BACH'S CHRISTMAS MUSIC IN ENGLAND AND IN GERMANY.

I was at the Temple on Christmas Eve for Bach's music. The shining white church was full of old and elderly men, of women of all ages, with a sprinkling of soldiers-lads, brought along, on what may be their last Christmas in this world, by their mothers and sisters and sweethearts. Everyone—but it was perhaps that my own eyes and heart were opened—everyone seemed so altered from other perfunctory times, grave, sincere, aware of all it meant.

With the first rasping notes of the organ, tearing the veil of silence, there came before my mind, as when a cloud rivers suddenly shows depths of solemn moonlit sky, the fact that there also, there beyond the sea and the war chorus, in hundreds of churches of Bach's own country (I can see the Thomas-Kirche and the Cantor, and the church of his birthplace, Eisenach), there, at this very moment, were crowds like this one at the Temple, listening to this self-same Christmas Music. There also elderly men, stay-behinds, and many, many women, old and young, and a sprinkling of soldiers-lads, brought forth for that, maybe, last Christmas at home and on Earth. Praying like these silently kneeling around me, and praying for the same mercy. Give us, O God, strength to live, and will, and love, if so be to some purpose; suffer not, O Lord, who seest our hearts, that we be crushed in this war not of our making; teach us to forgive the cruel folk who hate us; give us such peace as will never be broken. Forgive us, deliver us; remember, O Father, the peace and goodwill which were promised with Thy Son.

Something like that, articulate or not, is welling up with unused tears and silent sobs in those kneeling crowds, behind those screen units, both on this side and on yonder, of the shallow seas and the unfathomable ocean of horror and hatred. They are united, these English and those German crowds, in the sores of the loins and prayers and prayers, even as, unsuspecting, they are united in the same sequences of melody, the same words of harmonies wherewith, across two hundred years, that long dead but undying organist of Leipzig ennuieth, draws together, nooses and nets our soul to the ground, clarified, class substantiated, now consubstantial, into the presence of the new born, the eternally born, Hope of the World.

They are thinking and feeling the same, those German and those English crowds. They are played into unanimity only by Bach with his tunes and counterpoints, but by the ruthless hands of our common calamity. The same heroic, or resigned, or despairing mood; saddest of all, perhaps, the brief snatch of would-be cheerfulness, and beneath all individual, all articulate differences, the unanalyzable harmonies of collective sorrow.

They have come, these German women like these English ones, to seek rest in this church and this music after their day in hospitals and relief offices and committee rooms. They also have brought along with them their soldiers, their boys or their lover, home perhaps, or dead, or lost, or, because one can feel nearer together, without the unnerving fear of words and glances, here in this church, side by side, embracing in the music and in God. And, the service over, they will many of them, German women like English, go back to their homes, light up the Christmas tree, pull the paper caps and the favours out of the crackers, and laugh and play, so that the children at least may forget the war, the evil that hath come. But once more, German and English, the same burdens have been brought to the church, been laid down in the prayer and the music; the same burdens have been shouldered again. Never have we and they been closer together, more alike and akin than at this moment when War's cruelties and recriminations, War's monstrous iron curtain, cut us off so utterly from one another.

United, moreover, in the common feeling of Christmas. For a symbol turns the simple fact we are singularly know into the deeper fact. And the Child Christ, whom orthodox or orthodoxy, we are all celebrating, was not born once, but is born always, over and over again. He lies in every cradle, the incarnate, unembarrassed, unembarrassed. And He is the Redeemer because every new life, like every new day after the winter solstice, like the wheat quickening in the winter furrow, is the redemption of our Present by Our Future, the deliverance from our Hope from our Despair. Eternity dies and is forgotten, being accidental, changeable, sterile, and against the grain of life. But peace and goodwill on earth is born for ever anew, because it is born of the undying needs of our common humanity.

That is the message of Bach's Christmas music, his cosmic thunders hushed into pastoral fugues; the message of the long-deceased German organist to us English who listen; the message of us all, listening English back to Bach's fellow-countrymen united with us in listening and in singing and hoping.

VERNON LEE.