Cant in Music

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A large space was roped off, and there were two marquees, one used as dressing-rooms and the other to accommodate a contingent of the London Symphony Orchestra and their assistants. On the other side of the barrier was the rostrum, on which stood the conductor in monastic garb, and near him was the stationary chorus. The dancers and the other chorus moved on that part of the sward that was the stage. The grouping was picturesque and effective.

There is a great deal of music in 'Dido and Æneas' that is full of spontaneous beauty, and still sounds as fresh to-day as on the day it was written. Two solos of Dido are now becoming fairly familiar to concert-goers. It may be remarked, incidentally, that they seem to have been annexed of late by the tenors; for they have been sung at least four times within the last month in London by male singers. Even the least scholarly of musicians can enjoy 'When in death,' although they may not know that it has great historical interest as being the first instance of a *chaconne*. The music of Dido was excellently sung by Miss Epps, and as Belinda, Miss Violet Passmore sang with a good deal of fluency and appreciation of classical style. The part of Æneas was taken by a gentleman who preferred to observe anonymity. He sang with a good deal of dignity of expression.

The choruses in 'Dido and Æneas' have not yet become as familiar as they ought to be to the audiences of to-day, but the wedding chorus will never fail of its due effect by reason of its solidity and the expressive force of its melodies, while the music of the witches—very well represented by three ladies who sacrificed their vanity and wore appropriately hideous beards—is remarkably suggestive.

The renewed attention paid to music of previous generations is not without significance. It looks as though reaction in favour of simplicity, of which we have heard so much, were really coming to pass. Another sign pointing in the same direction is the extraordinary popularity of the revival of the 'Beggars' Opera.' It remains to be seen whether these things will have any lasting effect. It is to be hoped that they will not lead to a self-conscious affectation of naïveté such as we see in Eric Satie and others of the latest French reformers. A. K.

CANT IN MUSIC

BY CLAUDE TREVOR

Perhaps in no other art is so much cant talked as in music: about opera in particular. The superior musical person is ever dinning into our ears the absurdities of the old operas and their form—with set airs, duets, ensembles, &c.—and the immense fund of reality that exists in musical works written nowadays for the theatre. The good people of this way of thinking (and they are many) seem entirely to forget that opera, or music-drama, or whatever they like to call it, can under no circumstances be otherwise than ridiculous. In real life no one gives vent to his feelings—be they tender or violent—in song, accompanied by an orchestra to augment his sentiments. I could name half-a-dozen operas of recent years, written by popular composers who imagine they have made great strides in realism in opera by introducing their *dramatis persone* dressed quite up-to-date in an up-to-date story. One of the composers who thus comes to mind seems to have a particular leaning to heroes (tenors, of course) who, on occasion, are given to ask for whisky. This

