

Berlioz's Mastery In Song

MUSIC
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IN the programmes for the concerts by the Burnside Symphony Orchestra there is almost invariably a departure from the conventional repertoire.

On several occasions it has been a rarely heard work of Berlioz, for whom the conductor, Dr. Black, apparently has a fondness.

At the Burnside Orchestra's next concert, in July, Berlioz is again represented, but this time the item is confined to a song, "Absence," presumably with orchestral accompaniment.

"Absence" is the fourth, and according to some, the most beautiful, of Berlioz's famous set of six songs, "Nuits d'été" ("Summer Nights").

These are settings of poems by Théophile Gautier, written variously for mezzo-soprano, contralto, or tenor (though one is for baritone), originally with piano accompaniments.

All subsequently were imaginatively orchestrated by Berlioz—the accompaniment for "Absence" as early as 1843, the others much later, in 1856.

Though Berlioz has assigned a choice of voices for nearly every song, they can be, and have all been, sung by a soprano, especially a soprano whose range embraces a beautiful lower register.

The best interpretation I heard was by the American soprano, Eleanor Steber, who sang them wonderfully on a recording, the variety of color and expressiveness of her voice lending itself eloquently to Berlioz's supple and descriptive melodic line.

These beautiful and original songs are rarely heard on the concert platform today. The only time

I recall the whole six's having been sung in Adelaide was when Marie Collier, then taking the leading role in "The Consul" at the Theatre Royal, sang them at a Sunday afternoon Conservatorium concert.

"Absence" — an urgent plea for the return of the lover separated by distance — is one of the greatest and most expressive love-songs in the literature of music. It has been likened to the best of Schubert, and, surprisingly, of Mozart.

The originality of Berlioz's genius has not always "fitted in" with the rigid views of academic theorists; and "Absence" has been solemnly censured as breaking the prescribed text-book rules because the tritone in the fourth bar is incorrectly resolved!

The melody of Berlioz, too, is not always easy to take in readily. Critics who have been baffled by it are only too ready to assert that Berlioz "couldn't write a tune (except by accident) to save his life."

But once his kind of melodic organisation is understood, Berlioz's mastery is accepted and affords continuous delight.