

"The Children of Don."

THE production of "The Children of Don" marked a new era in the British drama as well as English opera, for the monumental trilogy of which this forms the prelude and first segment is the first to deal with the dawn of our race, and the legend of how dominant elemental powers were subjugated in order that man might have full scope for development.

Gwydion, son of the god Beli and goddess Don, inspired by the glorious visions of human destiny which were revealed through Norden's dreams, resolved to forego his godhood and risk eternal doom so that the magic cauldron should be destroyed and the magic wand

broken. A true appreciation of its depth and grandeur comes only with repeatedly hearing it, or by study and reflection. That this is so is shown by the experience of Prof. Arthur Nikisch who conducted the first two performances, and the singers who impersonated the principal rôles. That they all have waxed enthusiastic over the music as its true import became clear to them is significant of the worth of the drama and music per se, consequently their opinions given below will be of more than usual interest.

Prof. Arthur Nikisch, whose wide experience as an operatic and orchestral conductor has few parallels, said that Mr. Josef Holbrooke was a new voice in music, and that he had long had an admiration of his powers as a composer. He was tremendously impressed with the opera "The Children of Don," which eventually would be understood and appreciated; but this was impossible without becoming thoroughly familiar with the music. This took a certain amount of time and study, but the great beauties of the work well repaid this.

Mr. Alan Turner, an English baritone who won his spurs in Italy and has sung in the grand season at Covent Garden, took the part of the hero Gwydion. He found the music at first very difficult, but with study its great beauties became more and more apparent to him and the drama more and more convincing in its unfoldment as its true significance became clearer to his comprehension.

Mme. Doria, the well-known operatic contralto, who took the part of Elan, Gwydion's sister, said that the music grew upon her as she studied it, and the character was one of her favourites among those she had done, which included the contralto rôles in the Wagner music dramas, and German, French, and Italian operas.

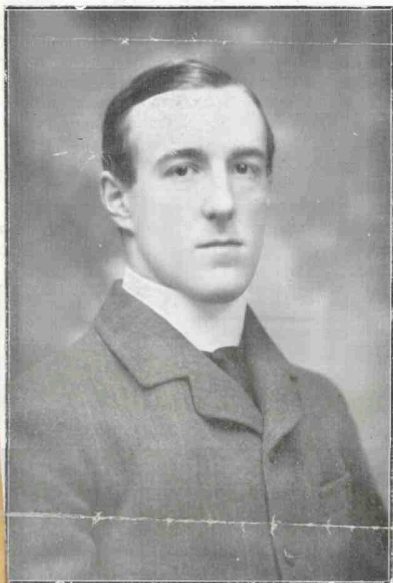
Mme. Jomelli, who created the leading soprano rôle, that of the priestess Goewin, says that she likes the music immensely. She was happy in singing it, and her opinion is that the opera is a very fine one. She admires the clever work very much indeed, and thinks that Mr. Holbrooke is one of England's foremost composers. Difficult music always interests her, and as this music is the most strange she has ever sung, she became very enthusiastic over it, and hopes to sing it again in the

one of the best drawn and musically accentuated that he knew in the whole field of opera. It was very effective and grateful to sing, and he was proud that he should have been associated with the first production of this chef d'œuvre.

Mr. Humphrey Bishop speaks in glowing terms of the Sea King's music, which, he says, is well written for the voice and well designed to take its rightful place in the great drama.

These opinions of the artists have been elicited from them by the Editor of THE LONDON MUSICAL COURIER, and are quite independent, and therefore all the more valuable.

The opinion of Mr. Hammerstein should also be given in this connection. He regarded it as the most stupendous work in all his experience in opera. He



LORD HOWARD DE WALDEN.

broken, whereby posterity would be freed from its erstwhile thralldom. The work not only reflects the portents of primeval days, but breathes that indomitable spirit which has made Britain the foremost among the nations of the earth.

Every thoughtful and patriotic man will be interested in this graphic story of the beginning of the Britons and how their champion faced and overcame almost insurmountable difficulties. The people of these islands owe a debt of gratitude to the author and composer for having crystallized this myth of transcendent importance into a practical form.

It was a momentous undertaking, and has been wrought with great skill, both Lord Howard de Walden and Mr. Josef Holbrooke having attained their object. The result is well worthy of the subject, and an enduring example of native achievement.

