Small "Places Where They Sing," and Their Fitting Music. No. I. The People's Response

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THE MUSICAL TIMES,

And Singing-Class Circular.

MARCH 1, 1873.

SMALL "PLACES WHERE THEY SING," AND THEIR FITTING MUSIC.

NO. I.—THE PEOPLE'S RESPONSE.

WITHOUT wasting precious lines in exordium, introduction, or other long-named beginning, let us at once take up the consideration of the people's response, as the simplest form to which musical tone may be attached.

The People's Response.—Does not the phrase of itself seem to suggest that the people themselves should have some say in the matter, and that the people's use—if such use exist to any appreciable extent—should be allowed full weight in deciding the manner of responding in the common congregation? The question then resolves itself into this—Is there, or is there not, any such people's use of response? It cannot be too widely known or too fully recognized that there does exist such use across Yorkshire and to a less degree in the adjoining counties. In these districts the people's answer is conveyed in uninflected speech, scarcely monotone or in one musical tone—but simply in speech without inflection. Let any Southerner attend the service in any little out-of-the-way Yorkshire church, where the activity of choral secretaries has not burst in upon ancient custom, and his ear will at once detect a response widely differing from his whining South Country polytone speech; he will hear a dignified, full-chested, deliberate utterance without inflection—not the song of one note one hears, rightly or wrongly, from the priest's lips in our cathedrals, but distinct speech, without change of tone.

And it must be confessed that the Yorkshire custom, be its origin what it may, is in full accordance with the national character. Be it of insular pride, or what not, an indisputable fact surely it is that there is nothing we English folk care less to do, be we journeying, at home, or be we in church—than blaze abroad our inner feelings. That mode of response is surely most English that takes the least colouring from personal feeling; inflection is the colouring of speech, therefore uninflected speech for this purpose best suits the national character; and this doubtless is the chief cause why the answer of the common congregation will always be found so much fuller where there is no inflection, than where ordinary speech is employed for response. Many who would shrink from making their voices heard in the individuality of inflection, readily join in the neutral one-tone. Surely, without going further, these three considerations—that the use is over a large district of England an immemorial use of the people—that it is in strict accordance with the national character—that it secures a fuller and more general response—may be left to decide the advisability of, as far as possible, extending inflectionless speech as the acknowledged vehicle of the people's answer.

But now comes another question. We shall have made but small advance in securing a decent and orderly response unless we can contrive to gather the responding voices into one tone. Uninflected speech must needs be in some one tone—the line that separates it from monotone proper, or the song of one note, is very fine, and if various speakers use different tones for their uninflected speech, the effect is but little more orderly—if at all so—than if ordinary speech were used. How then shall we obtain this agreement in selecting one note? Two at least of our leading living Church composers have directed their attention to solve this difficulty by setting harmonies to the persistent one note. These—the simplest form of musical service—do indeed most satisfactorily effect the desired object of collecting and sustaining the people's uninflected response, and it is impossible to overrate the value of these settings in securing a decent and orderly, and full people's answer; constant use only tends more and more to prove their fitness and usefulness. It might be supposed by those who have no experience to guide them to an opinion, that the choir and congregation of an ordinary country church for instance, would be wholly unable to keep

the one note through the service, and that the accompaniment instead of aiding, would only serve to proclaim the deviation. "Go into a cathedral, and listen to the Confession, running down almost like emptying a bottle, and is it likely that the half-trained choir and wholly untrained people can keep a note, when the practised choir of a cathedral do systematically fall?" Likely or not, fact it is that the half-trained choir and wholly untrained people do contrive to keep their note, and in a way too the cathedral choir do not, and probably cannot do. And, doubtless, strange as the assertion may at first sound, this comes about from the very reason of this want of training. As long as one note only is wanted, the very inflexibility of the untrained voice serves good turn. Only get the note once hit, and the hard voice takes a positive effort, like a stiff tap, to get it turned on another note. Let the mind wander as it may, still on, and on, and on—the untrained voice pours out of the unchanged orifice its one note. While on the contrary the delicate trained voice, if the attention flags for one moment, by minute gradations falls away insensibly, as the mind relaxes the effort of trimming by the ear. In practice it will be found that there is no difficulty in keeping the ordinary choir well up to pitch with accompanied monotone, but stray into melodic response—take to "doing Tallis," and where the trained choir at once rallies into tone, the ordinary choir falls to pieces in those indescribable noises, that so frequently impart such a sense of agony to the Preces.

