

Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Some Reflections on Modern Musical Criticism

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Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 54, No. 848 (Oct. 1, 1913), pp. 652-654

Published by: Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/907410>

Accessed: 24-10-2015 07:33 UTC

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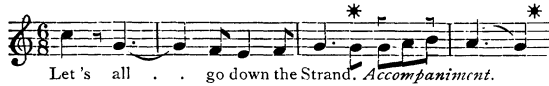
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We have received the following, from which we omit the writer's name and address :

SIR,—In the August issue of the *Musical Times*, under the heading, 'Next season's novelties,' appears a quotation, a few bars in length, of the theme from 'Symphonic variations on an original theme,' by Johann Thompson, as follows :



In the course of his notes on the above, the reviewer says: 'It is Mr. Thompson's ability to evolve such typically British strains as these,—great tunes, racy of the soil—that has made his name honoured in America, Europe, everywhere, in fact, but in his own country,' &c. It was impossible for me not immediately to call to mind, on reading the theme, its almost exact resemblance to the music hall song so much sung and whistled by the man and boy in the street—'Let's all go down the Strand'—the first bars of which I quote :



This is only one of many indications that the article in question was taken quite seriously. The fact would seem to imply that our contributor's jest was so much like earnest as to deceive. Or can it be that an unexpectedly large number of our musicians are deficient in a sense of humour? If so, some help must be provided,—such as an intimation that the matter is supposed to be humorous, or a few explanatory paragraphs.

The city of Frankfort is indebted to M. Nicolas Manskopf for a musical museum of exceptional interest. M. Manskopf has brought together a great number of rare and extraordinary documents connected with celebrated musicians and with musical history in general. The collection of portraits, autographs, medals, scores, theatre bills of important *premieres*, and so forth is probably unrivalled. The Berlioz centenary was celebrated by M. Manskopf with a special exhibition of documents relating to the composer. The 150th anniversary of Mozart's birth was similarly commemorated. Last month a special exhibition was opened to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the death of Grétry, a number of whose unpublished works and letters exist in the museum. In manuscripts connected with this composer, even the Grétry museum at Liège is surpassed by M. Manskopf's collection.

With reference to a general complaint as to the inconvenience of the seating arrangements at Queen's Hall, voiced in our Occasional Notes last month (page 585), we are glad to receive the following letter from Messrs. Chappell & Co., lessees of the Hall :

DEAR SIR,—In reply to your 'Occasional Note' upon the seating accommodation at Queen's Hall, your readers may be interested to know that we have already arranged for an entirely new form of seating upon the Stall floor of the Queen's Hall for this next autumn season, and hope, during the next summer vacation, to entirely remodel the seating of the Grand Circle, so as to get rid of the lack of space at present existing between the rows of seats on the Grand Circle tier.

We are, yours faithfully,

CHAPPELL & CO., LTD.

September 2, 1913.

50, New Bond Street.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON MODERN MUSICAL CRITICISM.

BY P. A. HESELTINE.

'The good critic,' wrote Anatole France, 'is he who narrates the adventures of his mind among masterpieces'—a significant phrase, which, if supplemented by a motto from Nietzsche, 'No good, no bad, but my taste, for which I have neither shame nor concealment,' forms the foundation of a complete philosophy of musical criticism.

Such a system, be it said at once, would probably be discredited by the majority of present-day musicians, though many work upon it already: unadmittedly, it is true, for the most part, and perhaps unwittingly. However, the sooner this principle is openly admitted and practised, the better for musical criticism and the public that is supposed to profit by it; for, frankly, the ever-recurring spectacle of critics who, being totally unable to keep pace with the musical thought of their day, seek to conceal their obtuseness by a lofty cynicism and feeble attempts at humour, is becoming monotonous, to say the least of it. The only humour of the situation lies in their own attitude; for what, after all, is the musical æsthetic if it is not that intuitive *feeling* for music implanted in the individual, the *feeling* of the merits or defects of a work, even if heart and reason be at variance on the subject? This instinctive feeling for a work is, in reality, the mirror of its creation, and almost amounts to a creation in itself, for it is the reflex action of a creative will that has achieved its expression, upon a sympathetic temperament whose desire to translate its dreams into the realities of art lacks a voice of its own, finding the vague thoughts it would utter reflected, or rather, transfigured and transcended by the voices of others of a kindred nature that have become articulate.