The librettist chose an idiom of expression suited to the lofty and far-reaching theme in the treatment of which he has shown great erudition and a potent poetic fancy.

The composer has been moved by his subject to great heights of inspiration, and, being a past master in composition, has given his thoughts a rare and profound musical expression. His aim has been to be thoroughly British, and to this end he has employed the most modern means in creating appropriate atmosphere and effectively illustrating and accentuating each phase of the drama. His melodies are distinguished and grateful to the ear, his use of leit motives remarkably clever and effective, his harmonic treatment skilful and well contrasted, and his orchestral colour in the overture and instrumental movements of rare beauty and variety.

That the music is genuinely inspired and of sterling intrinsic value is shown by the fact that the more it is heard the more it favourably impresses itself upon the



MR. ALAN TURNER AS GWYDION.
Gwydion bound to rock, after condemnation by Math.

near future. She has also learned the leading soprano rôle of "Dylan," the second work of the trilogy.

Miss Gertrude Bloomfield, who was specially chosen for the goddess Don, was pleased with her part, and was greatly impressed with the drama as a whole.

Mr. Frederick Blamey found the music of the Druid Gwion forceful of expression, well written for the voice, and of ever-growing interest.

Mr. Henry Weldon thought his part, that of Math,



MR. JOSEF HOLBROOKE.

found "The Children of Don" more difficult to produce than either "Salome" or "Electra," both of which he mounted in New York. Regarded musically, he had known nothing like it. Neither Wagner nor Strauss ever conceived such effects as were heard in this opera. They were wonderful, and required a very large orchestra to realize them. He is of the opinion that Mr. Holbrooke is the greatest composer this country has produced.

The Welsh people are tremendously enthusiastic over the work, as the Celtic legends upon which it is founded have their locale in Wales. Three performances of "The Children of Don" will be given at the Royal National Eisteddfod next year. Those who wish to gain a fuller knowledge of this subject will find a practical guide in Charles Squire, in his "Celtic Myth and Legend, Poetry, and Romance," recently issued by the Gresham Publishing Company. For sheer fascination they rival in attractiveness the "Classic Legends" published as another volume of this illuminating series.

The accompanying scenes of the opera were designed by Mr. S. H. Sime, by whose kind permission we reproduce them.

The following description of the work by Mr. George Lowe follows naturally this foreword, and the accompanying illustrations will help the reader better to understand the drama.

Josef Holbrooke's New Opera, "The Children of Don."

BY GEORGE LOWE.

THE publication of "The Children of Don," the first part of Josef Holbrooke's great operatic trilogy, "The Cauldron of Anwyn," of which the second part,

"Dylan," was issued about eighteen months ago, is an important event in the English musical world.

The book, which is by T. E. Ellis (Lord Howard de Walden), makes use of certain striking incidents taken from various ancient Cymric legends combined with super-added ideas. "The Mabinogion" has been largely drawn upon for material, and more particularly, the fable of "Math, the son of Mathonwy," though this has not been followed in its entirety. Instead, a unification of different legends has been essayed in which certain features of the original subject matter have been brought into prominence, whilst other features have been passed over altogether. Thus, in the operatic version, the story of Elan, or Arianrod, varies considerably from that contained in the ancient lore—many incidents having been entirely deleted, whilst considerable amplification is shown in other directions. All the happenings of the opera, too, are made to centre around a magic cauldron; but, in the Welsh legends, this object plays quite an ancillary part. Still, some connecting link between the different parts of the trilogy was necessary to lend it unity, and the cauldron has much the same significance here that the ring has in Wagner's tetralogy.

"The Children of Don" consists of a prologue in two parts and three acts, of which the third is divided into two scenes. In the first part of the prologue, Gwydion, the son of Don, arrives at a cavern representing the northern underworld (or Anwyn) and steals from thence the magic cauldron of Caridwen, the source of love and inspiration, after having slain its attendant priests. The second scene of the prologue is a rocky ice-bound island in the northern seas. Don (Thea), the Nature Goddess, calls on the Sea King, Lyd (Oceanus), to prevent the cauldron from being carried away by Gwydion. Lyd thereupon invokes the decision of the prisoned god, Nodeus (Chronos), the head of the fallen Titans, who has been condemned to eternal sleep. Nodeus, however, only replies in certain cryptic utterances, and, as a result, Lyd refuses to interfere with Gwydion.

