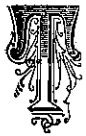


The Stage.

By S. E. GREVILLE-SMITH.



THE Westminster Abbey Singers have come to us like a breath from old English meadows. Their melodies bring the songs of English birds, the music of old church bells, and the joys of generations that were not so strenuous or so absolute as our own. To those of us who remember the checkered sunshine on English woodlands, and the glow of English Christmas firesides, these sweet, harmonious glees and catches make an appeal at once direct and irresistible, but the delight with which the Colonial-born have received Mr. Branscombe and his party can only be explained on the ground of heredity. But whether it be susceptible of explanation or not, the fact that music in its simplest and truest forms finds a responsive echo in the hearts of our young people is gratifying and wholesome. Beyond this, what one may hope is that the taste sharpened, if not created, by our visitors will crave for full satisfaction. It is a great deal to have a standard, and that, also, Mr. Branscombe has given us. For the Westminster Abbey Singers are samples of the best. The name is not an affiche adopted for advertising purposes. Every member of the company bears the genuine hall mark, and has actually sung in the great Abbey choir. This is not the place for detailed criticism of the performances. It will be pleasanter and perhaps more profitable to give, instead, some brief (and necessarily imperfect) biographical jottings.

Madame Hooton, the contralto, and sole lady member of the company, began her serious musical

studies at the Royal Academy of Music, where she went through a three years' course, taking the Parépa Rosa gold medal and Westmoreland Scholarship, the two highest distinctions awarded to singers. Since then she has been doing important oratorio work in England; she has toured three times through Canada and the United States, has visited Australia and South Africa, and is now under contract, with the rest of the company, for another season in the United States during the forthcoming winter. Madame Hooton (who in private life is Mrs. Branscombe) has, owing to her fondness for, and brilliant interpretation of, the ballads of Scotland, often been taken for a native of that country, but she is from Derbyshire, a county, by the way, that has been touched by the wizard fingers of Sir Walter.

Mr. Edward Branscombe's debut was as solo tenor at St. Andrew's, Wells Street, London, which at the time was the only parish church in the world that had two choral services daily. It was the church of which Sir Joseph Barnby was at one time organist, and in which some of the most popular of Gounod's anthems were performed for the first time in the presence of the composer. It is related that on one occasion Gounod was so delighted with a solo by one of the boys, that he took the little fellow up in his arms and kissed him. From St. Andrew's Mr. Branscombe went to Westminster Abbey in the capacity of lay vicar, a position he held for ten years, and which he has only just relinquished in order to carry out his Colonial and American pro-