One further step must be taken to ensure to the people's response full decency and order, and that is, that the ministrant shall himself adopt the people's custom, and employ uninflected speech in the common prayer. In our day, happily, the old attempts at *fine reading*, as taught by "Professors of Elocution," have well nigh wholly passed away. The clergy, of whatever shade of opinion, have for the most part laid aside the ancient prejudice against inflectionless speech, and where the one-tone is not purposely used, we find often so slight a variation from it, that it may be classed with it.

The fact is, not only is it found that speech with slight or no inflection wears and tears the voice very much less than ordinary speech, but that it is a far better vehicle of the words—carries them farther and more distinctly—doing away as it does with those falling tones, occurring so often in common speech, and which go by the term of dropping the voice. It may also be added that the very impersonality of the use commends itself to many minds. There is a sense of obtruding one's own meanings into the common prayer, when ordinary speech is used, and every priest surely desires to stand before his people as the minister of the church, rather than as the Rev. Mr. So-and-so. Much more general might the use become, if only it were more extensively recognized, that the aim should be not to set the prayers to a song of one note, but to speak without employing variation of tone. Surely nothing is more offensive to good taste, propriety, and sober feeling, than to hear prayers trolled forth in a rollicking showman's voice, or daintily warbled with *cres.* and *dim.* and *p's* and *f's* to the display of what the ladies call *Mr. So-and-so's charming voice*. Unfortunately such exhibitions commonly pass for intoning, and in more ways than one serve to deter many from adopting the custom of which such exhibitions are the parodies. "I cannot intone," says the quiet, modest man, who has neither the showman's nor the young lover's voice. "I cannot intone, I have no voice." No voice? Why, cannot you speak? You read the service on several tones; as surely as if you can go up several steps you can go up one, so surely if you can read in several tones you can read in one. Let me prove to you that you can intone. Whisper a sentence as clearly and articulately as you can. Now repeat that sentence, adding to the whisper—the dry articulation—any one tone you can utter easily. Give as *much articulation* and as *little tone* as you can; watch your throat and observe the form it takes in its effort to supply the whisper with vocal tone. Retaining that form of throat, read many sentences as dryly and articulately as you can, and if you test your note by tuning-fork or otherwise, you will find you will have kept the pitch. That is best intoning that, being true to pitch, shall yet be able to pass as simple speech in the ears of the ordinary hearer. It yet

remains for the ministrant to identify his note with the people's accompanied note of response. Few if any ears, it is to be hoped, there are so dull as to be *unable to learn* to take up a note from an organ, if that note lies near the prevailing speaking tone. It must be owned that there is some difficulty in this matter, but the real point of the difficulty lies in the difficulty not being recognized by those who have to surmount it. The man with imperfect ear has no inner test to help him to accuracy; if he would but take his quicker-eared friend's kindly word and firmly resolve to set a true G fast and firm in his ear—even though at the cost of hours of practice—the difficulty would surely in every case almost, quickly vanish. And who would begrudge a few hours' patient labour to be able to help, rather than interfere with, the one-note response of the people; one-note response helping surely to one-heart feeling.

J. POWELL METCALFE.

ENGLISH OPERA.

By HENRY C. LUNN.

ALL thinkers upon the condition of British Operatic art who, like ourselves, are old enough to remember the days of the "English Opera House," as it was termed, cannot but be struck with the manner in which this establishment was carried on year after year, in spite of the fact that frequently for months together an Opera was never heard within its walls. The theatre under the management of Mr. Arnold, although theoretically opened for the representation of strictly musical works, was practically devoted to what was likely to bring an audience; and we distinctly recollect that a drama entitled "The Evil Eye," was a highly attractive piece; that John Reeve, the low comedian of his time, was excessively funny in the character of *Zanie Kiebags*; and that the same actor, in a Farce, called "The Mummy" (which was moulded on the model of the more modern "Adelphi Screamer"), kept the audience in a roar of laughter from the rising to the falling of the curtain. Strangely enough, however, the original object for which the theatre was founded, could not be entirely lost sight of, for by the terms of the licence, it was compulsory to have a certain number of pieces of music in each act. This gave rise to the most absurd effects, for songs, duets, &c., were dragged in without meaning, simply to satisfy the conscience of the Lord Chamberlain. But their great hope was in *finales*: the act-drop scarcely ever fell without a number of people rushing in most unceremoniously (very often into a gentleman's drawing-room,) and bawling out some such nonsense as the following, which was set to music by the "arranger" of the establishment:

When morning beams,
We wake from dreams,
And off to hunt we go.
And, when it's o'er,
We drink and roar,
Hark forward, ho, yo ho!

