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THE COMPOSER AND THE PUBLIC

BY STANLEY H. CLARKE

Musical art suffers much from the misguided attentions of two unwitting enemies. One is the superior person who speaks slightly of all the lighter and popular forms of art, and the other is he who is persistently bewailing the fact that good music is not wanted and that only rubbish can be popular. Perhaps we ought to say that these are two aspects of the same mistaken attitude, an attitude which is most mischievous in its effect on musical progress. There is indeed no subject in art upon which so much confusion of thought prevails as this question of public taste, and it is especially marked with regard to music. The majority of mankind, though possessing a certain power of logical reasoning, do not overwork that faculty, and many of us find a substitute for thought in the empty catch-phrases and faulty generalisations of others. Two of the hardest worked of these are the terms 'popular' and 'classical' music, which are generally used to denote music with a tune in it, and music without; or, as the above-mentioned cynics have it, bad music (which pays), and good music (which doesn't).

That this crude division of music is false is palpable to anyone of open mind who does not ignore facts. While it is true that a man would not expect to make a fortune out of symphony-writing (it is believed that Beethoven had not that idea when he wrote the C minor), it is also true that some 'classical'* music is very bad and some 'popular' music very good. Yet if the average person be told that popular music need not be rubbish, though it often is, and that much of the present stuff would be more popular if it were better written, one is put down as either a crank or a humorist. The ordinary professional musician, even more than the layman, is obsessed with the fallacy that because bad work exists, it exists because of its badness, which is false logic. In fact, the non-musical person's views are often refreshingly original and catholic, while the professional's training sometimes induces this rigid classification of music into real music on which he is fed, and 'rubbish' which the wicked public force him to play. Thus at one extreme we have the man with no pretensions to taste—whose natural taste is in fact healthy enough, but who won't go within a mile of a symphony concert because he thinks it is something beyond the ken of ordinary mortals—and at the other the over-superior musician, or enthusiastic student, who regards all music other than that by five or six great masters as of no account. We have known one of the latter refer to Sullivan's music as that 'comic opera rubbish.' Yet anyone who does not realise the exceptional genius of that truly great musician has not got the beginnings of a true musical education. It should not be overlooked that the first test of any work should be: Does it fulfil its aim, and is it suitable for its conditions? It is unprofitable to ask whether Sullivan should rank with masters of grand opera or the symphony, but it is a fact beyond argument that in his own inimitable sphere he was as great a master as any composer who ever lived: for he was that rare phenomenon, a great popular

writer who was both greater and more popular than others.

There are pieces styled simply 'waltzes' which are recognised classics and veritable gems of art. In fact, the dance music of Strauss, Dvorák, or Chopin is alone sufficient to refute snobbish class-distinction in music. Much of Grieg's music was not merely intended for a narrow circle of cultivated listeners, but for his countrymen generally, who adored and honoured him as a national hero.

Moreover, the common idea that the public is tyrannic in its demand for rubbish, and the publisher and composer slaves to its will, is not strictly true, as it does not accurately represent the actual conditions of modern commercialism. It would, however, be correct to say that the composer and public alike are often at the mercy of the big publishing syndicates. But this phase will be dealt with later.

The public like a certain type of music for a certain purpose, be it a waltz or a patriotic ballad, or a Coronation march. But within that type there remains ample scope for genuine artistic work and freshness of style—quite enough to show whether the writer be indeed a composer or merely a charlatan.

We readily admit that empiricism and superficiality in art are not so evident nor so immediately dangerous in result as in, say, bridge-building or taxi-driving (to mention two other arts), but they are as much to be condemned. Yet when a musician decries certain light music, people always infer that he dislikes it because it is not more serious or 'classical,' as they will have it. Some musicians may be guilty of this superior attitude, as we have said; but the true artist is not such a foolish or unreasonable being. What he does know is that much of this light music, whether it be accidentally popular or not, fails in its professed object: it is badly conceived and badly written. If a dance movement, it has galvanic energy instead of real vitality and exhilaration; if a love song, it reveals treacly, weak sentiment instead of real passion. (The reader who at this point naturally asks 'Why, then, is this music popular?' is entreated patiently to wait and see.)

