

The drums of Basle

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THE DRUMS OF BASLE.

The coming to London of 165 performers of the Swiss Folklore Association, among them the *Elite of the Drums and Fifes of Basle*, will bring into focus an ancient and exclusively Swiss art (if such it can be called), namely the playing of the drum, whereof the Basler is the undisputed master. It is a purely local art, indigenous to Basle where it has been practised from time immemorial: the drum is to Basle what the bagpipes are to Scotland.

Anyone who has lived in Basle knows how sacred an instrument the drum is to the native. He does more than just beat it, he introduces shades of meaning and a range of expressions which the initiated alone can understand. So popular is the pastime that every schoolboy, long before he is allowed or can afford to handle a real drum, delights in producing his own percussion by means of small wooden hand-clappers where he attempts to imitate his elders with all the earnestness and concentration of a drum-major.

How far back in history the Basle drum goes, we cannot say. Its origin is probably military. True, the Basler never had the reputation of a great fighter — he achieved distinction in other spheres — yet he appeared with the Swiss at Grandson and Morat (in the rearguard) and he produced at least one hero: Hans Bär who at the battle of Marignano, with both legs shot away, tore the Basle banner from its shaft so that it should not fall into the hands of the enemy.

But if the Basler falls short of being a warrior, he most probably took his drum to the wars. It is a pleasing thought to conjure up the picture of the formidable Swiss pikemen marching into battle with their slow and heavy tread to the sound of the Basle drums.

To-day, the drums are mostly heard at the time of the celebrated Basle carnival. No one who has witnessed the quite unique performance is likely to forget it. During the winter months the drummers have been practising in cellars and backrooms. In the small hours of a raw February morning the various groups with their painted lanterns and, of course, their teams of drummers march through the dark streets of the town, their drums beating a tremendous tattoo,

"*ruesse*" the natives call it. This is the famous "*Morgenstreich*." Similar processions parade through the town later in daylight, again led by the drums expertly handled by performers in masques and costumes.

In that fascinating book "The Stories of Basel, Berne and Zurich," by M. D. Hottinger, there is a delightful description of the Basle drums:

"Basel has specialities There are the drum-concerts. This is no figure of speech. It is plain, unvarnished fact. The Basler is perhaps the only man in Europe who can listen, for the space of a concert, to drums alone, drums without any trimmings, without the intervention of any whining instruments, with nothing to distract the attention from the majestic harmony of the drums. Rapt, he will listen, distinguishing nuances which escape the alien ear, and go home content. The drum is sacred to Basel."

Now, for the first time, the traditional Basle drum will be heard in London. Whether it will be duly appreciated by an English audience remains to be seen, but all those who are able to attend the coming concerts at the Central Hall, Westminster, or at the Royal Albert Hall may be assured that an unusual treat is in store for them.

J.J.F.S.

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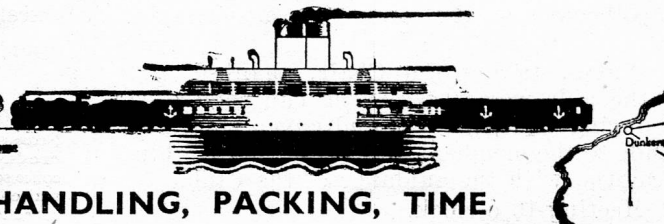
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