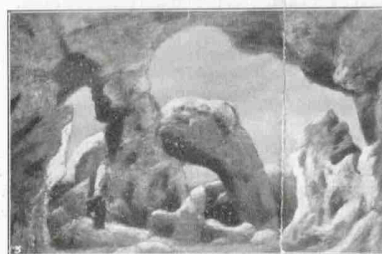
At this point the prologue ends and the actual story begins. The first act opens with a chorus of Druids in a forest of Arvon (Carnarvon). They have come to instal the cauldron, which has been taken from Gwydion, in a temple of Math, the priest-king and magician. This Math is a brother of Gwydion's mother, and Gwydion greatly resents the capture of the cauldron. Among the Druids we encounter the fanatical Gwion, and he and Math give Gwydion the task of guarding the sacred vessel and its vestal virgins from intrusion, and warn him of the dire results that will ensue if he fails in his office. Meanwhile Goewin, a maid of the cauldron, has become infected with its atmosphere, and yielded to the love of Govannion, a half-brother of Gwydion. This is discovered by Elan (or Arianrod), the half-sister of Gwydion, and later by Gwydion himself. The latter, however, decides not to betray Govannion's love, in spite of the bad blood that exists between them. Gwydion and Elan are then left alone, and the latter begs the former to become her husband, but he, whilst acknowledging the honour that she has done him, rejects her offer.

The scene of the second act is the temple, containing an altar, upon which the sacred cauldron reposes. Here Goewin comes praying for the return of her lost innocence, and she is then joined by Govannion, and later also by Gwydion, who warns both of them to depart. Finally, Govannion goes alone, after having repudiated Goewin. Math then appears, and to him Goewin confesses her guilty relations with Govannion. In anger, Math banishes her, and then reproaches Gwydion for his treachery in failing to guard the cauldron and its attendants. Spurred by Gwion, he sentences Gwydion to transformation into beast-shape, though he expresses his sorrow at the fate that compels him to this deed. Gwydion is bound to a stone near the altar, and left alone till Elan enters to speak consoling words to him. He tells her of the terrible fate that he must suffer, and then thinks of the cauldron as the means of release. They drink of the potion of the magic vessel together, and during this Elan is irresistibly drawn away by the voice of Lyd, the Sea King, from outside. Gwydion, left alone, is taunted by phantom forms from Anwyn that now appear before him. In turn, he calls on Nodeus,

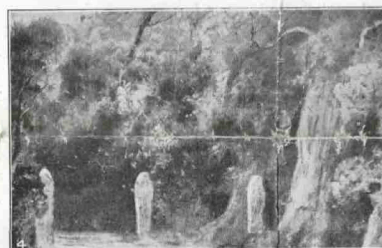
who again indulges in further cryptic utterances regarding the great destiny in store for the land. Then Math's spell begins to work on Gwydion. Darkness falls, and when a feeble light appears, Gwydion's bonds are seen empty. The gloom of the background is set with red



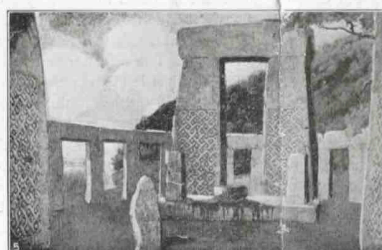
PROLOGUE. SCENE I.



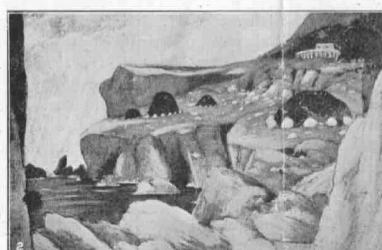
PROLOGUE. SCENE 2.



ACT I.



ACT II.



ACT III.

eyes of wolves, and one grim form comes from behind the stone to which Gwydion was bound and slinks across the stage. Later, we hear that Govannion has shared the same fate with Gwydion.

