chest, and partly due, finally, to the actual current of air—this last being very slight but quite enough to mislead many people into thinking that in some way it 'carries' the sound; when we consider all this, I say, we need not be surprised that those who have not trained themselves very carefully in habits of accurate reasoning (which also has a technique, by the by), are inclined to make a muddle of their terms and theories.

The final word of encouragement we can get from the writings of Bishop Berkeley:

'You see, Hylas, the water of yonder fountain, how it is forced upwards, in a round column, to a certain height; at which it breaks, and falls back into the basin from whence it rose; its ascent as well as descent, proceeding from the same uniform law or principle of gravitation. Just so, the same Principles which, at first view lead to Scepticism, pursued to a certain point, bring men back to common sense.' (Third Dialogue between Hylas and Philonous.)

We have only to apply this to our own special case. It is not necessary for the student or amateur to have a profound knowledge of, or to worry himself about, these theoretical considerations and complexities provided always, as our legal friends say, he does not make up a theory of his own based upon a very inadequate set of facts. If he has a good discriminative ear, i.e., one which not only hears intervals clearly, but one which readily distinguishes different qualities of sound, he can arrive at a fairly high level of skill in the art of singing with the expenditure of much less time and trouble upon purely technical matters than is necessary in the study of any other musical instrument. The ear must always be his chief guide; but if he concludes from this that he wants no other he has misunderstood the purpose of this article.

ON CONDUCTING

BY ALEXANDER BRENT-SMITH

On the value of conducting there are two widely different opinions. Inexperienced people imagine that anyone can conduct, whereas experienced people assert that no one can conduct.

This first opinion, held by the majority of people, is very clearly expressed, and practically applied, by boys in public schools about the time of their inter-house music competitions. The chief musician in the house first of all sets about collecting players and singers, since it is obvious that before you start worrying about
how the music should be performed you must have people capable of performing. Naturally, then, in the eyes of the House, to be a good singer or a good player is of the utmost importance. When once the choir (or orchestra) is established and the notes are known, the problem certainly arises as to the means whereby all shall start together and keep time during the changes of tempo. But even so the relative values of the performer and conductor scarcely change. ‘Oh, sir,’ says the head boy to his house-master, ‘who are we to get to conduct our choir? We can’t spare A, B, and C; they are much too useful as singers. Do you think we could get XYZ to do it? He’s got cheek enough for anything, and doesn’t mind making a fool of himself.’ That, roughly, is the opinion of the man-in-the-street on the relative merits of performers and conductors—performers require skill; conductors require cheek.

Even among the more initiated there are curious views about conducting, some of which have been brought to my notice recently. A young man wrote asking if he might have a talk with me about a musical career. He was, so he stated, desperately keen on music, but was an absolute rotter at any kind of instrument. He was an indifferent pianist owing to the clumsiness of his hands. He had hoped to be more successful as an organist, but, Nature being cruelly consistent, he found that his boots, size twelve, produced a cloudy effect in the bass. He had taken up the violin, but on the earnest entreaty of his family he had laid it down again. He felt that instruments of percussion scarcely gave scope for the expression of his ardent temperament. The question, therefore, which he wanted to put to me was—had he any chance of becoming a conductor?

The appointment being made, he duly appeared. He repeated at considerable length the sad history of his musical studies. ‘But,’ he added, ‘my fiancée tells me that I have a very good presence, which is half the battle with a conductor.’ I replied that I was not quite so sure about the value of a presence, pointing out that conductors, like Cambridge colleges, are remarkable chiefly for their backs.

‘Putting that on one side,’ he said, ‘what does a conductor require?’

‘In the first place,’ I answered, feeling rather pontifical, ‘he requires individuality—that is, he must have his own views about the music he is performing.’

‘Ah, there I’m quite safe,’ he chimed in. ‘I have very decided views on music, and I can truthfully say that I’ve never yet heard any conductor who gave a reading which in any way came up to my own ideas.’

‘That,’ I said, ‘sounds promising, for it means that if you should succeed we should have performances which break away from the orthodox interpretations. ‘Then,’ I added, ‘he must have a good sense of rhythm.’

‘That I certainly have,’ he answered. ‘I am a beautiful dancer, and very quick on my feet in the boxing ring.’

‘That was not exactly what I meant,’ I said, ‘but still it is probably in your favour. Then, of course,’ I continued, ‘you must learn all the technique of conducting. You must know how to beat various tempi, and, more than that, you must have the courage to give firm and decisive beats.’

At this point he drew himself up with what is known as hauteur. ‘I’m afraid you misunderstand me. I have no intention of being a mere time-beater. I want to be an artist with the stick.’

‘Oh well,’ I said, ‘perhaps you’d better let me have your ideas first, and afterwards I will give you my advice.’

‘My idea,’ he began, ‘is to be a star conductor—one of those men about whom the press writes, “Conductor weaves a spell of magic,” in capital letters. Someone who interprets the music by gestures—a flash of the arm, and the orchestra emulates Niagara; a raised hand, and we are lapped in the midst of a tropical night. You know the sort of thing?’

I nodded.

‘That’s my idea,’ he continued. ‘No giving down-beats for me. I mean to devise my own batonical gestures like the famous conductor who beat all the propositions of the first book of Euclid whilst conducting the “Egmont” Overture.’

‘Really?’ I asked. ‘I must own that I have never heard of him.’