presumably is considered a successful touch of realism in modern opera. Why, it may be asked, should it be considered more true to life to declaim and utter sounds which more often than not give no pleasure, than singing beautiful melody? To have cut-and-dried airs all through an opera of to-day would in truth be quite as tiresome as to have none at all; yet to exclude them from a score which it is reasonable to suppose is written with a view to pleasing the majority of the public, is surely just as annoying. Nothing can make any theatrical performance absolutely real, and yet truth can be conveyed through beautiful melody (or airs, or tunes if you will) just as it can by beautiful language. Take our immortal Shakespeare. Who ever uttered greater truths than he? Yet who goes about his daily occupations speaking in poetry and declaiming soliloquies aloud, unless bereft of reason? As sensible would it be to represent 'Hamlet' with the Prince of Denmark and the other personages in the tragedy dressed in the fashion of to-day as it is to endeavour to obtain greater realism in opera by adopting modern costume, and with the characters delivering their sentiments on all the notes of their voices. We may easily find plenty of examples of unreality in our plays of to-day. The villain of a drama can utter his most diabolical schemes and intentions towards the virtuous heroine, while she or her friends are within a couple of yards of him, and yet they know nothing, and fall victim to his machinations with the most delightful innocence. All the same, unreal as it is, certain situations, like beautiful melody, although not true to nature in their stage representation, will always appeal. Why? Because the public wants what gives it pleasure. Within the last thirty years or so it would really be very interesting to know how many dozens—nay, hundreds—of operas have been produced in Italy, Germany, and France, not to mention other countries, and how few have survived, and the underlying reason. This would probably be found to be lack of melody, though by this I would not be misunderstood as implying that it is owing to the absence of the old modelled type of vocal air, which would be out of place in opera of to-day. All the learning and science in the world will not compensate for the divine spark, be it in music or in any of the arts. Surely in the above-mentioned period a score of successful works (and this is a generous margin) would sum up those operas that hold their own in the répertoires of the leading theatres not only of Europe, but of the world. Thanks to their fund of melody, they are successful, although handicapped by poor libretti. The absurdity of florid passages is likewise always a sore point with the superior person whenever an opera of the old school is mounted, and yet given that 'Barbière' or 'Traviata,' &c., be well executed, and the theatre will be full, and this in any country in the world. I recall that in the early 'eighties, that saw the height of the Wagner mania, the critics—always so prescient—in speaking of some appearances that Patti was then making in her repertoire, foretold the utter extinction of the florid school of opera on the retirement of the *diva* from the stage. Well, hardly a season of opera, in any language, passes without some of these operas being presented; and this is a pretty good proof that such are not dead, but are very much alive when adequately performed. These same critics I have spoken of always go into raptures over 'Don Giovanni,' 'Le Nozze di Figaro,' or

'Il Flauto Magico,' and there are very few florid airs in opera to beat those in the first and last of the works cited. It is but necessary to name 'Il mio tesoro' for the tenor, Donna Anna's air in the last Act of 'Don Giovanni,' and the music of the Queen of Night in 'Il Flauto Magico.' These are only a few cases. Those in authority will tell us that *these* are by Mozart, though why less ridiculous because of that, according to their argument, is not quite clear. It is simply musical cant and nothing else. I should be sorry for any to imagine that I am comparing the musicianship of the greatest musician of all times with the operas of Bellini, Donizetti, and their school. I speak purely of the vocalisation employed, and the illogical reasoning of those who are looked up to and who regard themselves as oracles on the subject. Surely a parity of absurdity with the topic under discussion may be found in the attitude that accepts without question the words and the sense of the action in certain masterpieces of music.

Take Mozart's *chef d'œuvre* 'Il Flauto Magico.' Was ever such rubbish wedded to divine music? Turn to Gluck's 'Orfeo,' and examine the lovely air 'Che farò.' I read lately in the musical Press that in the opinion of the writer 'a vocal piece of music in itself expresses nothing, since the sentiment in such comes entirely from the words therein employed, never from the music.' This seems at first sight, and no doubt is, an exaggeration; but at the same time it contains a good deal of truth. When Gluck wrote the beautiful air mentioned above—that, in the French version, runs as follows:

'J'ai perdu mon Eurydice,
Rien n'égale mon malheur'—

it moved the public to tears, including Jean-Jaques Rousseau; but Boyé remarked that the same melody might just as well, perhaps better, express the contrary:

J'ai *trouvé* mon Eurydice,
Rien n'égale mon *bonheur*.

And be it remembered we are speaking of the great reformer, Gluck, from whom we hear so much concerning the absolute necessity for words and music being exactly suited each to other. At the same time, with all his theory, we know he plumped five airs from his Italian operas into 'Armide,' the situations in the latter, where they were used, being very different from those in the former. Bach drew upon his secular cantatas for the very different subject of his 'Christmas' Oratorio. As to Handel, it is well known with what calmness he borrowed from the secular duets—for the most part erotic—which he wrote for the Princess Caroline of Hanover between 1711 and 1714. Thus from one of them:

'No, di voi non vo' fidarmi
Cieco amor, crudel beltà,
Tropo siete menzoquere
Luscighiere deita.'

he borrowed the air in its entirety, transplanting it—even to using the same key, we are informed—for the magnificent chorus in 'Messiah':

For unto us a Child is born.