The first scene of the third act is the same as that of Act I., and three years have elapsed since the horror-haunting events with which the preceding act closed. Goewin appears and begs for restitution among her own people. Gwion, however, abuses her and sends her out to the wolves, by whom she is devoured. Math enters and reproaches Gwion for his cruelty, and then, in spite of Gwion's protests, repeals the spell on Gwydion and Govannion. These two then appear worn and emaciated, and Math tells Gwydion that, to obtain complete release, he must find a substitute for Goewin as an attendant on the cauldron. The second scene of the act is a rocky sea-shore, where Elan is discovered dreaming of her beautiful sea lover. Math and Gwydion appear, and ask her if she will fill the place left vacant by Goewin's apostasy. She consents to do. Then Math puts her to the test by his magic: He draws a line on the ground between himself and her, and bids her cross it. She is unable to do so, and a small boy, Dylan, the child of herself and Lyd, springs up beside her. Math, thinking Dylan to be Gwydion's son, curses the children of Don. Conflict ensues and Math is slain by Gwydion. Govannion then enters and flings Dylan into the sea, whilst Elan falls down unconscious and is then removed by Govannion. Dylan climbs out of the sea to have great things prophesied of him by Gwydion. Later, Govannion returns, and is followed shortly afterwards by Gwion and the Druids. A scene of bloodshed results, in which Gwion is slain by Govannion. Gwydion, intending to adopt Dylan, departs with him, and the curtain falls on a group of Druids hovering around the body of their fallen leader, with Govannion watching them sombrely from a short distance.

In the music of this opera, as in "Dylan," the composer has endeavoured to follow as closely as possible the inflexions of the speaking voice, so that vocal melody has had to be sacrificed to a certain extent. There are many fine outbursts of lyrical fervour for the soloists, however. When this method of writing becomes inappropriate by reason of the more dramatic exigencies of the situation, the melodic interest is maintained by the orchestra alone in a manner that is full of illuminating suggestion. The influence of Wagner is felt here as it is in most modern operas, but at the same time there is a distinct Holbrookean spirit about the music with which Wagner has nothing to do. In the use of the leit-motif system, and in the broad mental sweep over a vast subject, the two composers meet on common ground, and if Holbrooke has failed to quite reach the emotional depths of the Wagnerian dramas, he has, at least, eradicated many defects to which his predecessor was prone, such, for instance, as the long and often tedious yarns in which the vocalists are made to indulge and the intrusion of an over-elaborated symbolism. No modern composer handles the orchestra with greater ease than Holbrooke, and when this is combined with equal powers of thematic invention, a sensitive and particularly modern feeling for harmonization, a strong dramatic bias, and fine powers of synthesis, we have the chief qualities that go towards the making of a great writer for the stage.

In "The Children of Don," then, the composer sees his picture clearly, and he sees it whole. The great issues of his subject have been grasped by him in their completeness, and he has created an unforgettable work of real vital dramatic strength, and of eloquent magical beauty. By reason of the nature of the incidents upon which the drama is founded, the music is, generally, of a gloomy and sombre character; but it is no petty tragedy in which the listener is asked to participate, but a tragedy of super-eminent and noble dignity. Though the general tone of the work is fatalistic, it has many definite contrasts of atmospheric and pictorial suggestions to show. Thus, the gloomy remoteness of the frost-bound region of Anwyn, the playful tossing of the sea-waves on the shore, the grisly horror of the famished wolf-pack, and the satanic ferocity of the demons that taunt Gwydion, are figured in wonderful music that has no parallel save in that of some of the Wagner and Strauss operas, and in that of Debussy's "Pelleas and Melisande."

The music, too, that is woven around the doings of the various protagonists of the drama shows much sense

