

FIFTY YEARS OF MUSIC

THE WOOD JUBILEE CONCERT

A GREAT NIGHT AT ALBERT HALL

By RICHARD CAPELL

The huge orchestra filled all the space below the organ console; above it the yet huger choir spread out fan-wise. And—hugest—the audience crowded the floor, the tiers, the gallery.

It was a great occasion—the sort of thing for which the Albert Hall might have been expressly designed—a concert, but even more a national demonstration. Sir Henry Wood's spiritual home is elsewhere, but four or five times as many people were able to join in the celebration of his jubilee here as at Queen's Hall.

True, the Albert Hall itself could contain only a fraction of the public for whom the name Henry J. Wood is part and parcel of the experience of music. Let this opportunity be taken of repeating that all the unnumbered thousands who are in Sir Henry Wood's debt for his having opened to them the gates of the kingdom of music can share in the jubilee celebrations by contributing to the H.J.W. Fund for the endowment of hospital beds for orchestral musicians.

In the course of the evening a respectable number of decibels was added to that prodigious volume of sound which the last half-century has heard in the form of applause of Sir Henry and his works. The whole multitude stood and cheered when the hero of the evening made his first appearance. But that has long since been a sound as familiar to his ears as the ocean's breakers to the sea-gull. Is there, one wondered, another living man whose total of decibels of this kind equals his?

The evening's formalities were brief. Lady George Cholmondeley spoke of the beneficent application to be made of the money raised, and presented Sir Henry with the binding that is to contain the manuscript of Vaughan Williams's "Serenade to Music"—the work composed for the occasion. Sir Henry did not develop the theme of his thanks. As conductor of the concert he had every opportunity of being eloquent in his own way.

A SHAKESPEARE SERENADE

Eclecticism is the spirit that dictates the programme for such an occasion, and the selection was generous in that sense. The chorus sang Handel, Bach and Sullivan; the orchestra's pieces ranged but little less widely. Sergei Rachmaninoff made a handsome contribution, playing his C minor concerto in the finest style. After Bax's brave "London Pageant" overture came Vaughan Williams's new "Serenade" for 16 solo singers. The names of these—all household words—have already been published here.

Our Musician Laureate can be counted upon to do the unconventional thing in his occasional pieces. The matter of his Serenade had been kept a secret. It turned out to be a setting of some two-score lines from the Lorenzo-Jessica scene in the last act of "The Merchant of Venice."

Mortal's pen has never written words that were nearer to being sheer music or so evocative of the other art. They have drawn from Vaughan Williams some pages of rare tenderness and charm. A violin solo fixes the mood, beautifully enough to warrant Lorenzo's lyricism. The singers are sometimes a choir, at other times soloists.

The lines that begin "Look how the floor of heaven is thick inlaid" are divided between the tenors. A contralto sings, "I am never merry when I hear sweet music," and is answered by basses. Horns "Wake Diana with a hymn." Portia is a soprano. We return at the end to "Soft stillness and the night become the touches of sweet harmony." Shakespeare's blank verse is a lily best left unpainted, as a rule, by musicians, but when the thing has been done to this purpose there is no resisting.