In the same way, a work that is antipathetic in feeling to the mood or temperament of a particular hearer, evokes the thought that even its expressed reality is inferior to the shadowy, unborn dreams that haunt his mind. As was hinted above, this power of *feeling* a work has its roots entirely in the idiosyncrasies of temperament and their resultant moods and tastes.

The time has long passed when freedom of thought in music was suppressed by a kind of superstitious adherence to certain arbitrary rules and regulations, in spite of the belated bleatings—now becoming pathetically weak-voiced and unsupported—of the musically dead who deplore the 'licentiousness' of modern music, and sigh for the good old days when Haydn reigned supreme, or even make bold to deny the name of music to the works of those 20th century composers whose musical genealogies they happen to be unable to trace back to Jubal. They should, perhaps, be reminded that there are, no doubt, persons who would see no necessary connection between the grown plant and its bulb—there certainly is not much resemblance between the two when viewed side by side—but such people would scarcely be mistaken for horticulturists, though they might take the greatest delight in the æsthetic beauty of flowers. Even those who condescend to permit their contemporaries to express themselves through a musical medium at all, are prone to forget that all the precious rules and regulations which are so dear to them, were only compiled by musical grammarians from the study of musical works already in existence. Moreover, considering the date of the matter, if not of its presentation, the average text-book of harmony

or counterpoint is about as useful to the aspiring composer of the present day as an English grammar based on Chaucer and his predecessors would be to the modern author. Besides, a knowledge of grammar, even of the right kind, does not make an author, and as regards this so-called musical grammar, it appears to be an open question whether the acquisition of it is not actually a hindrance to natural musical expression, if we may accept the opinions of those who have attained the end to which it is professedly a (or does it call itself *the*?) means.*

We do not imply contempt for Chaucer by admiring Shelley, and there seems to be no obvious reason why the followers of Mr. John Masefield should deny the name of poetry to the works of Milton. The space of time by which these writers are separated precludes comparison. Yet Mr. Corder, in his letter to the *Musical Times* of March, 1913, would have us believe that 'if Scriabine's "Prometheus" is music, then it is idle to pretend that the other works (Beethoven's Violin concerto and a Symphony by Haydn) are also music.'

In other words, if 'The vision of Piers Plowman' is poetry, then it is idle to pretend that works by Browning or Swinburne are also poetry; or, if Robert Burns wrote poetry, then William Barnes did not; or, to extend the analogy a step further, if the 'Odyssey' is an epic poem, then it is idle to classify 'Paradise Lost' under the same heading.

Mr. Corder would fain proceed to show that the introduction of psychology or expression of personality into music was a recent innovation, and tended to the decadence of the art. If he is really prepared to maintain that the music of Haydn or Beethoven contains no expression of its composer's personality, well—there is simply no more to be said. He that hath ears to hear—simply will hear; that is all.

As for the taste that accepts Haydn and Beethoven and rejects Scriabine, or *vice versa*, we cannot blame it, any more than we can blame any other taste under the sun, *per se*, for we must realise that the necessary antecedent to the possibility of such a condemnation would be a fixed standard of objective beauty, which, as a matter of plain fact, simply does not exist. 'No one yet knoweth what is good and bad,' said Zarathustra. Observe the word *knoweth*. The truth of Nietzsche's observation lies just in the very fact that *everyone* knows in his inmost heart what is good and bad, or rather, to use a Socratean distinction, *thinks* he knows, *knowing* in reality nothing whatever.

