

PERCY HARRISON

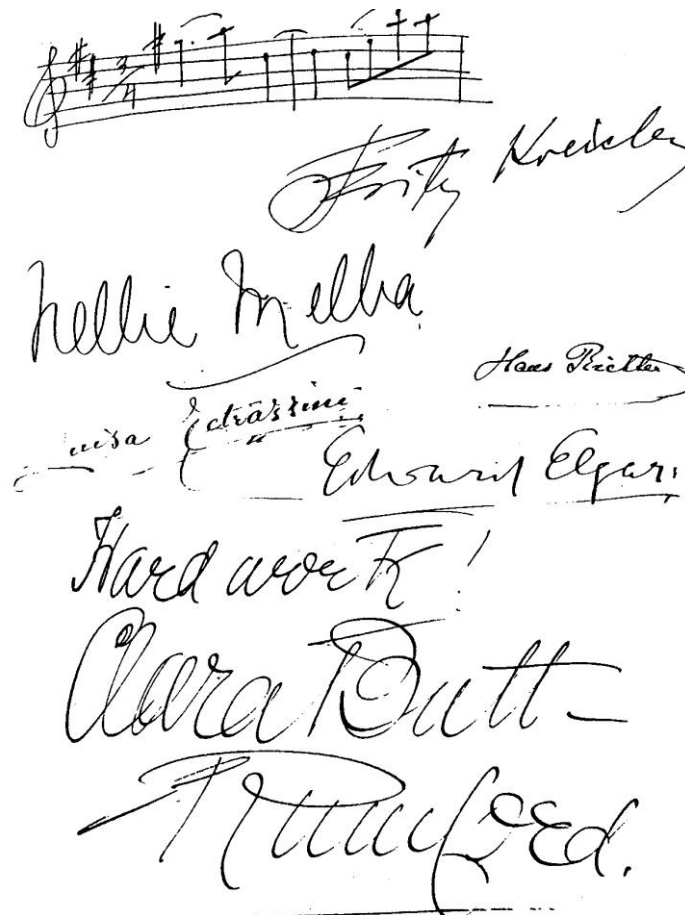
Many of our readers who have any idea of the musical history of Birmingham will know of the Triennial Festivals at which the people of this town were the first to hear many famous pieces of music. But how many know of the Harrison Concerts? These were subscription concerts organized by Percy Harrison of Moseley between 1870 and 1917.

It is apparent that by 1903 Percy Harrison was well known, because in that year he was the subject of No 46 in "*Familiar Figures*" in the *Evening Despatch*. This feature consisted of a caricature of the person concerned, followed by a succinct note. Number 46 began "Than Mr Percy Harrison there is no one in Birmingham better known", and continued with a comment on the concerts.

Born in 1846, Percy Harrison was the second son of Alderman Harrison JP., of Buckingham. His grandfather, father and brothers were several times mayors of that town, but Percy came to Birmingham and was educated at the Birmingham and Edgbaston Proprietary School, Five Ways, Edgbaston (which later became King Edward's School, Five Ways). In 1837 his uncle had started a firm of piano dealers, and in 1870 Percy joined the firm, later advertised in concert programmes as "Harrison and Harrison, Pianoforte and American Organ Show Rooms, Great Midland Music Warehouse, Colmore Row and Bennetts Hill".

Percy Harrison lived for a time at "Annesley" in Cotton Lane, but in 1890 he had a new house built in Wake Green Road, which he called "Lindenhurst". This is now the Listed Building, numbers 10 and 12. The original design, as one building but with two distinct parts, suggests that Mr Harrison intended that one half of the house should be available for putting up visiting artistes.

In 1871 the series of concerts known as "Harrison's Concerts" had been started. Although it appears that this was done under the name of the firm, it is apparent that Percy was the impresario in the family, and was in charge of the concert arrangements. The concerts were principally financed by subscription, but there were plenty of seats at one shilling. Percy Harrison saw the concerts as a means of introducing to the people of Birmingham, and of other towns, eminent artistes from all over the world. But he did not wait for artistes to become really famous before engaging them; he often found fairly unknown performers, secured their services, and took them round his "circuit".



Signatures of some of Percy Harrison's musical guests

It would seem very probable that Percy Harrison entertained many of the artistes at his home in Wake Green Road when they were performing in Birmingham. One wonders how many whose voices we now know only from old gramophone records or from contemporary description stayed there. The list might include such names as Clara Novello, Melba, Clara Butt, and almost certainly Adelina Patti and Paderewski would have stayed there. It is reported that it was owing to Mr Harrison that Miss Clara Butt was introduced to the musical section of the community, and Madame Patti sang almost solely for Harrison during the last thirty years of her career. He was a friend of the family and enjoyed the hospitality of Madame Patti and her husband at their home at Craig-y-Nos Castle in the Tawe Valley.

In the 1870's a concert consisted of singers and instrumentalists (chiefly pianists), but Percy Harrison was prepared to educate the musical tastes of the people, and to do this he was prepared to engage an orchestra. For the last subscription concert of the 1881 autumn season, Mr Charles Hallé was engaged to play a pianoforte solo, but the concert also included a performance by "the celebrated band of Mr Charles Hallé." Later, other orchestras appeared, including the Queen's Hall and the London Symphony Orchestras. Other conductors included Richter, Henry Wood and Edward Elgar, who, on November 13th 1905 conducted the first performance of his Introduction and Allegro for Strings, Op 47.

In addition to the popular concerts, Harrison also started a series of classical chamber concerts but, despite their success, these were abandoned because the responsibility of organising two series of concerts was too much.

Percy Harrison felt that the war (1914-18) would lower public taste in music, and this seemed to cloud his judgement. His last few concerts failed to make the accustomed

success. The final concert took place on Tuesday March 28th 1917, and was billed as "The Clara Butt Concert". The concert ended with the National Anthem, for the second verse of which the words were "provided by Miss Butt, and she will sing them as a solo"; the third verse was "modernised by Mr Harrison from the old version". Finding rest more exhausting than work, the sudden stoppage of the activity to which he was accustomed was difficult for him. Having survived a slight stroke about a year before, he died on Christmas Day, 1917.

Well known for his cheerful friendliness, Percy Harrison attributed this and his good health to being in love with his work, and to the air of Moseley which he considered to be the finest and healthiest suburb of Birmingham. He always showed a readiness to do what he could to help forward the art of music. In 1890 he was elected President of the Birmingham Musical Society, the members of which, we are told "speak very warmly of his abilities as Chairman of their musical evenings". Nevertheless, he was primarily a shrewd business man. In one of his obituaries the tale is told of how, on reading the reports of the first London appearance of Tetrassini, Harrison saw the great commercial possibilities of her voice, rushed to London, and secured her "on terms the more favourable to himself in that the singer had not realised her own financial value in this country."

Another obituary refers to his almost inexhaustible fund of stories about eminent artistes and their curious fads and fancies: if he could have been persuaded to write his memoirs, he could have produced a book that might have shocked a good many people, but would have delighted tens of thousands. And in his obituary in *The Birmingham Post* on December 27th 1917, he is described as a shrewd business man who, although tenacious of his own rights, did not resent a similar spirit in others, and was broad-minded enough to live on friendly terms with those who were sometimes compelled to differ publicly from him.

He was a man held in great esteem by all who knew him.

Roy Thomas

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