of psychological fitness. Arawn plays only a small part in the drama, but the music allotted to him well defines the solemnity and the sinister quality of his state as ruler of the underworld. The music of Don is not particularly striking, but her appearance in the drama is only of ephemeral interest. That of Nodeus, however, is much better, and well exemplifies his aloofness from active endeavour. Gwydion is very definitely and excellently characterized in the music. The leading theme with which he is associated shows him as a man of considerable resolve but with certain idealistic strains in his nature and with the capacity for strong and generous affections. In every situation in which he is placed, however, he remains one of the most subtly conceived characters of the drama. The music of Govannion, as in "Dylan," though good and extremely interesting, is, psychologically, rather bewildering. He is a man of sullen temper, of strong hates and hot jealousies, ready to love fiercely for a time, but ready also, on an impulse, to reject the maiden of his choice; watchful on behalf of his sister's honour, but careless with regard to that of himself and others; a morbid dreamer of vengeance and the perpetrator of a cold-blooded murder; yet, the music that surrounds him rarely depicts him as impulsive and unregulated in character, and the leading theme that attaches to him hints at much softer moods than his actions go to show. The character of Math is far better realized in the music, and makes us feel that all his impulses are of a higher and more generous nature than those of the milieu in which he exists. Fate alone and the requirements of his age compel him to act harshly, and he remains a stately and appealing figure throughout. The music of Elan, too, is beautifully conceived. In spite of her liaison with Lyd to which fate condemns her, she is pictured as a pure, tender, self-sacrificing woman, ever ready with her sympathy, and more sinned against than sinning. Never for one moment does she descend into the weakly sentimental. Something of dignity always attaches to her, and we are made to feel that the nemesis that eventually she has to suffer is much too heavy for the nature of her offence. Goewin is the maiden in whom the magical properties of the cauldron rouses hot desires, and the music that depicts her passion is much better framed than that which later depicts her remorse. The character of Lyd, the Sea King, is merely sketched in this opera, but in "Dylan" it becomes predominant.

The vocal parts of "The Children of Don" are divided as follows:—Sopranos, Don and Goewin; contralto, Elan; tenors, First Priest, Arawn, Gwion, First and Second Demons; baritones, Gwydion and Math; basses, Sea King, Govannion, Second Priest, and Nodeus. The themes of the work are striking and original, and the score is one of great complication. The harmonization is very advanced, but liberty has been allied with discretion, and it must be ceded that the pictures that the work unfolds could not have been nearly so vividly limned under less elastic rules, and that Holbrooke has proved that a great work of art is quite compatible with modern freedom.

Of the many themes that the opera contains, that representative of the character of Gwydion is of great importance. Then there is a theme that distinguishes the personality of Govannion, which becomes of still greater prominence in "Dylan"; another representative of Math, his primitive religion and kingship and gift of prophecy; another of Nodeus and his aloofness from all mortal concerns; another of Goewin and her passion; whilst the "cauldron" theme also figures largely throughout the opera.

Another very important theme typifies the general elemental nature of the work and the stormy, restless character of it all; another expresses the mystery that attaches to Dylan, and this becomes of much greater importance in the next opera of the trilogy; another depicts the malignant fanaticism of Gwion; another, the hopeless and stultified idolatry of the Druids; another, the terrors of the underworld; whilst there is a theme relating to the Sea King, a wave motif, and some sea-fowl music that become of much greater significance in "Dylan."

The prologue of the opera is preceded by an overture in which most of the leading themes of the opera appear.

The first scene of this prologue is a fine masterly conception, full of real dramatic grip and of intellectual strength. Here, the "cauldron" motif and the Gwydion theme are particularly prominent, whilst the themes descriptive of the terrors of the underworld and of the elemental nature of the work also play an important part. The second part of the prologue is less interesting, and the music of Don is rather dull, and the goddess is generally rather a vague and unsatisfactory personage, both histrionically and musically. The Sea King's music is much more individual, whilst that of Nodeus is beautiful throughout. He has a long solo, based chiefly upon his own theme, which is utilized in a manner that is full of wonderful variety. Later, at the lines for the Sea King,

"Man shall hear our many voices growing clear,
And stung to new ideas austere,
Shall feel the heavens ring with trumpets vast
Calling to battle all the powers outcast,"

we reach one of those lyrical outbursts in which, as it has already been mentioned, this work is particularly rich.

An intermezzo separates the prologue from the first act, and then the austere Druid theme is heard. The ensuing scene for Gwydion, Math, and Gwion, though good, does not call for any special mention, but with the entrance of Govannion and Goewin we have a duet that is one of the lyrical gems of the opera.

Rarely has the enchantment of the night in awakening the senses to love been more exquisitely painted. The music is full of idyllic beauty of phrase, and as the ardent strains rise and fall in the midst of this forest silence, one realizes how faultlessly the emotional mood of the hour has been caught. When Goewin tells Govannion that she is a priestess of the deadly cauldron, he asks "Shall that prevail against our passion?" and the "cauldron" theme leaps up in solemn warning from the orchestra. The duet between Gwydion and Elan that is heard later in the act is another passage of fragrant loveliness, in which the deeply tender woman-nature of Elan is realized to the full, without a trace of mawkishness coming to mar it.

