

A BLAGROVE FANTASIA

Anyone who has worked with the Richard Blagrove English Concertina tutor will readily acknowledge the competence of this great master of the instrument. In consequence one approaches Blagrove arrangements and compositions rather eagerly - and then all too often deflates into disappointment.

Blagrove, like Regondi, Case, Warren, and other Masters of his period produced a lot of thin stuff. There was single line work or octaves melody where one expected harmony or contrapuntal settings. Complete masters of the instrument themselves, and with a full appreciation of its amazing potential, they seemed reticent to take the student any distance beyond competent manipulation of the keyboard. Thin scores were a frequent fault with the arrangers of the Blagrove era.

The Fantasia here under review is a good illustration of this. The concertina part of this music relies for its interest largely on the contrasting styles of expression called for. There are brilliant allegros and cadenzas. There are 'note groups' presented in different ways. Sometimes they are part of the rhythmic movement of the piece as in the variation of the first tune 'The Curly-headed Ploughboy'. In 'The Banks of Allan Water' they are found as embellishment; nine, ten and fourteen notes thrust into the compass of a single beat. Again the Trillo (shake) helps to give the music a light dancing touch.

These are among the features which assist the player in moving away from finger fiddling to keyboard interpreting. Strict attention to dynamics is demanded throughout the Fantasia. The dynamics marks are numerous and range from accents and staccato marks to diminuendoes and rallentandos.

The Allegro Vivace which closes the piece is especially important. It storms the whole work to an irrepressible climax. This kind of movement is common in Fantasia arrangements and especially in overtures (vide Rossini) and adds a special content to a musician's thinking, outlook, and even style.

Two dynamics directions call for special mention. Several times through the piece the player meets with 'leggiero' - 'play in a light style'. This is the key to the whole Fantasia. Dainty, delicate action and sensitive interpretation are essential to the right handling of the work. The force of 'leggiero' is readily seen in the various moments of grace notes given.

This commentary on the Blagrove Fantasia which is included with this issue of the Magazine has been written by Alex Richards.

In contrast with 'leggiero' there is the 'maestoso' at the "Roast Beef of Old England". The player can have a field day here. Strutting magnificence! Decorum and smug dignity! One can visualise the pompous procession of beef laden cooks parading the banquet hall to the accompaniment of thunderous appreciation from the trenchermen whose well padded paunches proclaim one of their chief pursuits in life.

The 'maestoso' calls on the concertinist to make it all live. Interestingly enough, the octave arrangement here is a help to success, especially as with the rallentando the final bars poise to drop onto the stirring Allegro Vivace ending.

There is nothing in the Fantasia that is beyond the standard of any reasonable player. Even the speed requirements of the variation, cadenzas, or group-note passages can be met by mastering these areas at slow speed and then building up to brilliance.

With all this, it is to be regretted that the Fantasia offers so little in the way of harmony beyond the introductory Andante. In the nature of things at the time most of that was left to the accompanying instrument and even there all too frequently there was a lamentable imaginative lack. Occasional composers broke with this practice. Yet Shackelton even in his fine arrangement of Meyerbeers "Coronation March" from "Le Prophete" spoiled an excellent job by a thin climax.

The plan of the Fantasia is a good example of what can be done with a collection of tunes. There is character contrast here. There is contrast in the demand for imaginative skill with sensitiveness of touch and interpretation as each melody is presented. Most of all, for purposes of the Concertina Magazine, this work is within the scope of any reasonably good player and is at the same time happy entertainment.

A word of warning: It would be a mistake for a player to team up with a poor accompanist. The higher the standard of the accompaniment, the greater the challenge to the soloist to achieve better than his best. Player and audience both inevitably benefit from that.

A parting thought : The lovely tunes, "Banks of Allan Water" and "Cherry Ripe " are two gems of Old World country music. They fairly beg for a sensitive singing concertina with a sensitive, imaginative player behind it. One does not have to be a professional to reach that standard.....just a thought!