

*Reprinted from the Arts Council Bulletin, April, 1951*

## THE APOLLO SOCIETY

BY LUCY HOARE

*"If music and sweet poetry agree,  
As they must needs, the sister and the brother,  
Then must the love be great 'twixt thee and me,  
Because thou lov'st the one, and I the other."*

The Passionate Pilgrim may have overstated his case in the ardour of wooing but there are undoubtedly many people who do feel this relationship between poetry and music and are drawn together to enjoy them. Such enjoyment is the purpose of the special recitals which the Apollo Society has been giving all over the country during the past eight years.

The members of the Society believe that in reviving the neglected art of reading poetry, music may be set with it in sisterly union and that by so doing each may be enhanced. Both are a language that reaches the heart through the very innermost of the senses, the ear, "the ever open gateway of the soul"; each shares a common ancestor in the nursery rhyme, the folk song and the ballad; one may be able to win the hearing of the audience for the other, reflect what the other will project, suggest what the other may resolve. In their different media the musician and the poet are constantly trying to describe what they feel and think and see to the hearts of their fellow men. To journey with one may sharpen the awareness for a voyage with the other.

The Society was born one night in Cambridge during May 1943 after an isolated programme of poetry and music presented at the Arts Theatre by Norman Higgins. Already Peggy Ashcroft and Edith Evans had been giving Sunday evening poetry readings at a West End theatre to enthusiastic audiences. Now, at Cambridge, a pianist—Natasha Litvin—and a poet—Stephen Spender—were drawn into what quickly became a modern version of the minstrel band, with the arch-promoter of minstrelsy, Mr. George Rylands, Dean of King's College, at its back. The original members were Peggy Ashcroft, Edith Evans, Robert Harris, John Laurie, Natasha Litvin, Angus Morrison, Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis. Since then the Society has grown to include the names of many other distinguished artists—poets, pianists and readers. From the nursery of Cambridge it graduated to war-time camps, schools, training colleges, Art Centres and provincial theatres all over England. In 1946 it found a new patron at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. Here Laurier Lister, who had been building up a poetry-loving audience, generously opened the doors to the Apollo Society and later, in 1947, became the Society's first Secretary. In the same year the Society became incorporated and has since April 1948 received the support of the Arts Council.

An Apollo recital is usually given by two readers and a pianist and lasts about 1 hour 25 minutes with a short break in the middle. The programme is broken into groups—usually about seven—and each group of poems, enclosed, interlaced, introduced, or concluded by music, has its own unity of mood, subject or form. A well balanced programme seems to demand a somewhat higher

proportion of poetry than music—roughly two-thirds to one-third. The voices of the two readers in their relationship to each other are also of considerable importance to the balance of the programme. The poems are read rather than recited because most believe they are in this way carried from poet to audience more truly with less intrusion of the reader's own personality.

In the early stages of programme planning the tendency was to match the mood or subject of the music and the poetry. It was soon found, however, that there were many more connections between particular poems and particular pieces of music than sympathy of either mood or subject. The parallels between the forms of poetry and music may be as striking. There is often a kinship of treatment deeper and more vital than any unity of mental origin. A parallel mood might be found in Debussy for Shelley's *The Cloud*, but a more profound link in form may lie between a Bach Prelude and a Shakespeare sonnet. Keats himself compared *Bards of Passion and of Mirth* to a rondo by Mozart. Sometimes a whole sequence of moods which have inspired poets find a similar inspiration in music. The Apollo has incorporated into several recent programmes a group in which Schumann's *Kinderszenen* is interleaved with Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, and another in which Moussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is threaded with Conversation Pieces.

Programme building is no easy matter, for each team of artists has different qualities and each audience different needs. There are those who love poetry and who are accustomed to hearing it spoken. They assure the success of a recital before it begins by the sympathy and generosity with which they open not only their minds but also their hearts. There are many others who would like to enjoy poetry but are suspicious and afraid. They must be given the security of the familiar and the simple. Their confidence once gained, they taste with the relish and surprise of unspoiled palates.

In over a hundred recitals the Apollo Society has gathered immense experience in presenting programmes of poetry and music to audiences of all ages in backgrounds widely differing. The girls of a Worcester School, the inhabitants of Durham's mining areas, the Festival visitors of Brighton, Cheltenham and Edinburgh, the students in Yorkshire training colleges or the members of Oldham Theatre Club—all these have encouraged the Society by their patronage. A certain courage is required of those who organise the first Apollo recital in their district or for their community. They are the pioneers who make the work of the Society possible. Yet time and again their faith is vindicated and it is proved that great poetry finds a like response in people whose circumstances seem to have little in common.

In this Festival year of 1951 the Apollo Society has a heavy list of engagements from old friends and new and has been invited by the Arts Council to prepare an ambitious series of eight recitals to be given at St. James's Square during the London Season of the Arts. Each of these programmes is sponsored by a living poet and each will include extracts from the poems selected as prize winners in the 1951 Poetry Competition. By stimulating love of classic poetry interest quickens in the work of our own generation. The English heritage of culture needs sustaining now as never before and everyone, whether artist, organiser, or audience who joins in its service, is paying to the future some of the debt owing to the past.