In the second act there is a beautiful solo for Goewin in which the soaring arpeggio figures in the orchestra define the yearning of her soul for the return of her maiden innocence. The scene between Gwydion, Goewin, Math, and Gwion is also excellently conceived, and has some fine emotional moments. Math's anger and sorrow over Gwydion's defection is particularly well portrayed. The potion drinking scene is dramatically and convincingly handled, and is followed by the wild-fowl music, previously mentioned, after which the voice of the Sea King is heard softly in the distance above a pedal bass note only. The appearance of the demons to Gwydion after Elan has left him is associated with some of the most remarkable and powerful music of the opera. It is gruesome and haunting, and finds its closest analogy in Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." The theme representative of the terrors of the underworld comes in for some extensive working here, and a magnificent scene is built up, dramatic, fierce, and wild. A little later, the noble, dignified "Nodeus" theme returns in effective contrast, till it is ousted by the furious music that accompanies the appearance of the wolves on the scene, and the end of the act is one of blood-curdling horror.

The third and last act preserves a high level almost throughout, and the interest is more uniformly maintained than it is in any of the preceding portions of the opera. It contains passages of supreme aesthetic beauty and pictures of the most vivid and graphic power. The barbaric nature of the scene between Gwion and Goewin is excellently conceived, and here the theme illustrative of the elemental nature of the work becomes prominent. Math's words of pity for the ill-fated maiden are accompanied by a lyrical passage of much beauty, whilst his reply to Gwion, commencing "There is a singing in my soul," is combined with an exquisite broad-phrase melody from the orchestra, representative of the underlying tenderness in Math's nature, which forms a graphic contrast to the stern music allotted to Gwion. All through this scene, indeed, the psychological interest of the drama is magnificently sustained in the music. The recalling of Gwydion and Govannion to human shape is

associated also with music that is some of the finest and most dramatic of the work. The second scene of the act opens to the sound of sea music, which is very beautiful in its atmospheric suggestiveness. It is followed by an exquisite solo passage for Elan. Here, the harmonization is very free but of extreme delicacy. In some subtle way, the sensitiveness and dream-like nature of Elan is magically realized in the music. One feels that here we are not called upon to witness a primitive type of undeveloped womanhood, but one of those beautiful natures that every age has contributed to the history of the world—a vision of dignified grace and refined loveliness in the midst of rude and savage surroundings. The passage in which she sings of the fairness of her spirit of the sea is one of unsurpassable beauty pregnant with the purest and deepest emotion. The meeting of Gwydion and Elan, too, is beautifully treated, whilst the scene of the testing of Elan is also dramatically powerful and convincing. With the death of Math we have a noble funeral march, simple but eloquent in design. The later part of the opera is stressful in character, and the elemental, primeval character of it has been caught very finely. The last part of this trilogy, which is to be entitled "Brangwyn," will be eagerly awaited by all those to whom the interests of British opera have any appeal.

Miss Gwladys Roberts.

MANY of our British singers are to-day supplementing their rich gifts of voice, musical endowment, and temperament by thorough and consistent development of their talents, thereby qualifying themselves to take their place among the world's great interpretative artists.

By general consent Miss Gwladys Roberts deserves an honoured position among these, for although only on



MISS GWGLADYS ROBERTS.

the threshold of her career, she has achieved a well-marked and fully merited success.

She comes from a family and race of natural singers, whose undoubted vocal gifts have won general recognition and admiration. She early realized, however, that to rise to and sustain a premier position required a general culture and a wide musical education.

Her first singing lessons were received from Mr. Swindell in Llanelly, the place of her birth, which has been made famous musically by its Eisteddfods.

Her general education, though, was not allowed to be interrupted by the fact that she possessed an exceptional voice, and in due course she entered the University College of Wales at Aberystwyth.

At the end of her college career she decided to enter the Royal Academy of Music. She, of course, took the entire course, and her teacher in singing was Mme. Agnes Larkcom, for harmony Dr. Greenish, for piano and various branches the other leading professors.