'What Is Art?' (Concluded)

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of purpose, those high ideals of work and duty, and that constant seeking after knowledge, or 'picking up,' which have so frequently been commented upon in this series of biographies. He fully deserves all the success which has fallen to his lot. His literary gifts, his fine mental equipment, his kind-heartedness, his dignified and courteous bearing so typical of the true English gentleman, and his artistic musical temperament—these are some of the attributes which go towards constituting the personality of one of the present-day leading musicians in England, and who is so well known and respected as Dr. Henry Hiles, the chief musician of Manchester.

'WHAT IS ART?'

(Concluded from page 233.)

COUNT TOLSTOY, in answering his self-propounded question, does not forget to decry the critics. It would be strange if he did, since they are a class which, from the dawn of literature, has been the best abused. All men speak ill of them—those excepted who may happen to be praised, and even then the truce endures but a little while. How the critics have managed to perpetuate their kind under such apparently desperate conditions is a mystery, unless we assume the existence in them of a delusion, stupendous and invincible, that they really are of some use in the world. If that delusion exists, Count Tolstoy's attack is not likely to dispel it. He not only refrains from abusive epithets, but even offers a left-handed compliment. The professional valuers of art are, he tells us, 'erudite' persons, who, in the measure of their learning, are 'perverted and at the same time self-confident individuals.' But he does not entirely agree with a friend who once said, 'Critics are the stupid who discuss the wise.' Indeed, he brands the remark as partial, inexact, and rude. Yet he holds it partly true, and more just than it would be to say that critics are men who can explain works of art. Critics, according to our author, are wholly superfluous persons. If a work of art be good, it explains itself; if it be bad, no amount of explanation can make it contagious. In this summary manner is the whole array of modern criticism dismissed. But the explainers are not only useless, they are mischievous. The critics set up false standards, and propound judgments based on traditions which have become inapplicable. On this point let me quote: 'The chief harm done by the critics is this, that themselves lacking the capacity to be infected by art (and that is the characteristic of all critics, for did they not lack this they could not attempt the impossible—the interpretation of works of art), they pay most attention to, and eulogise, brain-spun, invented works, and set these up as models worthy of imitation.

That is the reason they so confidently extol in literature the Greek tragedians, Dante, Tasso, Milton, Shakespeare, Goethe, and, among recent writers, Zola and Ibsen; in music, Beethoven's last period, and Wagner. To justify their praise of these brain-spun, invented works, they devise entire theories (of which the famous theory of beauty is one), and not only dull but also talented people compose works in strict deference to these theories, and often real artists, doing violence to their genius, submit to them.' I do not pretend to explain this tremendous indictment of criticism. It sounds like revolution, with anarchy in waiting round the corner; but what would follow were the criminals found guilty, and how much better art would be for their punishment, are questions which I respectfully leave the reader to answer for himself, with just a hint of warning that even a Tolstoy may destroy with no conception of how to reconstruct.

Having ground the critics to powder and blown the atoms into space, our author turns to Richard Wagner as to an arch-heretic, as to an embodiment of the Evil One in music, with whom there can be no peace. Our author begins by assailing Wagner's theory as to the union of arts in music-drama. Under this head he makes some points with which I am bound to agree. The reader, however, would, if put to it, prefer to pass them over the sooner to reach Tolstoy's description of a performance of 'Siegfried,' witnessed by him in Moscow. This is very funny, and the fun is partly due to the author's wish to put his subject in a ridiculous light; partly to the nature of the subject itself, in which there are irresistible provocations to mirth. But when the story is told, Tolstoy passes judgment with by no means a smiling face. He wrathfully denounces what he regards as a masterpiece of counterfeit art, and embraces in one sweeping condemnation the composer, his work, and his admirers. 'Listening to this opera,' writes the critic, 'I involuntarily thought of a respected, wise, and educated country labourer. . . . What would he think if he knew of all the labour spent upon such a performance, and saw that audience, those great ones of the earth—old, bald-headed, grey-bearded men, whom he had been accustomed to respect—sit silent and attentive, listening to and looking at all these stupidities for five hours on end. Not to speak of an adult labourer, one can hardly imagine a child of over seven occupying himself with such a stupid, incoherent fairy-tale. And yet an enormous audience, the cream of the cultured upper classes, sits out five hours of this insane performance, and goes away imagining that by paying tribute to this nonsense it has acquired a fresh right to esteem itself advanced and enlightened.' This is strong language, but the author's intensity does not blind him to the fact that it is necessary to show how an opera so false in art and so 'stupid' manages to hold

