Before-Breakfast Music

Author(s): Gerald Cumberland

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VOICES IN HARMONY.
cantabile.

Who is He? How shall we name Him when we
of - fer sac - ri - fice?

Having no knowledge of foreign languages, except a little Sanscrit acquired during his poetic excursion to the East, he has sought consistently for the true melodic equivalent of English speech. Concerning this aspect of his music I wrote, some months before the outbreak of war, as follows*:

‘I have often complained that our native composers are not inspired by the qualities of their own language. Instead of seeking its true musical expression they are content with what is in reality instrumental writing, thinly disguised by words, rather than a true use of the vocal medium. Holst is here an honourable exception. His vocal writing obviously grows from his text. The path by which this result has been attained is not without interest. As the masters of the classical tradition were German, the knowledge of vocal writing he acquired in his student years was almost entirely based on translations, which are nearly always very poor. So far from learning how to set an English text adequately, he and his fellow students were not even made aware of the difficulties of the problem. Subsequently, when teaching at Morley College, he used the vocal material at hand to perform some works of Purcell, and he had the unusual acumen to realise what we have lost under the musical hegemony of Germany. To recover it has been his ideal ever since, and his peculiarly admirable vocal idiom is the result. *Si sic omnes!*’

(To be continued.)

* *The Outlook*, March 21, 1914.

BEFORE-BREAKFAST MUSIC.

BY GERALD CUMBERLAND.

If I had time and the necessary knowledge, I would write a learned and vituperative book on the influence of the digestive organs on the theatre, and in my book my readers (I am postulating readers) would discover a long and, I hope, amusing chapter devoted to that form of art we call opera. If it were the custom to perform operas before breakfast instead of after dinner, do you suppose for a moment that Mascagni would have composed ‘Cavalleria Rusticana,’ Puccini ‘Madame Butterfly,’ Wagner ‘Tannhäuser,’ and Richard Strauss ‘Elektra’? If ever we are sane, we are sane in the morning. After dinner and (conceivably) wine, we are, so to speak, a little bit ‘above ourselves’: the world is romantic for a few hours, our worries are buried, our unpaid income-tax is forgotten. Already divorced from the realities of life as we enter the theatre, we are quite prepared to be carried still further into that grotesque land where passionate love, undisciplined and unveiled, appears to be the only topic of conversation.

Until a few months ago I congratulated myself that I had escaped seeing ‘Thais.’ True, I, to my shame, had heard ‘Cavalleria Rusticana’ twenty-seven times and ‘Elektra’ nine; but ‘Thais’—never. Then one evening, on entirely false pretences, I was taken by a friend to Covent Garden. They were doing ‘Thais.’ I suppose this opera belongs to that class of art which Nietzsche called Mediterranean music. It bored me, for I soon discovered that it portrayed the passion of love in its crudest and most naked form. Love was represented as a kind of sick frenzy—a long, feeble, and voluptuous cry of the flesh for satiety. It was a third-rate kind of love, and the characters on the stage were third-rate characters. The orchestration was lusciously sumptuous, the melodies were ‘melting,’ and the harmony glittered with the third-rate glitter of spangles.

I remember that as I came out of the theatre I began to recall to my memory, one by one, all the ‘grand’ operas I had heard. I could think of but a very few that were not concerned, in one form or another, with the passion of love; I could not recall one that was totally devoid of ‘love’ interest. And before I had reached home, ‘This accounts,’ said I to myself, ‘for my waning interest in opera. It is not a form of art for grown men; it is fit only for boys in their late ‘teens and early twenties.’

I told myself that of all the operas which exhibit the passion of love, ‘Carmen’ is the only one that does so in an endurable manner, for the music of ‘Carmen’ is witty and taunting, sunny and a little fierce. Bizet was not the kind of man to indulge either himself or any of the creatures of his imagination in long swooning ecstasies in which everything is told and nothing worth while is said. And I compared Bizet’s music with Wagner’s rich vulgarity of sex, with Richard Strauss’s conquering

brutality, with Puccini's lingering voluptuousness, and with Massenet's picture-dramas in which kissing lips, four times life-size, are thrown eternally on the screen.

'Are we, then, all dominated by this one passion?' I asked my friend, as we stood under a lamp-post at the parting of our ways; 'are we who compose music and write verse, novels, and dramas obsessed by a passion which, to most men, is but a passing, if volcanic, interruption in their lives?'

