



Ibbs and Tillett: The Rise and Fall of a Musical Empire

By Christopher Fifield

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For the greater part of the twentieth century, Ibbs and Tillett's concert agency was to the British music industry what Marks and Spencer is to the world of the department store. The roll-call of famous musicians on its books was unmatched, and included such international stars as Clara Butt, Fritz Kreisler, Pablo Casals, Sergei Rachmaninov, Andres Segovia, Kathleen Ferrier, Myra Hess, Jacqueline du Pre, Clifford Curzon and Vladimir Ashkenazy, to name but a handful. From 1906, the success of the company was due to the dedication of its founders, Robert Leigh-Ibbs and John Tillett. After their deaths, the agency was run by the latter's wife, Emmie, who, dubbed the 'Duchess of Wigmore Street', became one of the most formidable yet respected women in British music. The history of this unique institution and its owners is told here for the first time, often through the fascinating letters that were exchanged between the artists themselves and the agency. It begins in the latter years of the 19th century with the concert and theatrical manager Narciso Vert, for whom both Ibbs and Tillett worked until his death in 1905. The story then becomes a history of musical life in twentieth-century Britain, illuminating aspects of the day-to-day management of concerts and festivals, the lives and livelihoods of professional musicians, as well as those who strove to join their ranks through audition or recommendation. The changing profile of artists represented by Ibbs and Tillett and their reception in the press can be viewed as a barometer of musical taste. The demise of the agency in 1990 was indicative of just how much the world of British music had changed by the end of the century, but despite its loss to the profession, the legacy and influence of Ibbs and Tillett has remained a benchmark in today's highly competitive world of artist management and concert promotion, many of whose principal operators began their working lives as 'Ibblets'.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Christopher Fifield is a writer and conductor.

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