Most musical comedies are poor not because they lack the grand opera touch, but simply because they are second-rate. They do not pretend to be grand, but they do claim to be 'catchy,' and when the musician knows that they could be ten times as catchy if they were written by artists who knew their job as well as a good engineer knows his, there is ground for complaint. It is time it was recognised that to give the keenest satisfaction and real pleasure it is not enough merely to fill pages of the score with quick 6/8 or 2/4 time, badly orchestrated and with the drums used in almost every bar. This is no doubt very effective, but there must be brains behind it. In fact, regarding tunefulness and brightness alone, it is no exaggeration to say that a page of Mozart, Haydn, or Schubert has more than the entire score of some of these popular creations. The greatness of Mozart is not alone in the Symphonies, but is found in the 'Magic Flute' and 'Figaro' also.

It is rightly assumed that melody is a chief factor in the appeal of music, but the importance of harmony is often underrated. The 'man in the street,' when he cries 'Give me a tune I can whistle,' thinks he has summed up all. He does not—nor can he without a composer's training—know that

* This word in relation to music sadly needs a rest, as it is so often misused. Who ever speaks of a classical picture or a classical novel in exactly the same sense? The ordinary listener dubs everything 'classical' which he does not like. What pedants call "classicism" is nothing but the transformation apparently brought about when the dust of years settles on what was once a romantic masterpiece.—Cyril Scott, in 'The Philosophy of Modernism.'

harmony is as much responsible for the effect of a favourite passage as mere melody. A tune is bound up with its harmony and is often quite at its mercy, and no melody can be heard entirely isolated from all accompaniment without suggesting some harmony, though the ordinary man is unconscious of it. To take an example quite at random: the initial germ of the chorus of that popular success 'The long, long trail' is more of a monotone than a melody. It owes its hold on the listener to the effect of one note repeated above the harmonies which slide smoothly from the major to relative minor key (a good old reliable effect).

Again: some fairly accomplished melodists are lacking in rhythmic force and variety, and the result is music which, though pleasing up to a certain point, can express only a limited vein of sentiment (mostly soporific). The happiest conjunction of melody, harmony, and rhythm is naturally only rarely achieved by one writer, and when it is, then we have men like Sullivan. Edward German, though he repeats himself unduly, is a worthy successor. 'Merrie England' alone rises above its contemporaries as Snowdon above the Traeth Mawr.

One of the most popular entr'acte pieces ever written is perhaps Elgar's 'Salut d'Amour,' and it is mentioned here because it aptly illustrates a point already made. We have often heard this work disparagingly referred to, or admiringly instanced as 'the sort of thing that pays,' by people who showed no knowledge whatever that such a piece differed in any way from the countless effusions of our hack-writers. They say, 'Ah! that was the young Elgar writing pot-boilers.' To which we would reply, 'Yes! but how superior to other people's pot-boilers!' To anyone of discernment the hand of a master is apparent in this trifling fragment. Let him who wishes to learn something of composition study even such a slight piece as this, and then turn to some of the many other effusions of a like purport. Note also that this little work is not likely to die for many years yet, despite its familiarity. Apart from the position of its composer, its sustained vogue is due to its intrinsic superiority.

This brings me to the problem of the relationship (if any) between art and profit.

Dismissing, then, the hasty and utterly false contention that popular music necessarily means bad music, I commence with the statement that the public, left to itself, has no taste at all either for good or bad. This is not a joke, nor is it merely a personal opinion, for it can be confirmed by appeal to responsible authority. First let me quote from one of a series of pamphlets recently issued by the Ministry of Reconstruction—that on 'Art and Industry.' The writer's name is not mentioned, but it is needless to record he is a practical master of his subject. He says:

'A study of the so-called "public taste" proves that the public is not an originating force by reason of its artistic demand. In matters of art the public never demands anything, because it cannot demand that of which it is ignorant: individual members of the public possess a sense of taste, and to some extent influence supply by the insistency of their demand at the shops they patronise, but they are comparatively few, and *not an organized force*; therefore, speaking broadly, it is fair to say

that it is *supply which creates demand*! Public taste is the exercise of selection of the offer made to it. The more the offer improves, the more the public is stimulated in its selection; but conversely, deterioration in quality of offer is not met by sustained and effective protest from the public. The public is enormously receptive and docile, especially in its desire to be in the mode. In spite, however, of the things it will accept because it is the fashion, the most outrageous of these are comparatively short-lived.'