‘Oh, yes,’ he replied, his eyes flashing with enthusiasm; ‘he has worked out all his own designs. During the “Midsummer Night’s Dream” Overture he draws pictures with his baton of Titania, Oberon, and, of course, Bottom. During “Coriolanus” he draws pictures of the Coliseum (at Rome, I mean) and the Arch of Titus and ——’

‘Details of historical accuracy don’t worry him, I suppose?’

‘Oh, no,’ he answered, with a contemptuous turn of the mouth, ‘he is far above such petty trifles. Anyway, that’s the sort of conductor I want to be.’

I rose quickly, saying: ‘Then I don’t see how I can be of any assistance to you. You seem to have your plan of campaign quite clear in your own mind. All you require now is an orchestra of sixty, seventy, or a hundred players as foolish as yourself.’

Since then he has visited several other people to ask their advice. I am told that on the day after his sudden and swift exit from the house of Dr. A-B-C he received an air-cushion with apologies but no regrets.

That there are such extravagant notions about conductors and their methods is no matter for surprise when we consider how extravagantly some conductors behave and how
extravagantly some conductors are advertised. Can we expect an ordinary man to believe that a conductor is essential to a performance when he sees him (conducting by heart) step with an imperious gesture towards the first violins, while the sound comes almost apologetically from the second violins? On the other hand, why should not an ordinary man believe that a conductor is a superman when he sees in his paper the prominent headlines—'Wizard Weaves a Magic Spell'?

But in spite of the extravagance of some conductors and their chroniclers, the importance of conducting is at the same time greater and less than the schoolboy or the concert-goer imagines.

First-rate performances are not given by men who, in the Pauline phrase, conduct as one that beateth the air; they are obtained by men who have clear notions of what the music means to them, and who have the ability to communicate their views to those around them. But—and here the extravagant paragraphist misses the point—they could not obtain great performances unless they had great players and singers capable of meeting their demands. A first-class orchestra may give a superb performance of certain works under the direction of an inexperienced conductor, but no conductor can give a superb performance of any work with an incompetent orchestra.

First, then, to get a good performance a great conductor must have good material to work upon, and secondly, he must have ample time for rehearsal. No conductor, however great and skilful, can communicate all his ideas of balance, delicacy, rubato, &c., by means of a magnetic eye or by a magic wand. He requires ample rehearsal time to explain and justify his views to his confederates. It is in this matter of time for rehearsal that the star conductor has the advantage over the struggle or the novice. The latter may just have time to run through the music to make sure that the notes are played, but that is all. Details of interpretation have to be left to chance. Hence we have the sad condition in this country of really gifted conductors never gaining public appreciation, while outsiders, or a few prominent Englishmen (who rightly refuse to conduct orchestras, other than those they work with habitually, without hours of rehearsal) pick all the plums of appreciation.

For sheer skill, reliability, and precision probably the greatest conductors are not those who capture the headlines, but the little-known hard workers who give astonishingly good performances with players and singers who have to be shepherded, coaxed, and encouraged. It is such a man who, by the heat of his own enthusiasm, transforms base metal into gold, who deserves the headlines about Wizardry. The famous few may possess more fire and insight, but who knows—if conductors were hidden from sight and if their identity were not disclosed, there might be some strange reversals of judgment.

A POSTSCRIPT TO MY BACH BOOK

By Rutland Boughton

Some opposition was to be expected when I set out to describe the career and art of Bach in the light of a materialistic conception of history and a sociological conception of Christianity. The Editor of the Musical Times says that I have only myself to blame if the reviewers 'spend their available space in attacking the main point' of my new book. Have the reviewers attacked that point? They have denied it; but denial is not attack in an intellectual sense unless some efforts are made to disprove, and at present I am unaware of any such effort so far as the central thesis is concerned, although it is true that a more real attack has been made upon a few details. We will come to those details later on; for the moment I want to stick to 'the main point.'

First let me say that I am entirely satisfied of the intellectual integrity, and even the generous spirit of the majority of the reviewers. Of my own small capacity to present my argument that they may be gently, gradually, and fully persuaded, I am also very conscious. My scholarship is incomplete, and my friends never cease to tell me that my style is too violent. I would give much to possess the scholarship of Prof. Sanford Terry in matters relating to Bach, the historical scholarship of Coulton, Boissonade, and Franz Mehring, and the insinuating persuasiveness of Anatole France in the matter of style. Then, though the minority of unfriendly reviewers would probably be the more furious, the friendly majority would have been less dissatisfied. But I must work with the knowledge and style that I have, relying on lovers of historical and aesthetic truth to correct my facts when they are wrongly presented, and question my deductions when they seem doubtful; but I am sure they will agree I have the right to ask that they first concentrate on the core of my thesis.

What is that core?

All Bach students are agreed that though outwardly the master took his stand by Lutheran orthodoxy, his art frequently (and as I believe continually) reveals him in sympathy with those contemporary Christians who were opposed to that orthodoxy. It seems to me that such a contradiction can only be explained in one of two ways: either, as Schweitzer believes, Bach was a purely objective artist, taking Lutheranism and Pietism with equal human sympathy, as Shakespeare took Henry V. and Falstaff, Miranda and Caliban; or Bach did really believe in one or the other form of contemporary Protestantism, and express that belief in his art. Sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, because his belief was entirely bound up with his thoughts and emotions.

If Bach was the objective artist supposed by Schweitzer, we must inevitably find that he will have expressed all points of view—even the most opposed—with an equal power. If Bach was a subjective artist, we shall find that his power will only have been exerted in the expression of those things in which he believed.