

The Artist and the People

Author(s): Ernest Newman

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 55, No. 860 (Oct. 1, 1914), pp. 605-607

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/911028>

Accessed: 14-12-2015 18:08 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Musical Times

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

OCTOBER 1, 1914.

THE ARTIST AND THE PEOPLE.

BY ERNEST NEWMAN.

Is it the fault of the composers or of the peoples that national songs are as a rule such poor stuff? Why should our soldiers in France go marching to the most wretched of music-hall songs when we have composers of the calibre of Elgar and Bantock in the country? Is it that the composers cannot write the sort of music that will satisfy at once the musician and the populace, or that the populace has no ear for any but the most obvious music? In his D major 'Pomp and Circumstance' March, Elgar has given the soldiers an ideal piece of 'popular' music in the best sense of that term. I wonder how many soldiers know it, and of those who do, how many realise how thoroughly good it is? It gives one an uneasy sense that we artists and the mass of mankind live in different mental worlds, over the frontiers of which it is impossible for either us or them to pass into each other's territory. The potency of art resides not so much in what it actually says as in the response it calls out from each hearer's past intellectual and emotional life. Elgar's March seems to me a vigorous, bracing piece of music, full of the animal spirits that one would expect to be of irresistible appeal to the soldier. But do I only think so because the music complies perfectly with my notions as an artist of what a breezy march should be; and does the soldier, lacking the more or less conventional artistic mould into which to pour his feelings, fail to see Elgar's work quite as I do, and so fail to appreciate it as I do? On the other hand, certain music stirs an emotion in him that I, for my part, frankly cannot imagine any intelligent human being feeling an interest in. From musical food that I should call unbearably coarse or insufferably sloppy, he seems to extract at least as much spiritual nourishment as I can extract from Bach or Wagner; and I am not at all prepared to say that, in the last resort, it is not spiritual nourishment of much the same kind as well as the same degree. To me a song like 'The Rosary' is merely the snivel of a distempered puppy; but I can well believe that to the man in the street, or the maiden in the picture-house, it opens such glimpses of paradise as are given me by things like Bach's Aria for the G string or the Adagio of the Ninth Symphony. The curious thing is that in face of the supreme realities of life, art—even to artists and lovers of art—becomes strangely small and unreal. We see this incidentally in the general abandonment of concerts for the whole coming year during the first few weeks of

mental strain that we all went through at the commencement of the war. It is no disparagement of art to say that it is not life,—indeed, as artists, we have always had to insist both on the ideality of art and the impossibility of confusing the quality of the art with the character of the artist. But in times of supreme crisis one begins to understand the Philistine point of view that art is merely a plaything for idle hours. During the first few weeks of August we were all of us, I think, intellectually and emotionally shaken as we have never been before by any trouble, public or private. I can speak with certainty, of course, only of my own state of mind, but no doubt it was that of many others. I found myself for some weeks incapable of thinking seriously about music,—not from any panic fear, but simply because, in face of the tremendous realities that life suddenly opened out before us all, music seemed to me utterly remote and unreal. It was not merely that to sit at home and pamper the soul with delicate, sweet sounds while the blood of Europe was being poured out, appeared as callous as to be fiddling while Rome was burning; it was that the critical appraisement of music—the occupation in which some of us have to spend our lives—suddenly took on an almost ludicrous air of insignificance. What in the name of all that was rational did it matter whether a particular melody of Strauss's was good or bad, or whether Rimsky-Korsakov was or was not an over-rated composer at present? To sit down solemnly and write at length about such things, and be prepared to fly at the throat of any one who contradicted us, seemed as absurd as for a family to be quarrelling a whole day about the relative merits of the humming of this insect or that in the garden, while inside the house some one was dying in slow agony.

This mood is bound to pass away, of course. Art would not have been evolved as it has been through all the centuries were it not as vital a part of our being as the desire for food or for love; and when the normal balance of our mental life has been restored, we artists will come to think, as before, that art, in its own way, is as real as what the world calls reality. But that frame of mind requires a certain ease in life, a certain abstraction from life: and the value of our recent experiences is the proof that artistic emotion cannot exist in the soul at the same time as an overwhelming emotion derived from reality, and the inference this perhaps authorises that the reason the 'people' are not more artistic is that for them 'life' is too real. In the daily struggle with poverty, disease, and death, there is little time for looking beyond and within to the new Jerusalem. It is a familiar phenomenon that to the Swiss mountaineer the Alps are less a vision of unspeakable beauty than a means to a livelihood. One must come to reality from a distance, see it from a distance, and see it comparatively rarely, to colour it with the ideal. To the millions who yearly trudged over Westminster Bridge, it was simply a footway to the day's toil and back again, to be forgotten when the day's toil was over; it needed the sudden flashing of the

view of it upon a Wordsworth's eye for the wistful poetry dreaming within the stone and iron to make itself visible and audible :

' Dear God ! the very houses seem asleep ;
And all that mighty heart is lying still.'