Yet the very numbers referred to are some which one hears spoken of as so 'truly devotional,' along with the assurance that the composer of such must have been a deeply pious man to write such profoundly religious and appropriate music to the sacred words! Hanslick said: 'Change epoch, personages,

and locality, and call Meyerbeer's "Huguenots" "The Ghibellines of Pisa," and the musical expression would remain the same.'

Another writer expresses himself thus: 'Music is like botany and zoology, and, like them, demonstrates its individual characteristics in its own categories, and thus expresses its ideas and sentiments in such a manner that the same motive can be applied to numerous ideas and sentiments, presenting the same general characteristics, but that can under other circumstances differ from them.' And indeed instances are not wanting in which composers could be named who, having written airs, duets, quartets, choruses—in fact the greater part of a work for the theatre—wait to have words put to their musical ideas!

Let us turn our attention from the grotesqueness of operatic representations to that form of which we as a nation are so justly proud—oratorio. The fashion of its presentation to an audience is surely as grotesque as any operatic 'show' ever seen. Take, as an example, 'Elijah.' The Prophet—attired in the newest-cut evening suit, with spotless shirt-front and white tie—jumps up like any jack-in-the-box to deliver his most impressive recitatives and dramatic airs—while the Widow is dressed (or the contrary, according to fashion) in the very latest thing in frocks. The other soloists affect similar styles of adornment, while the chorus, male and female, follows suit, except that the soprani wear pink scarves across their persons and the contralti blue ones, or *vice versa*. And why, in the name of all that is rational, should soloists and choristers be all armed with their music? Surely it would be reasonable to suppose they could sing their parts from memory, having had many rehearsals; and if it is an old work, they have probably sung it scores of times. To my mind the whole paraphernalia of orchestra and vocalists should be concealed from view, a thing only feasible in some of our magnificent Cathedrals, which are the only places artistically suitable to such performances and the only places where they can be in any measure devotional. There is this to be said, however, that as a money-making speculation the scheme would be difficult. It is obvious that it would be impossible to employ anything like the magnificent body of voices to be heard in our vast concert-halls, or at the Handel Festival, or a similar mass of instrumentalists.* Neither would such an overwhelming body of sound be desirable—or, indeed, bearable—and anything like the huge audiences could not be accommodated as at, say, the Albert Hall or at the Crystal Palace. As oratorio is presented now, it fares horribly, and to my mind ceases to have the faintest devotional character, its glorious interpretation in England lacking the devotional atmosphere. The suggestion that a fee should be levied for seats in Cathedrals in order to hear oratorio is met with a good dose of *cant*, objections being raised at the idea of turning sanctuaries into concert-halls. As so many of the objectors pay for their 'sittings' to listen to what is sometimes very much less edifying, I cannot see that the argument is much worth consideration. Then as to monetary gain there would naturally be comparatively little, and as no one imagines for an instant that the promoters who organise such

* Of course I know oratorio has before now been performed in some of our Cathedrals, but I urge that it should invariably be so performed when at all feasible. There was, however, it will be remembered, some controversy a few years ago when Elgar's 'Gerontius' was given in Worcester Cathedral, because of the Roman teaching of the text.

performances as at present obtain do it for aught else than profit, it does not seem very likely that the giving of oratorio in Churches will ever supplant the speculative enterprise that now exists. But as it exists it is to my mind inartistic and absurd, and to any who assert it is purely religious and devotional I retort—*cant*.

Occasional Notes

We are asked by the Lord Mayor of London (Sir Edward Cooper) to draw attention to the effort now being made to place the League of Arts on a firm financial basis. His Lordship points out that there is no other organization in this country working on the same lines as the League, which has during recent months arranged or assisted at the following events: National Peace Celebrations in the Royal Parks, July 19, 1919; Thames Pageant, August 4, 1919; Lord Mayor's Show (large costumed choir on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral, together with a number of artistic banners); Carol Singers and Mummers, Christmas, 1919; a number of Old English Folk-Plays, produced in Hyde Park; Purcell's opera 'Dido and Æneas'—two performances—Hyde Park, on July 3 (*see* page 529), to audiences of ten thousand people. The League of Arts has also drawn up plans for the Dedication of the Cenotaph when it takes its permanent form in Whitehall, and Sir Edward Elgar has specially adapted for the occasion a portion of 'For the Fallen.' The above is by no means a complete list of the League's activities.

