

Dunhill's memories of
WILLIAM YEATES HURLSTONE
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I have beside me as I write a charming little book by H.G.Newell, which has recently been printed for friendly circulation. It is called "*William Yeates Hurlstone, Musician and Man*".* Whilst to many present and some past Collegians the name of this composer may be almost unknown, the book recalls the personality and attainments of an old Scholar of the College who was an exceedingly prominent figure in our midst from 1894 till 1906. I remember Hurlstone vividly because he was not only a fellow-student for whom I cherished an almost idolatrous admiration, but because he and I were appointed together on the staff in 1905, to teach Counterpoint and Harmony when it was decided that an experiment should be made in giving instruction in these subjects in that (the historical) order.

We were both far younger than any of the other professors, and were always described by Parry as the "two babies of the staff", and accorded delightfully affectionate greetings on that account. Alas, our association as colleagues was very short-lived. In January, 1906, I was sent to Australasia to examine for the Associated Board. I remember Hurlstone saying, at our last meeting before my departure, "I am so glad they are sending you and not me – I *couldn't* have done it." He was at that time very much a sick man. He had a troublesome cough which, he told me, was greatly aggravated by the blackboard chalk which he had to use in his classes. We used to walk up and down Prince Consort Road together after lunch, for he always felt the need for fresh air before resuming his teaching for the afternoon. It was here that I said good-bye to him. I never saw him again. He died on May 30 of that year, while I was still away.

Looking back upon our memorable student days Hurlstone's dark visage and somewhat awkward presence, modest and unassertive though they were, seem to dominate the mental picture. Yet he was never willingly in the foreground, for he shrank from personal prominence. Mr. Newell tells us how careful he was to avoid any appearance of "musicality". "He detested the fashion of long hair set by the foreigner, and his mother was constantly being required to snip off bits of refractory hair . . . to satisfy his fastidiousness on this point." Nevertheless, despite this dislike of attracting attention to himself, he occupied a kind of supremacy amongst the College composers of his period – a period which must certainly be regarded as a fruitful one for English music, since his fellow-students included

Coleridge-Taylor, Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, John Ireland, Frank Bridge and others whose works were, later on, to become so prominent in a larger musical world.

Hurlstone was always regarded by Sir Charles Stanford as the most brilliantly gifted of his College pupils. He was one of those composers whose talents ripened early. I cannot recall a more remarkable case of mastery and maturity in youth, and it is little wonder that most of us, who were struggling by slow degrees to achieve some measure of self-expression in music, looked upon Hurlstone's work with astonished admiration. We remember, in particular, his spontaneous *Suite of Dances* for orchestra (the first orchestral work he ever wrote), his Pianoforte Concerto (which he played himself), his remarkably effective *Suite "The Magic Mirror"*, and the two fine sets of orchestral variations, one on a Hungarian Theme, the other on a Swedish Air. We remember, perhaps even more clearly, certain examples of his chamber music, since further opportunities have been afforded us of getting to know their beauties.

Hurlstone's chief friends at the College were Coleridge-Taylor, whose work he greatly admired, and Fritz Hart, now Principal of the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music. With the latter, a vivacious young man whose sympathies and abilities were so enthusiastic and so many-sided, he enjoyed an intimate companionship which was obviously particularly inspiring to him. Despite these sympathetic surroundings the whole of poor Hurlstone's life was a struggle against his two enemies – the only enemies he ever encountered – poverty and ill-health. When we remember this we can only marvel at his mental energy, the fertility of his invention and the mastery of technique which directed it. From the age of 16 onwards he was forced to teach (which he always disliked) and even after he had become known as a composer and pianist he was unable to shake himself free from financial embarrassments. But, as Mr. Newell tells us, he bore his troubles *"with a quiet patience and a ready smile. Not a grumble was known to pass his lips outside his family circle, and even they were not permitted to know all that was passing in his mind"*.

Hurlstone's richest gifts as a composer are, I think, only revealed to us in his chamber music. He had all the great qualities which go to the making of a successful writer of ensemble works – abundant sympathy with players, genuine impulses which could readily be curbed and directed, and much resource in workmanship. It is sad to think that in recent years these compositions, most of which are printed and easily accessible, have been so neglected by concert-givers.

Since his death the circle of Hurlstone's admirers has not, indeed, widened as much as one expected it might do. It is hard to say why. Good wine needs no bush, and one would hope, good music no trumpeting. The British musical ear, however, is slow and hard to capture, and possibly the quiet unobtrusive character of Hurlstone's appeal has little of the mettle that summons the crowd and compels immediate admiration.

He was very fond of wind instruments, as the scope of many of his early works shows. While still a Scholar at the College he wrote a Trio for piano, clarinet and bassoon, a Quartet for wind alone, and a Quintet for wind and piano, which was especially noteworthy. It is not generally known that his splendid Quartet for piano and strings (perhaps the best-loved of all his works) was adapted from this early composition, and I remember his telling me that he always preferred it in its original form. The later Sonata for bassoon and piano, probably the finest piece of bassoon-solo music of recent times, is yet another example of this predilection.

Hurlstone attracted very special attention, of course, by carrying off the first prize in Mr. Cobbett's first "Phantasy" competition, and one is glad to know that the fifty pounds he gained thereby helped to relieve him of some financial obligations. Mr. Cobbett himself has recorded a few interesting particulars concerning the birth of that beautiful little string quartet. Hurlstone was anxious to compete, but despaired of finding a suitable theme. *"One evening he took a long walk in the darkness when the four crotchets which open the work came into his mind, and, so to speak, set him going. He sketched out the work that night and completed it soon afterwards, just in time to send it in."* His Phantasy remains, I think, the most convincing example of that form which Mr. Cobbett's long years of encouragement brought to light.

Other chamber works which have won their way into the affections of a limited circle of pianists and string players are the Sonata for piano and violoncello, a highly notable and original conception, and the singularly fresh and engaging Trio in G, for piano, violin and 'cello. It may perhaps be of some interest to mention that, a few years before the war, I had the pleasure of performing in this Trio at a concert of the Newcastle Classical Concert Society, and its success was so marked that I was asked to come the following year in order that the work should be played again. Those who know anything of the inherent conservatism of most chamber-music societies will realise what a triumph this was for a little-known British composition.

Hurlstone was thirty when he died – a year younger than Schubert – and on his tombstone, in Croydon New Cemetery, the inscription is a translation of the epitaph on Schubert’s grave: “*Music hath here entombed rich treasure but still fairer hopes*”.

It may be that those of us who knew and loved the man hold his music in peculiar affection by reason of its strongly personal attributes. But we should like to share that appreciation with many more who have yet to come under the spell. To us, at least, his work and his memory are alike sweet. It is, perhaps, idle to speculate upon the things which so fine a musician might have done had he lived till to-day, and the place he might have taken amongst contemporary composers. One cannot imagine that he would have lost his love of frank melody, or allowed his art to be invaded by the almost unbearable discordances of some of the more fashionable writers of our time. However that may be I feel justified in saying, with the supreme creator of sonnets, that

*“Had my friend’s Muse grown with this growing age,
A dearer birth than this his love had brought,
To march in ranks of better equipage”.*

* *William Yeates Hurlstone. J. & W. Chester, Ltd. Price 6d.*