There comes a time in many thoughtful artists' lives, I imagine, when they are inclined to turn their back upon art as being a somewhat selfish enjoyment, seeing that the bulk of mankind are debarred from it by the sheer necessity of working to provide the artist with the leisure that is essential to him. I am not saying that this is a rounded view, for in the last resort the world is as rich by the music of those feckless and economically useless persons Wagner and Hugo Wolf as by the potatoes of the Irish farmer. But it is a view that occurs to one sometimes, and a view that has some justification: In his 'Multitude and Solitude' Mr. Masfield has given fine expression to this impulse of the disillusioned artist to cease his traffic with imaginary things and bend his back to the hard common labour of the world.

Quite recently I received a letter from a lady connected with the theatre and the opera, who was trying to work out some difficult problems of her art in a poor fishing village on the Scotch coast. 'But away here,' she wrote me, 'where the men grab a hard living from the sea, I feel the whole thing's not worth a whistle.' That was my own feeling for an hour or so the other day. I was in the organ loft of the great hall of a university that has been turned into a soldiers' hospital. The organist was playing to men who had been wounded in the fighting round Mons. All that the musical culture of my life has been devoted to obtaining for me seemed to fall away from me like a useless garment: as one thought of the broken bodies in the hall below, and what those bodies had endured day after day that we might live at ease at home, the touch of shame that was inseparable from the thought of that ease put it out of the question that one should coddle his soul with the customary dainties of music. Certain great and grave music would have harmonized with the scene, but not much, I confess, that I could think of. On the other hand,—and this was the strangest part of the experience for me—I found myself not only tolerant but, in some inexplicable way, positively appreciative, of music that at any other time would have moved me to derision. The men had sent up a list of the music they would like to hear: it was mostly of the 'Tipperary' and 'Lost chord' type, though one soldier had asked for what he called the 'Rachmanov' Prelude. To forget the place and the scene, as one managed to do for an odd moment, was to become an artist again, critical of the music as music, and contemptuous of it when it was artistically bad; but when one turned one's eyes again on the beds below and saw the men drinking in the strains and occasionally joining in them, the worst music lost its power to annoy.

One ceased to be an artist: one's psychology simply adjusted itself without an effort to that of the men. And for the first time in my life I began to understand how the people can love their poor music as they do. These irreflective beings are not individualists as artists and art-lovers are. They cannot live alone: their mental life is not sure enough or deep enough for that. On their days of holiday, in their evenings of leisure, they shun solitude as they would the plague: they must be in a crowd or they will die of boredom. The true artist's pleasure is a solitary thing. To enjoy a book, a picture, a landscape, he prefers to be alone, or at any rate in the company only of someone tuned to the same spiritual pitch as himself; he would prefer to savour his music also alone, if the nature of the art did not make association with others mostly inevitable. So he develops his feelings and his perceptions to new and ever new refinements. To the people this intensive culture is impossible. Enjoying in crowds as they do, the sensations of the finer individuals among them can never develop in subtlety beyond the sensations of the average among them. A song of Schubert or Wolf, a nocturne of Chopin, a prelude of Bach, is the cry of a solitary spirit that really needs no companionship in its own intellectual life: and here and there a spirit, for the moment made approximately fine, responds to the cry. But a popular song is only a greatest common denominator, a reach-me-down suit that has to be made coarse and shapeless so that it may hang with much the same rough congruence upon a larger or a smaller, a thinner or a stouter body. And for the artist to sympathise with the popular point of view he has to stand shoulder by shoulder with the people in some crisis in which he unconsciously discards, for the moment, all the qualities that separate him, as an artist, from the crowd.