the attention and command the applause of an educated audience. In discharging this part of his task, Tolstoy recognises the extraordinary cleverness with which Wagner has made use of all that is considered poetical. Beyond this even hypnotism has been pressed into the service of sham art. Indeed, it is this strange power which should be held answerable for much of the result. 'Sit in the dark for four days in company with people who are not quite normal, and, through the auditory nerves, subject your brain to the strongest action of the sounds best adapted to excite it, and you will no doubt be reduced to an abnormal condition and be enchanted by absurdities.' Tolstoy thus dismisses 'Siegfried': 'So, thanks to the masterly skill with which it counterfeits art while having nothing in common with it, a meaningless, coarse, spurious production finds acceptance all over the world, costs millions of roubles to produce, and assists more and more to pervert the taste of people of the upper classes and their conception of what is art.'

I apprehend that few who read Count Tolstoy's book will agree with all he says. The distinguished author is too sweeping, too uncompromising, too oblivious of facts and considerations which his theory, being crude and hard as most theories are, cannot be made to fit. But while the Count falls into extravagance of thought and word, and often irritates where a more reasonable advocate would perhaps convince, I am bound to say, after due reflection, that in the main he is right. He is right certainly in distinguishing between real and counterfeit art by reference to the condition, mental and emotional, which the one sets up in us, while the other leaves us unmoved and cold. 'However poetical, realistic, effectful, or interesting a work may be,' says Tolstoy, 'it is not a work of art if it does not evoke that feeling (quite distinct from all other feelings) of joy, and of spiritual union with another (the author), and with others (those who are also infected by it).' No doubt there are many works—a vast majority indeed—which, while they fail according to the test just laid down, do actually kindle some excitement and communicate a sense of pleasure. But those results do not represent the infectiousness upon which Count Tolstoy insists. Their origin is traceable, in point of fact, to considerations which fundamentally have no essential concern with art, but are in the nature of adjuncts and, often, of mere accidents. Our author, we have seen, attributes to Wagner, as he appears in 'Siegfried,' unbounded ability in the creation and employment of clever, poetical, and interesting accessories. But these things, he consistently argues, merely put a gloss upon that which is not true art, because, though it may secure our attention, it leaves us unmoved.

An example used by way of illustration often throws more light upon argument than any amount of rhetoric, and Tolstoy does not fail

to take advantage of its power. He tells us that, one day, when returning from a walk in a depressed state of mind, he heard the singing of a large choir of peasant women—singing which conveyed such a definite feeling of joy, cheerfulness, and energy, that it braced him up and restored his good spirits; that is to say, the music 'infected' him with its qualities, so that he also became glad, cheerful, energetic. The same evening, a famous pianist who chanced then to be a guest of our author, played Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 101. Here I must quote: 'For a long time, I used to attune myself so as to delight in those shapeless improvisations which form the subject-matter of the works of Beethoven's later period, but I had only to consider the question of art seriously, and to compare the impression I received from Beethoven's later works with those pleasant, clear, and strong musical impressions which are transmitted, for instance, by the melodies of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Chopin (when his melodies are not overloaded with complications and ornamentation), and of Beethoven himself, in his early period, and, above all, with the impressions produced by folk-songs . . . and other such simple, clear, and powerful music, and the obscure, almost unhealthy, excitement from Beethoven's later pieces, that I had artificially evoked in myself was immediately destroyed. On the completion of the performance (though it was noticeable that everyone had become dull) those present, in the accepted manner, warmly praised Beethoven's profound production, and did not forget to add that formerly they had not been able to understand that last period of his, but that they now saw that he was really then at his very best. And when I ventured to compare the impression made on me by the singing of the peasant women—an impression which had been shared by all who heard it—with the effect of this Sonata, the admirers of Beethoven only smiled contemptuously, not considering it necessary to reply to such strange remarks.'