'No,' answered he, 'it is only composers of operas who wallow in the passion of sex. Consider our novelists and dramatists. Take "Hamlet," for example. The love interest there is of no account. Also "The Merchant of Venice," "The Tempest". . . .'

'Yes,' I answered, 'much of Shakespeare is immune. Think of the comedies and the historical plays: there is a world of different interests there. *He* doesn't surround you with a horde of mouthing men and prowling women. Then there are our modern comedies—Shaw, Barrie, and the rest. And Drinkwater's . . .'

'Novels also Frank Norris, Harold Frederick. . . .'

'Both American novelists!' I said; 'have we any English writers not . . .? As a matter of fact, even Mrs. Humphry Ward. . . . Yes, I'm afraid we shall find very few, if any. All novels, I suppose, are smeared with sex. But, after all, our writers have reticence and decency. They don't underline everything. They credit their readers with *some* imagination. But in opera,—No. I suppose it is because music so readily lends itself to hysteria and passion. The veriest fool can concoct musical frenzies. It is, I imagine, because opera is so full of passionate love let loose that it is held in derision and contempt by so many men of musical tastes.'

'But if you exclude love,' began my friend, 'what subjects would you put forward for operatic treatment?'

'I don't exclude love. Let it take its proper place in art as it does in life. All I maintain is that it should not be the all-absorbing topic.'

'But surely it is clear that many subjects suitable for treatment in novels, or poems, or in dramas, are, by their very nature, unsuitable for treatment in operas. You might, for example, write an admirable novel about the local politics of, say, Liverpool—the jealousies, the intrigues, the self-interests, the hypocrisies of all the people involved; but you could not possibly put that kind of thing into an opera.'

'Why not?'

My friend hesitated a moment, and lit a cigarette before replying.

'Well, it's obvious. The spirit of music is too intense, too elevated, too—well, sublimated, for low passions and mean ambitions. Music is so far removed from everyday life that it cannot express the commonplace ugliness of our natures, the common round and daily tasks of our existence. A man may conceivably express himself in song when he is making love, or even when he is seeking revenge, but it is ridiculous to expect him to sing,

say, when he is trying to bribe his workmen to vote for him. You remember how absurd it always seemed to hear Pinkerton in "Madame Butterfly" ask for a whisky-and-soda.'

'True, it is impossible for music to express the ordinary commonplaces of every-day conversation, but even the mean things, like the local politics of a large town, can be dealt with in a lofty manner. There are both tragedy and humour in a subject of that kind. You cannot turn a realistic libretto into music, but any libretto that deals artistically and truthfully with life—no matter how commonplace its subject may be—is fit and suitable for operatic music. After all, music is the most fluid of all the arts: it can be made to express any shade of any emotion whatsoever.'

'I wonder Indeed, I doubt it.'

'You are doubtful because it has never yet been done. And why it has never been done is fairly obvious. It is too big an experiment: a composer might devote two years' hard work to writing an opera about the politics of Liverpool, but in the present state of the public taste he would get no manager to stage it. Composers of orchestral and chamber-music all over the world are sitting biting their nails in their anxiety to be original at all costs. But not composers of opera. Few men have the courage of Debussy. Operatic composers seem more than content to work on the old lines—to get as far away from real life as possible. Why, even Rutland Boughton, who is certainly original and energetic, saturates himself with all the flappedoodleism of Malory and Fiona Macleod. They can see beauty only when it is far off. And yet what gorgeous operas might be made of such subjects as the harvest, the building of a cathedral, any of Sherlock Holmes's stories, war, religion, or almost any subject that comes into your head.'

'Our librettists and composers would have to change their methods.'

'Obviously. But why not? Isn't it time they *did* change them? Aren't we all sick of their post-Wagnerism? Let us have the before-breakfast opera instead of the after-dinner affair. Let our operatic composers cut down into the very tissues of our multiform life instead of merely exposing and dissecting exaggerated lust. Not until they do this will many of us regard them with anything but amazed contempt. Opera, as we have it to-day, is on its death-bed; it is dying through lack of nourishment—the nourishment of human life with its thousands of diverse pleasures and pains and ambitions and despairs. In all the stuff we have seen at Covent Garden this year a man either gets the woman he wants or he doesn't get her. And men and women of experience were asked to go, listen, and admire.'

'And our librettists—where shall we find them?'

'Perhaps we shan't find them—I don't know. It is certainly very singular that none of our poets of to-day knows anything of music.'

'Yes. Worse still, only half-a-dozen of our composers know anything about poetry.'

'So I'm afraid the time for the before-breakfast opera is not yet.'