The theory of a finite and absolute standard of beauty is the supreme obstacle to the progress of musical evolution. Every standard of beauty must necessarily lie in the taste of the individual, or, as Thomas Hardy has it, 'Beauty, to all who have felt, lies not in the thing, but in what the thing symbolises.' It would be as absurd to call anyone unmusical because the music of Schönberg or Scriabine meant more to him than that of Haydn or Beethoven, as it would be to call Mr. Corder unmusical for the taste he has professed in his letter to the *Musical Times*. So far from there being any necessary antagonism between the two predilections, one can picture the devotee of Schönberg or Scriabine cheerfully confronting Mr. Corder with the optimistic assurance that 'I am right, and you are right, and all is right as right can be.' Flippant as it may appear, this remark voices a very profound truth in æsthetics. Substitute any other four composers for the names mentioned

above for the sake of examples, and you still have four men, possibly of widely differing temperaments, yet human beings for all that, expressing themselves as best they can with the means at their disposal, in terms of music. Let Schönberg be their spokesman, for his words apply equally well to all. 'The artist does, not what *others* consider beautiful, but what for *himself* is a necessity.' The facts that music is by far the youngest of the arts, and that the gradual, and perhaps still incomplete development of technical resources of all kinds has undoubtedly influenced the music of all ages to a very large extent, may be laid aside in a purely æsthetic consideration and comparison of musical works of different epochs. Human nature remains the samethroughout the ages—fundamentally, that is, for the progress of civilization and the surface changes its effects will never cease—and it is, after all, the human note in every kind of music that makes the strongest appeal to human hearts. To quote Schönberg once again: 'Instruction, if it is to be of real value to the artist, must be of such a kind as helps him to *hear himself*. Mere technical knowledge will avail him nothing.'

This is the key-note of all originality in music—that is, the true, natural originality that distinguishes the individual from the mass, and which alone makes progress in musical expression possible. There are some, of course, who immediately associate deliberate eccentricity with any manifestation or attempt at originality in music; the distinction between mere eccentricity and true originality lies solely in the sincerity of purpose with which the music is written. Strictly speaking, there is more to be said for this imputation of eccentricity to really original music than would appear at first sight, though in this sense the term would carry no stigma. For what, after all, is eccentricity but an attitude of nonconformity with certain established traditions and customs, the courage to stand out above the herd and its conventionalities? 'The strongest man,' wrote Ibsen, 'is he who stands alone.' But he is always an eccentric to the crowd, if not a madman. If it were not for this attitude, there would be no art whatever, or if there were, we should be deluged with innumerable works—for everyone in the world would turn creator of them—all as totally indistinguishable from each other as the nails or screws turned out by any two men in the ordinary mechanical workshop.

Music, as a live and creative art, cannot stand still and stagnate; whether one considers it to be progressing in an ascending or descending line is, of course, a matter of opinion, but as soon as the course of its progress is arrested, it will assuredly perish as a living art. So long as human nature remains what it is, it will be ever striving, however ineffectually, to pierce the veil of transcendental things, and express at least a

'Dim vision of the rainbow-aureoled face
Of her whom men name Beauty,'

the elusive ideal which soars but the higher into infinity as each more clear-sighted and lovely dream of it is wrought into substance by the mind of man. Each man's only true standard of art is his glimmering perception of this vision.

The game of 'Artists and Critics' seems to have consisted for a very long time solely in the diverting though somewhat ineffectual pastime of submitting new values to the judgment of the old which they have supplanted. The motor-car is the logical outcome of the coach-and-four in the sense that it is equally the expression of man's desire for rapid transit. There are, doubtless, centenarians,

* See remarks by Mr. Balfour Gardiner, in the *Musical Times*, August, 1912.

and even others, whose taste does not permit of their riding in motor-cars; there is absolutely no reason why they should do so against their inclination, but it is quite absurd for them to inveigh against the modern motorist for not sharing their taste in conveyances. But here is the old, old threadbare story once again repeating itself, the old, old fear of, or contempt for, progress. The majority of music-lovers are taught to swallow in their infancy certain tenets of faith which have given birth to the grisly chimera of the fixed standard, that most terrible of all the obstacles that beset the path of the creative artist who has the courage of his tastes, and dares to cast aside all the shackles of tradition. Thus, too, comes about the appalling dearth of originality in criticism. If some music-lovers sincerely prefer Schönberg or Scriabine, or any other composers of their own age, to Haydn and Beethoven—an ugly thought, this, for the academics, but nevertheless a very real fact that they must face sooner or later—why should they not openly say so, especially if they are critics by profession? The natural development of musical taste is, without a doubt, vastly impeded by traditional opinions of critics of the past which survive to-day in those of weakling dilettantes who have no opinions of their own, and are hidebound by the conventional attitude towards certain composers, standing in awe before the purely arbitrary pedestals upon which the said composers have been placed. Before a tribunal composed of such people as these—and their number is fearsomely great—every new work is, so to say, guilty until it is proved innocent—of originality, that is! Thus comes it about that 20th century works of tremendous significance, like the large choral works of Frederick Delius, to cite but one name among many, are treated with complacent neglect, in spite of the immense enthusiasm evoked by them whenever any of the rare performances of them take place, whereas the discovery of a work like the 'Jena Symphony,' which, judged purely on its own merits, would never have been disturbed from its slumber into oblivion, creates a feverish excitement in the musical world because somebody conjectures that it may be a student-work of Beethoven's.