It may be that the reader is also smiling contemptuously, and saying to himself: 'This is only ignorance, or want of taste, condemning what it does not understand.' But it must be conceded, at all events, that in the passage just quoted, Count Tolstoy carries out his own theory—namely, that true art explains itself to the humblest, while counterfeit art leaves the observer uninformed and unmoved. In support of that theory it may be pointed out, as a matter of observation and experience, that from time to time a work appears which leaps into popularity at a bound, which learned and unlearned, gentle and simple, accept without question, and carry forward on the very crest of the wave of universal favour. Yet another work, written, let us suppose, by a man of equal or even superior ability, and recommended by all the resources of a cultured mind and clever

pen, obtains no more than a 'success of esteem,' is soon put upon the shelf, and practically forgotten. Of examples in the second of these categories no one in particular need be cited. They are numerous, and the reader can make his choice. But of those in the first and much shorter list, I cannot refuse to mention Coleridge-Taylor's 'Hiawatha,' than which no choral composition ever met with greater or more immediate success, or, let me add, was ever more deserving of such good fortune. How are we to account for the triumph of this and the failure of that? There must be some reason, apart from technical excellence, which often more fully appears on the side of the failure, some reason which gathers round the successful effort not so much the suffrages of the intellectual as the palpitating emotions which it is the main business of music to excite. To my mind, in the case of 'Hiawatha' that reason appears, not in the effect of its orchestration, but in the power of its simple and natural vocal melody—a power which so many modern composers, some by mistake of judgment, others to cover deficiency of melodic invention, practically despise and neglect. It is not only the simple and touching beauty of the phrases in 'Hiawatha' that 'infect' the hearer, but also their naturalness and truth. 'So must it be,' one thinks as the music goes on, 'so must it be, and in no other way!' The word is wedded to its pre-destined tone—this sort of marriage is also made in heaven—and the combined appeal cannot be resisted. A thousand other examples to be found in the records of musical art convey the same lesson and point to the same conclusion—namely, that the true and irresistible spirit of music is not found in the schools, does not lie in technical complications and elaborate developments (which only tend to smother it), but in utterances, often as simple as a folk-proverb, and, like that, forming part, ultimately, of individual and national life. When will the majestic 'Old Hundred' cease out of the land, or the Dead March in 'Saul,' or 'I know that my Redeemer liveth,' or 'O rest in the Lord,' or a hundred other embodiments of musical expression such as cannot die?

Count Tolstoy very explicitly lays down the qualities which must exist in any true work of art. They are three, and first in order comes individuality, as to which our author says: 'The more individual the feeling transmitted, the more strongly does it act on the receiver; the more individual the state of soul into which he is transferred, the more pleasure does the receiver obtain, and therefore the more readily and strongly does he join in it.' The second quality is clearness of expression. This, says our author, 'assists infection, because the receiver who mingles in consciousness with the author, is the better satisfied the more clearly the feeling is transmitted.' Last, and greatest of all, comes sincerity. 'As soon as the spectator, hearer, or reader feels that the artist

is infected by his own production, and writes, sings, or plays for himself, and not merely to act on others, this mental condition of the artist infects the receiver.'

Here I put Tolstoy's book on my library shelf, conscious that there is much in it hard to be understood, harder still to accept, yet glad that I have read it, and, I hope, benefited to the extent of wider and also more definite views on the great subject of which it treats.

JOSEPH BENNETT.

THE TRAINING OF A CHORUS

SOME PRACTICAL HINTS

By HENRY COWARD

(Chorus-master of the Sheffield Festival Choir).

(Concluded from p. 383.)

WORDS.

THE most unsatisfactory part of the average choral performance is the slovenly way in which words are uttered. This is owing to the inertia of the muscles of the tongue and mouth. The dictum of St. James, about the tongue being an unruly member, is true also in another sense from that intended by the Apostle. The strong indisposition to work—better known by its real name, idleness—which causes the lips and tongue to sing with no more effort than in ordinary conversation, is the Giant Despair against which a conductor must wage war. Assuming that you get your choir to speak distinctly, then comes the difficult question of proper vowel sound. It is hard to convince even educated persons that, although they may speak correctly—with proper accent and proper vowel quantity—as soon as they begin to sing they oft-times alter the vowels in ways most ludicrous.

And is it at all wonderful that choristers should be deficient in this respect when, at every important concert, we hear singers with reputations singing 'moi' and 'thoi' for 'my' and 'thy'; 'thau' (very short vowel) for 'the'; when 'ow' as in 'now' is refined, or rather perverted, to 'o' as in 'know'; and when the vowels generally are maltreated for the purpose of some fancied gain in tone? Let me tell these singers that they fail in their object of winning admiration. The public are quick to note all subterfuges, and they soon discern between the true and the false. If they (the singers) only heard the remarks upon this 'make believe,' or incompetence, they would at once amend their ways.

INITIAL AND FINAL CONSONANTS.

In the training of a chorus the conductor should insist upon his singers *saying* their words apart from the music—he patterning the precise sound required, and then getting the same sound when sung to music. To do this is often very worrying and troublesome; but the living interest which these clear singing words give to