Sir Edward Cooper is confident that the public will desire that an organization which has done so much, and on such practical lines, should become a permanent part of the musical life of the country.

The appeal makes no reference to the important work of the League in various provincial centres. In many towns the peace celebrations were organized in connection with the League, which rendered help in various practical ways. Among the most important results was the impetus given to what is known in America as community singing. In addition to the stirring examples we have heard in London—all of which were directly or indirectly due to the League—there have been many no less successful 'sings' in the country. As a result chorus singing by the crowd is likely to be a regular feature at some centres where people are less easily abashed than in London. For example, we hear that at Portsmouth a series of municipal concerts is being arranged at which singing by the audience of popular songs and choruses will be made a more or less regular feature. This is a direct outcome of the work by the local League of Arts choir. The social and musical benefits of such amenities are too obvious to need underlining. We hope the Lord Mayor's appeal will meet with a generous response. Donations should be sent to the League offices, 37, Russell Square, W.C.1.

As usual, the most welcome musical announcement at this season of the year is that of the Queen's Hall Promenade Concerts. They begin on Saturday, August 14, and end on October 23. The list of

soloists is a very long one—far too long to quote, as it consists of ninety-three names. Not all the stars in the galaxy are of prime importance, but it is a notable list, and includes practically all our leading soloists. The programmes have not yet been issued. It will be interesting to see how far they have been affected by the enterprising character of recent and projected orchestral concerts. Meanwhile a list of novelties comes to hand just as we are going to press. There are twenty, ten being by native composers, viz., Templeton Strong ('The Night'), Montague Phillips (Pianoforte Concerto in E), Landon Ronald (Suite, 'The Garden of Allah'), Armstrong Gibbs (Suite from a Fairy Play), Eric Fogg (Ballet Suite), Arnold Bax (Symphonic Variations for Pianoforte and Orchestra), York Bowen (Violin Concerto in E minor), Herbert Howells ('Merry-Eye,' for orchestra), Eugène Goossens ('The Eternal Rhythm'), and Georges Dorlay (Valse Intermezzo). The novelties from abroad include works by Casella, Prokofiev, Catoire, Fauré, and Palmgren.

Bach's organ music has been drawn upon a good deal at choral weddings during the past few years, but we have heard of no such thorough-going homage to the old man as was paid at Kendal recently, when two members of the Bach Society were married. Before the service the organist played two choral preludes and the Prelude and Fugue in G major; the hymn was Carlyle's translation of Luther's 'Ein' Feste Burg,' sung to Bach's harmonization of the tune; during the signing of the register the choir sang the choral from Cantata No. 147; and the most recent husband and wife walked down the aisle to the strains of the Toccata in F. The allegiance to Mendelssohn's Wedding March and other familiar nuptial music has been weakening for some time, but there has been no more complete break away than this. Gone is the day when:

was almost as essential as the ring.

THE MUSIC AND MUSICIANS OF DICKENS

BY C. EDGAR THOMAS

I.

Had Charles Dickens any musical sense? Did he care for, or understand, music? These are interesting queries. If they are to be answered in the affirmative—and we shall endeavour to do this—it is singular that he has given us no picture of a celebrated musician or singer; but, rather, has contented himself with hovering on the fringe of music—of dallying with amateurs, down-at-heel melody merchants, and third-rate concert artists. In 'Sketches by Boz' he has penned in his own inimitable way an amusing account of the seaside busker in the Tippin family, whose descendants are now legion—much to our sorrow. It will be remembered that Mr. Tippin followed the occupation of a comic singer at Ramsgate, and that his estimable spouse was a concert singer from the London theatres—seaside songsters mostly are—who rendered the popular cavatina of 'Bid me discourse' to her husband's accompaniment. After which, as an indication of her obliging nature,