And so, to return to the purely artistic standpoint, we begin to understand why the songs that a nation takes to its heart—especially its patriotic songs—are as a rule such inferior stuff. There is no community of spirit between the great composer and the nation as a whole; they inhabit different worlds; neither speaks a language that is quite understood of the other. If the nation and its great men were one in the arts of peace as they are in the arts of destruction, it is to its great men that the nation would instinctively turn at times like these. But the psychology of the crowd becomes the dominant factor, and in that psychology there is no room for the real artist. This the artists seem instinctively to recognise. I can recall no memorable piece of music that has been directly inspired by war except the 'Kaisermarsch' of Wagner; and this, though it indeed gives an eloquence unparalleled elsewhere to the psychology of the crowd, is after all but a poor thing in comparison with Wagner's other music. Brahms tried to beat the military drum in his 'Triumphlied,' but this sort of banging and firing and strutting was really alien to his reflective temperament. One could wish that the best of our

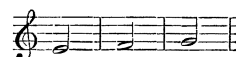
English poets and the best of our English musicians would co-operate to express for us in some great and enduring song just what we are all feeling to-day. But that is not to be. There have been some fine poems in the newspapers during the past few weeks; but it is not these, but some mechanical doggerel of the school of Kipling, that is to be set to music, and the music is presumably to be of the sort that has long made the popular English ballad an offence to musicians. Perhaps the people's instinct is the right one: they know what they want, as their apologists are so fond of telling us. In the past they have gone to the third- and fourth-rate men for their national songs, as they are doing to-day. The national anthems of the world are, on the whole, a deplorable lot. It is only the associations of 'God save the King' that prevent even the man in the street from seeing what wretched commonplace it is. 'Rule, Britannia' is hardly better: it never really hits the heroic it is always aiming at; its pompous periods symbolise only the protrusion of the national stomach, not the swelling of the national chest. The Austrian National Anthem is good music because it was written by Haydn without any thought of the nation; both this and the Russian Anthem—the work of Lvov—owe their musical quality to the fact that they make no attempt to give voice to the warlike psychology of the crowd. Both these songs, indeed, are much too sober for fighting purposes. The Belgian National Anthem, 'La Brabançonne,' is a poor thing to the outsider who judges it simply as music, though no doubt to our gallant Ally it is sanctified by associations. 'Die Wacht am Rhein' is in itself a thoroughly commonplace tune; but it has the advantage of gaining in impressiveness when sung by large masses of men. The one really national song—*i.e.*, a song that has really come from the people, not from the accredited composers of a race—that is worth the paper it is written on, is 'La Marseillaise.' There is genius in that, though it is the genius of the amateur. It is weakest at the end, as an amateur's music always is: the final phrase of the song seems to me like a ridiculously small and unimpressive tail attached to a big and fierce tiger. It was no doubt an instinctive sense of the weakness of this phrase that made Schumann reject it in 'The Two Grenadiers,' and finish his quotation with a variant of the second line of the song. But 'La Marseillaise' is for the most part the right kind of thing. The swift leap to the dominant and the pause on it in the opening line are like a rider rising in the stirrups and drawing a flashing sabre from the scabbard: the modulations in the middle of the tune are admirably expressive, as is also the new rhythmic turn given to the melody towards the end. We should have reason to congratulate ourselves if, in default of our recognised composers, some Rouget de Lisle were to spring out from the ranks of the people to-day; but one sadly doubts whether the people can produce him, or would recognise him if they saw him. Their taste has been irreparably debauched. It's a long, long way from Tipperary to 'La Marseillaise.'

MUSICAL CLICHÉS AND COPYRIGHT.

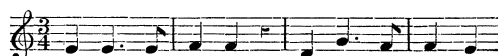
BY G. H. CLUTSAM.

(Continued from page 512.)

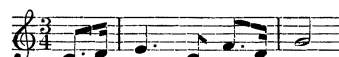
A very simple progression—the ascent of the scale from the third to the dominant:



has attracted innumerable composers as a fundamental in their search for an appealing tune. In its primitive expression Handel may be cited:



with Rossini:



and Mendelssohn:



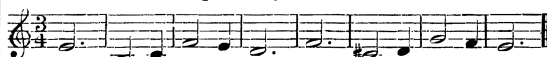
among a hundred and one others, but Beethoven in his finest Trio (Piano, Violin, and 'Cello) gave it a definite form and dignity that have seldom been attained by its myriad unconscious plagiarists:



Delightfully ingenuous use has been made of this theme by our English ballad writers, and for really popular samples Sir Arthur Sullivan, in a sentimental vein:



and in his comic-opera style:



with Signor Tosti, who, despite his nationality, was one of the most refined and talented exponents of a form of song-writing that England has for good or evil made entirely her own.



can be quoted as essentially typical.

One of the first successes of Johann Strauss, the king of terpsichorean music of the domestic or social kind, by extending the descending variant:



provided a theme for a very popular English waltz