The above is well worth pondering, for it is very sound sense. To a similar effect, though in a more vigorous and entertaining manner, writes 'Criticus' in the *Era*. After saying that 'because the public swallows every third-rate joke and fourth-rate ballad that is thrust down its throat, this does not mean that the public would not prefer to swallow something else—it only means that the public is very hungry,' he goes on to say:

'The fact is the public takes what it can get, and if it can't get anything good it takes something bad; just as a starving man will eat his boots if he has nothing else to eat. Given a diet of boots, a man will of course begin to distinguish, to say, "These are jolly tasty boots," or "These boots are a bit tough, all things considered." But the fact that he declares some of the boots he eats to be excellent fare does not mean that he is a boot-eater by nature.'

Again:

'The public has no special hankering after trash. There has been trash on the stage ever since the stage came into existence; but this is the first time there has been what you might call a Trash Monopoly, a Trash Trust, and that is the only reason why trash to-day is so unpromisingly popular.'

The writer concludes by saying that the manager who gives the public something better will find himself 'not a Samaritan, but a millionaire.'

Now, without pressing the latter statement, there is no doubt whatever that the above arguments are unanswerable, and those who repeat the parrot-cry that the public is athirst for rubbish are speaking neither sound art nor advocating sound business.

It is sometimes suggested that good composers are at fault in turning up their noses at popular forms of music; but there is little in this idea. Few composers nowadays are so indifferent to the chances of worldly profit. I commenced these remarks by decrying artistic snobbishness, but the real composer has never committed this fault. In the old days Mozart wrote musical comedies which are now classics, and Beethoven wrote dance-music without being ashamed of the fact being known.

What many producers have not yet grasped, however, is that they will not rouse the public to wild enthusiasm simply by giving them mediocrity; and so long as they are content with asking for the 'usual stuff that takes' they will not find a Sullivan. For the crux of the whole matter is that to produce outstanding work, even of a popular kind, the composer must cling to his ideals, and must continually nourish the artistic impulse within himself or he will get nowhere. But like the famous

goose of the golden eggs, he must not be interfered with ; nor must he be treated as a perverse young person whose best ideas should be suppressed, lest he deliver up symphonies when he is asked for waltzes. As Arnold Bennett says, 'To make the largest possible amount of money out of an artist, the only way is to leave him alone.'

SIR GEORGE GROVE : A CENTENARY APPRECIATION

BY W. H. GRATTAN FLOOD

On August 13 occurred the centenary of the birth of Sir George Grove, and yet the event passed by almost unnoticed.

George Grove was born at Thurlow Terrace, Wandsworth Road, Clapham, and his hundredth anniversary is worthy of being referred to, if only by reason of two outstanding works : (a) the projection of the 'Dictionary of Music and Musicians' and (b) the organization of the Royal College of Music. These works did not engross his activities, and we find him as editor of *Macmillan's Magazine* in May, 1868 (in succession to Prof. Masson), also as co-editor of the 'Dictionary of the Bible,' a work which stimulated the formation of the Palestine Exploration Fund. He also, for forty seasons, contributed the greater portion of the valuable analytical programmes of the Saturday Concerts at the Crystal Palace—a task suggested to him by Sir August Manns. In addition, he published a critical examination of Beethoven's Symphonies and Prefaces to Otto Jahn's 'Life of Mozart' and Hensel's 'Mendelssohn Family,' together with numerous contributions to various magazines. In fact, his versatility drew from Robert Browning a memorable letter in which Grove is described as 'the Orientalist, the Schubertian, the Literate in ordinary and extraordinary.'