There are thousands of earnest music-lovers who are constantly perplexed by the question, 'Where experts disagree, who shall decide? What need is there of a decision?' The man who cannot think for himself cannot appreciate for himself; and nobody can appreciate for him. As M. Calvocoressi wisely points out in the *Musical Times* of March, 1913, it is impossible to become familiar with, let alone to appreciate, all the music that is extant in the world, and it is a regrettable fact that attention to the kind of antediluvian criticism referred to above has created a tendency among ordinary music-lovers* to be ashamed of their true tastes, and thus to attempt too much in trying to appreciate styles of music which make no natural appeal to them, while at the same time their real feeling will not allow them to neglect the study of the particular kind of music that is akin in spirit to their peculiar temperaments.

The chief danger of modern critics, both amateur and professional, seems to lie in this futile attempt at over-comprehensiveness. Mr. Ernest Newman recently made some shrewd remarks respecting a compulsory 'time-limit' for critics.† If a man of genius like Berlioz, himself a revolutionary, had perforce to confess in his latter years that he could make nothing of the Prelude to 'Tristan,' which seems to us now as

clear and simple as most of Berlioz's own work, it is scarcely probable that the ordinary music-lover of the present day will be able fully to comprehend and appreciate all the countless styles of music that he will encounter. Let him feast at the banquet of the Muses as he will, and let no one attempt to coerce his taste—for is not the fact of his having taste the sole qualification for his admission to the said banquet? But let him remember that enough is as good as a feast, and beware of musical dyspepsy.

Church and Organ Music.

THE COMPLEAT ORGANIST.

BY HARVEY GRACE.

(Continued from September number, page 596.)

I. OF VOLUNTARIES—continued.

While comparatively few organists play set pieces for in-voluntaries, practically all perform the task of what is not too happily known as 'playing the people out.' Perhaps the phrase was originally used satirically. Those who know the delightful letters of Mendelssohn will recall his quotation from the postlude he heard in that land of song—and bad music—Italy. 'This,' he says, 'is what the fellow was playing':

Ex. 1.



It is certainly pretty bad, but most of us have heard things very little better in England, even of late years. We have organists not a few who can as effectually 'speed the parting guest' as did their Italian brother. Good easy man, he may have been in his very best form that day. He may even have been congratulated afterwards by admiring friends. One can see him receiving their praises with a deprecatory air, 'So glad you liked it; yes, a little thing of my own,' not guessing that he was to receive a quite unexpected immortality, not as an artist, but as an awful example.

After all, he was merely subscribing to the popular idea that a postlude must needs be loud, quick, and cheerful. This, with certain other conventions of our profession, needs reconsidering. While a very quiet work is not often desirable, there is much to be said for, on occasion, a *mf* diapason movement, or a piece beginning rather loudly and ending (when most of the noise of footsteps is over) quietly. The out-voluntary is so closely joined to the service that it can hardly be considered entirely on its own merits. It is too commonly the practice to play pieces which, while excellent as music and first-rate for recital purposes, are quite out of place at the close of a service, unless something of a more restrained character be played first, to act as a kind of buffer. Pieces of very bright or dance-like rhythm (as most marches, Guilmant's 'Grand chœur alla Handel,' and all other pieces in minuet form) should not be thrown at the congregation until they have had time to forget their religious

* It is scarcely necessary to add, parenthetically, that by 'music-lovers,' are designated only those to whom music is something more than an 'agreeable aid to digestion.'

† See *Birmingham Daily Post*, criticism of Paderewski's recital in Birmingham, October, 1912.