

Obituary of Thomas Frederick Dunhill (died March 13th, 1946)

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On account of a close musical association and friendship of many years' standing, your Editor has given me the privilege of writing of this great musician and his work. I write from no critical angle and I do not presume to place Dr. Dunhill's compositions in any category, but my words are in appreciation of a composer whose work I love and admire wholeheartedly, and a musician for whom I have always felt the greatest respect and affection.

My first personal contact with him came through the Chiddingfold Pageant Play, a literary masterpiece by W. Graham Robertson, for which Dr. Dunhill wrote the music. This experience at once revealed to me my friend's "sense" of the stage, and the successful Guildford Pageant Play quickly followed, by the same author and composer, and was produced at the old Guildford Theatre. These two Pageants were responsible for the charming "Chiddingfold" Suite (strings) and "Guildford" Suite (full orchestra).

It was then that he asked me to find him a book for a light opera. I went at once to my friend A. P. Herbert, and the result of this ideal combination was "Tantivy Towers", which was produced by Nigel Playfair at the Lyric, Hammersmith, and later transferred to the New Theatre. This brilliant opera, which sparkles with genuine wit, humour and lyrical romance in both book and music, ran successfully for one year and was enthusiastically acclaimed by the public and Press. J.T. Grein, in "The Sketch", wrote: "Now here is something to be proud of – this light opera of Mr. A. P. Herbert and Mr Thomas F. Dunhill's. At last we have something British from top to toe, in tune and in words, in spirit and in build, in quality and raciness The music has a native flavour all its own and difficult to define In sentiment, in expression, in healthy gaiety, it cannot be otherwise described than as English – English in boisterousness In its way it is as light as Lehar or Oscar Strauss, but the lilt is different; the songs of the hunting-field more robust; the love-songs are more plaintively heartfelt."

It was hoped that the happy association of these two artists would be the means of bringing British light opera to the fore once more, but although, as the composer told me, his head was "full of tunes waiting to be used", another libretto was not forthcoming. I should add that in "Tantivy" Dr. Dunhill revealed a natural and

happy gift of setting dialogue and built up in his music a dramatic climax to Act II, unequalled in light opera in my opinion.

Another published work produced at Guildford, which I hope will see a West End production, is the Children's Opera "Happy Families" (book by Rose Fileman). It gets its title and also its fairy story from the families in the card game.

His other important stage works include two Ballets, one a pantomime Ballet, "Dick Whittington", still awaiting production, and the other "Gallimaufry" (or a medley of Dances). This was produced at the Hamburg Opera in 1934 and remained in the repertory of the Ballet there. From each of these he has arranged orchestral suites under their titles and both make a graceful addition to our national store.

Amongst many important orchestral and concerted works are: a Symphony (Belgrade), "Elegiac Variations" in memory of Parry, and the Overture "Maytime" (Op. 100); a delightful work for cello and orchestra, "Capricious Variations on a Traditional Tune", and a Concertino for two violins and strings. His many beautiful songs include the song-cycle for tenor and orchestra, "Wind among the Reeds", in which "The Cloths of Heaven" was born; amongst choral works, "The Christmas Rose". Also, he has left a large number of varied compositions of educational value for young students – all of them the work of a master. He holds a high place as a composer of chamber music.

As a composer his idiom is essentially national, personal and distinct. He is a master craftsman, a lover of beauty and an idealist, economical of means, of impeccable taste and style. Although giftedly fluent, his care of detail is remarkable. All these qualities are reflected in his smallest unison song and instrumental piece.

As an author, his book "Chamber Music" (Macmillan) is a standard one, and his "Sullivan's Comic Operas" is the only serious and thorough criticism of this composer's style. He was a natural and delightful lecturer on any musical subject, his knowledge was profound, and he was a born teacher.

In his young days he was a scholar of the R.C.M., and at one time Editor of the R.C.M. Magazine. During a lifelong connection with his Alma Mater he never lost his deep affection for its associations and traditions, and he was a well-known figure at all R.C.M. functions. His pupils will miss him as a friend as well as his scholarly mind and advice. He was a man we all respected.

He was in no way self-centred musically and was a really fair-minded critic who made a point of hearing all the music he could. I owe him a great debt of gratitude for his ready and invaluable help and advice in all things musical. As a man he was a true and lovable friend to all who had the privilege of his friendship.

Although I shall no longer, alas! have the honour to add to the many first performances of his works I have been invited to give in his presence, it will remain a joy to interpret his music and spread the knowledge and love of it.

Claud Powell