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Archibald T. Davison: Faith in Good Music

By WILLIAM A. WEBER, February 17, 1961



"The cult of reality is widespread, not only in our church music but in all other departments of our life as well....I can only say that the older I grow the more disillusioned I become with the apostles of reality. It is to reality, we are told, to things as they are, that we must give attention. I am fully persuaded that it is not the realist but, rather, the imaginative man who sees things as they really are.... The imaginative man looks around and behind the self-evident facts, seeing them in their total setting, in all their implications: and in the end I am backing him, and not the realist, to come upon the truth." **ARCHIBALD T. DAVISON (1883-1961)**

An idealist is always prey to self compromise, dictatorial methods, and tactlessness. Archibald T. Davison, the reformer of American musical education, who died February 6, avoided these pitfalls, for he possessed shrewd but ever-tactful skill; a desire to lead men, not force them; and as well an uncompromising idealism.

The ideal he continually articulated and strove to achieve was that even without education all men can prefer good music to bad. He said in a discussion of his earliest work, *The Concord Song Book*: "The place where lasting music will be built is where the two great roads of popularity and of lasting beauty intersect. In the pursuit of music, as in the acquirement of every form of artistic expression, we encounter the aesthetic paradox, that what we like first we seldom like best --that we prefer our second choice to our first.... The real way to grow the power of musical or any other sort of artistic appreciation is to live upon the edge of your taste."

Fifty years ago this notion was considered ludicrous, impractical and, perhaps, slightly effeminate, yet he believed that no musical standards "could preserve (their) integrity in the face of the experimental spirit of the musical pioneer." He complained in his book *Church Music* that "it seems to me every time I have had what appeared to me to be a really perceptive or productive idea someone has promptly told me that it wouldn't work; that it was impractical, visionary." That supermarkets now sell classical music records demonstrates that Davison was both correct and influential, but he, the indomitable idealist still did not hesitate to attack popularization equally hard when its quality was inferior.

In 1909, however, after he had earned Harvard's second Ph.D. in music, he intended to be a composer and had several pieces performed in Boston and St. Louis. But, as he later recalled, "I began to realize that there really was so much beautiful music in the world that wasn't being played. Then I became interested in students and I saw what could be achieved if I could get them interested in worthwhile music instead of the usual ephemeral songs."

He first realized his ideal with the Harvard Glee Club. When the group asked him to be their "coach" in 1912, it was tied to the Banjo and Mandolin Clubs, with whom they performed "Mrs. Casey's Boarding House" and "The Bulldog on the Bank," reflecting the ribald good-fellowism and narrow exclusiveness of the time.

The important point about his famous transformation of the Glee Club is that he did not accomplish it by dictating repertoire or purging those who opposed him. "Doc," as he soon came to be called, felt college men were intelligent enough to have good judgement but had taste plastic enough to be molded. He first improved the quality of the Club's singing, and then persuaded them to try some classical pieces in rehearsal. The first, Mendelssohn's *The Huntsman's Farewell*, appealed to them so strongly that they agreed to sing it in St. Louis in 1915 before a surprised audience that applauded enthusiastically.

A major factor favoring Davison in his reform was the sober maturity of the veterans who returned from World War I impatient with the Glee Club's rowdiness. Another was the University Chapel Choir, for as Organist, he had control over repertoire. When at Christmas 1913 he introduced some Radcliffe singers into the choir, President Lowell warned him sternly not to do it again, but when the beautifully varied tone of a mixed chorus reappeared the following year, Lowell remained silent and thereafter supported Davison unswervingly.

The love of the choral masterpieces of the 16th and 17th centuries that he instilled in the choir proved the crucial factor in the transformation of the Glee Club. In 1919 a number of choir members independently of him ended the tie with the instrumental clubs and asked him to be director of the new Glee Club. That spring they toured The East and Middle West and were acclaimed the best amateur chorus in America.