Solos, too, as we have said, were constantly introduced, having so little to do with the situation in which they were sung, that the business of the scene was usually temporarily suspended, and a few words allusive to the subject of the song, written for the occasion, were spoken by the vocalist, as a "cue" for the orchestra. Thus a brigand, who had been pursued by troops into a mountain pass, would come forward, and, at the risk of being fired upon, sing a sentimental effusion, relating to his early days; a waiting-maid would unceremoniously walk into her mistress's room and, bidding her "listen," give a detailed account of her numerous wooers, and the manner in which she had treated them; and we have even seen a harp and milking-stool brought into a corn-field, in order that the suffering heroine (who unfortunately happened to be a vocalist) should sing a popular ballad to her own accompaniment.

Unquestionably these "musical pieces" (if such they might be called), would scarcely do much for the cultivation of creative operatic talent; but it must be remembered that the *idea* was thus kept alive—there was an English Opera House, if there were an English Opera to put in it; and if composers could not or would not write one, the lessee was always

enabled to fall back upon *Zanie Kiebags* and fill the house. Let those who regard these days with wonder recollect, however, that English Operas were given, and successfully too; and that from this period we may date a very decided growth in the taste for musical works by British composers. Loder's "Nourjahad," and John Barnett's "Mountain Sylph," to name only two of the many produced, attracted large audiences, and encouraged the belief that as long as there existed a home for such native productions, no difficulty would be found in procuring them. It may also be said that the cast of these operas was, as a rule, in the highest degree satisfactory. In the "Mountain Sylph," for instance, Miss Romer, Messrs. Wilson, and Henry Phillips formed a trio thoroughly competent to interpret the music entrusted to them; and although it must be confessed that Mr. Keeley, who played the part of *Christie*, however good as a comedian, could hardly be accepted as a vocalist, the public was good natured enough to laugh with him, instead of at him, because it was well understood that with a company so strangely mixed, the singers must be constantly encroaching upon the province of the actors, and the actors upon that of the singers.

But, apart from the works written especially for this establishment, it must be borne in mind that foreign operas in the English language were here presented, and this during the time when the fashionable lyrical establishment in the Haymarket was sealed to the general public, in consequence of the high rate of admission. Night after night, for example, was the house filled to hear Weber's "Der Freischütz," which in a short time became actually popular, even with the masses. Many other operas, too, of the highest class, by continental composers, were constantly given; and it is an indisputable fact that, in spite of the much vaunted rapid and universal spread of the art, better operatic music was to be found on the pianofortes of amateurs in those days than in the present.

With this truth before us, it is obviously absurd to account for the non-existence of an English Opera House, by the fact of there being no composers who can write for it. Those who watch the progress of musical events in this country, must know that for years the public has been carefully educated away from, instead of towards it. The Italian Opera, at first, only appealing to the aristocratic few, has now become a popular institution, and the nationality of lyrical works is so disguised, from the fact of one language only being used, that, save for the retention of some of the original titles in the bills (for a mercantile, and not an artistic reason), few persons can ever know to what words the music of an opera had been first allied. It will of course be seen that in endeavouring to prove how the exclusive use of the Italian tongue on the lyric stage in this country has gradually weaned the people from the desire to hear their native language sung by native vocalists, we are but echoing the sentiments of Mr. G. A. Macfarren, who, in an able paper in this journal on the evil influence of the Italian language upon music, has clearly pointed out the importance of the subject as affecting the progress of pure English art. Speaking of the manner in which composers' works are perverted in their meaning by translation, he says, "One might forgive this paramount injustice to a musician under either of two circumstances. Firstly, were the so-called translation into the native language of the executant, who would then be enabled to invest its performance with such natural impulse as is incompatible with the enunciation of a strange tongue; secondly, were the text rendered into the native language of the audience, who would thus be enabled more thoroughly to apprehend the musical purport than is possible through the aid of the English side of an opera libretto, or even through the preparatory help of school education." Here, indeed, the matter is stated so convincingly, that we might wonder what the veriest musical conservative could say against it. Were it possible to present foreign operas in their original language, and with a company of native vocalists, nothing could of course be more satisfactory; but to translate a German work, for instance, into Italian, and then have it sung by Swedish, French, German, or even English artists, is a manifest absurdity which, if art were regarded as it should be in this country, could scarcely be tolerated. Handel commenced his career in England by composing Italian operas, according to