Those who associate the name of Grove with the Dictionary which bears his name may be surprised to learn that originally he was a civil engineer, and served under Stephenson at Chester and Bangor—superintending the erection of the tubular bridge at Menai. He was appointed secretary to the Society of Arts in 1850, and, in the following year, married the sister of Dean Bradley of Westminster. It is worthy of mention that on the occasion of his receiving the honorary degree of LL.D. from Durham University, in 1875, the public orator laid stress on Grove's contributions to Biblical research and geography—ignoring his musical services.

As to his musical heroes Grove most honoured Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schubert, Handel, Schumann, and Brahms, but, strange to say, he rather disliked Wagner, whom he met, in 1877, at Dannreuther's house in Orme Square, London.

In addition to his honorary degree from Durham he received a similar degree from Glasgow University, and, in 1883, was knighted on the recommendation of Mr. Gladstone. He was made a C.B. in 1894, and was presented with his bust (by Mr. Alfred Gilbert, R.A.) on his retirement from the Royal College of Music—being the gift of the pupils—a gift which he bequeathed to the College, where his name is perpetuated in the George Grove Memorial Scholarship.

It is almost unnecessary to add that an excellent 'Life of Sir George Grove,' by C. L. Graves, was published by Macmillan in 1904.

Occasional Notes

John o' London's Weekly recently asked a number of well-known writers and a couple of painters how they stood in the matter of appreciation of music. The replies were illuminating. None showed any knowledge of the art, only four—Mr. Conrad, Mr. Galsworthy, Miss May Sinclair, and Mr. Augustus John—expressed any enthusiasm for it, and the remaining eleven were either indifferent or anti-pathetic. Miss Rose Macaulay's answer is amusing, and just what might be expected from the author of 'What Not.' She says : 'I have never learnt anything about music, and certainly am not musical ; but I like to hear it, particularly bad music. I know when it is bad, but still enjoy it. I don't mind good either, if the other is unobtainable.' Mr. W. W. Jacobs is quite definite in his liking for military bands, pianofortes, organs, and bagpipes, but gets a bit doubtful when classical music comes up. He decides, however, that he doesn't mind it 'if it includes an easy chair, a bright fire, and a good cigar.' But, as becomes a humorist, he adds that he can enjoy it without these accessories 'if it is very solemn and sad.' Mr. H. G. Wells takes the line Dr. Johnson took about a woman's preaching—it is worth hearing, but not worth going to hear. 'I like classical and some modern music very much—but not to the extent of going to the opera. Music has to come to me, and I don't want more than an hour of it at a time.' Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is annoyed by it—'especially in restaurants and other inappropriate places.' This 'especially' is promising, and when Sir Arthur goes on to say 'I always feel there is music which would move me greatly, but I never quite seem to get it,' we have an idea that the root of the matter is in him, and that some day he may see the light. Mr. Chesterton evidently couldn't be bothered. His wife wrote : 'My husband just asks me to inform you that he is so ignorant of music that he doesn't even mind it.' So that was that !

The gem of the collection however is the reply of the Honourable John Collier. He begins splendidly : 'I am a passionate lover of music.' Now here, we say, is the goods. It is quite refreshing to find a painter so appreciative of a sister art. We don't even feel that he is letting us down when he goes on to say, 'except when it distracts my attention from more important occupations, such as eating my dinner.' After all, there are occupations to which the hearing of music must give way, and feeding is one of them. Nor do we part company with him when he says : 'Also it always lasts too long ; musicians never know when to stop.' We still go with him, because a passionate lover of music who likes it in moderate doses is evidently a bit of an epicure—the kind of music-lover who wants it little and good, and with plenty of time to savour it fully. After this fine start however, Sir John comes down with a rich dull thud : 'Again, it has the disadvantage that one tune so closely resembles another that I never can tell them apart. Surely there must be something wrong with an art which shows so little variety.' There have been others who have found this difficulty. There was Lamb, and we have all met the man who knows only two tunes, one of which is 'God save the King' and the other isn't. And the writer once saw the congregation at a village church standing during the playing of the 'Dead March' in