As "Doc" explained later in *Choral Conducting*, rehearsals were the key to the Club's quality and to his educational aims. A short, strongly built man, he moved swiftly but unostentatiously on the podium, evoking the response he wanted rather by an expressive face and pair of hands than by the discursiveness he often condemned in conductors. Davison always believed that music could speak for itself and that explanation of contrapuntal technique or rhapsodizing on Schubert only frustrated that desire to sing which is natural to a well-trained chorus.

He felt that "Good singing is impossible without unremitting attention to small details, heartlessly but tactfully insisted upon," but never forgot that "it is the rehearsal, and not the concert, that most often spells adventure." Frederick Lewis Allen described a typical Davison rehearsal: "You hear, cutting through the deep, swelling tones of the chorus, Davison's sharp voice: 'Now's your chance! That's it! Good! First rate! This is a bad place; look out for it! That's the way basses! Eyes! Eyes!'"

The Glee Club was an immediate sensation, for the discovery that college boys could sing refined music so spiritedly mystified and delighted America. The French government invited them for a summer tour in 1921, and crowds packed Symphony Hall several times a year to hear them. A reviewer from the *New York Herald Tribune* babbled gleefully that the group had "sung things calculated to cause a fellow to run his eyes, hold down his head sidewise and kick to get something out of his ears." They sang with Fritz Kreisler, Pablo Casals and performed Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* at the Metropolitan Opera.

But despite the fame "Doc" and his singers acquired, he continued to maintain that "we look on the Glee Club not primarily as an artistic organization doing an unusual stunt, but as an educational movement." The freak value of the Glee Club naturally did not last long, and by 1926 it was singing to a half-empty Symphony Hall. But it was still contributing just as much to the revival of choral singing, setting an example to the many college Glee Clubs that discarded their mandolins and took up Palestrina, Bach and Vaughn Williams.

The very flaws of the Glee Club's performances were directly related to Davison's predominantly educational aims. The club grew from 75 to 250 because he wanted to allow as many as possible to take part in it; to accommodate as many as possible and blend voices of varying qualities, he sought "a homogeneous mediocrity of tone." Such tone was not in itself a flaw of the group; but since it often resulted in an imbalance of bases, only restraint could compensate for their greater volume, and several sympathetic reviewers, including Olin Downes of the *New York Times*, remarked about the resultant preciousness of their tone.

During his years with the Glee Club, Davison began arranging, teaching and writing and in 1934 retired from his conducting duties to devote his full time to this work. Although he believed that mixed voices were infinitely preferable to a men's chorus, he nonetheless "tortured" the means "to justify the end" and made over 300 arrangements for men's voices that gave them access to a much wider repertoire. His "Concord Series" song books have had unparalleled usage in schools and homes both here and abroad. The number of distinguished musicians who trained at Harvard and thus felt his influence he once described as "almost embarrassing."

But his great interest was "in the man who had to start from scratch," and to give such students the aesthetic experience he felt they needed, he began Music 1. Survey courses in the history of music without pedagogical mechanics of harmonic technique were rare in colleges, and, once again, the form he established at Harvard became an influential pattern elsewhere. As a teacher he was unforgettable, for as one of his own generation put it, "he is not satisfied with merely teaching; he inculcates."

Davison expressed his character, ideals and aims probably best in his books on the state of American music. One work, *Choral Conducting*, is full of the shrewd, tactful stratagems he used to command the complete loyalty of his singers. *Music Education in America*, written in 1926, assaulted many of the pet notions of the public and the musical professions: he ridiculed sight-reading and compulsory piano lessons for young children and derided the idea that music was best taught by drill, when drill presented discipline and not understanding.

Church Music (1952), best displays what Davison called his "gift of invective," for its lucid, often deliciously polemical style projects well-defined standards for sacred music that are based on a very clear idea of the role of music in worship. Davison minces no words in describing the devotional habits and musical ideas of the average layman and concludes that "our churches are literally asylums for the harboring of the great army of the apostles of musical mediocrity."

In sacred as in secular music he maintained that only the best will fulfill the purpose of music, whether it be an offering of beauty to God or purely an appreciation of that beauty. To defend his ideals, to strive toward their achievement and to effect them with discrimination--these were the accomplishments of Archibald Davison.

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