Melody and Modern Music

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was Greece' and 'the grandeur that was Rome' almost the same ideation must have been at work as the pom-pom-ic impulse that moved Bantock to compose the music of 'Some for the glories of this world' in his 'Omar.' One can hear almost Keats's 'magic casement' opening, and imagine how to his inner ear there came the 'wauning' and 'ripple' of seas faery and perilous. And while we muse (*i.e.*, prepare and attune ourselves to compose) there is a gap of silence, a loneliness that is the invisible companion of beauty. In such moments either poet or composer equally may develop musical ideas, incapable of verbal expression, until conference has taken place. This need for expression may take the form of 'What on earth am I to say here?' Whether an idea comes as a vision or as a joke, first in music or first in scene or words, only conference can make it useful. The worst that can happen to a libretto is that it should be complete in itself, and then be subjected to a sort of vivisection. Conference is the only hope of opera.

There is another way. In the 'Omar Khayyâm' aforesaid the composer unpicks the silken quatrains of Persian Omar and Suffolk Fitzgerald, and weaves a rug which has the rich colours of the East. The result is good because there is unity. But as a rule the use of regular sets of verses results either in sing-song or the destruction of the poem's beauty. When one thinks of the regularity of 'John Gilpin' one really wonders how the bottle-necks got broken. But if our good friend Mr. Holbrooke set it, there would be no doubt about it. John would beat the Valkyries.

What I have written applies equally to the more or less robust type of opera that we need. Musical comedy is largely written on the stage. Comedy opera needs formal treatment, but also suggestion and discussion. *Pace* Wagner no man has yet lived, nor (with deference to Dr. Smyth) woman either, who could double the parts of author and composer.

MELODY AND MODERN MUSIC.

By J. S. SHEDLOCK.

To the sane remarks of Mr. H. C. Colles on the above subject I should like to add something concerning a few of his statements, also to refer to an interesting and unfamiliar letter. Mr. Colles does not believe—and I agree with him—that the question whether the lines of the post-impressionists are worth working on can be settled by any dogmatic expression of opinion. Such a course would lead to argument—*i.e.*, to a *cul de sac*. The theorising and arguing of Wagner only provoked opposition and deepened prejudice. His music, however, once the new in it had become fairly familiar, began to make a strong appeal. But to go further back. The famous false relation in Mozart's Quartet in C, which roused the anger of Sarti, and the opening of Beethoven's first Symphony, were contrary to long-established rules and in that sense new. Had these composers announced that all rules were fetters, and deliberately tried to shake them off, they themselves would soon have been forgotten. But only when the *δαίμων* within prompted defiance of rule and custom did they forsake the beaten path.

Again, Mr. Colles says: 'Our tonal sense has changed from that of 350 years ago; it may change again, or, at any rate, expand to a wholly unexpected dimension.' Judging the future by the past, there is surely every reason to expect further evolution on similar lines. 'The post-impressionist,' continues the writer, 'wants neither: he wants it to be abandoned, obliterated.' Perilous was the sea of sound on which

Schönberg went a-sailing, and he himself may possibly have now abandoned hope of obliterating Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner. Though an extreme case, it is a salutary warning not to waste time in argument, or in the words of the apostle, 'be no more tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine.'

In connection with Mr. Colles's statement that 'no theme, however rhythmic, will appeal as a melody unless the mind can correlate it to some previously-comprehended scheme of tonality and harmony,' some quotations from a letter 151 years old will, I think, be acceptable. It was written (June 2, 1765) by Benjamin Franklin to the Scottish judge, Lord Kames. In it he explains the scheme of tonality and harmony on which the old Scotch songs are based. He, however, first expresses regret

that Kames in his 'Elements of Criticism' did not fully examine the subject of music, and show how the pleasure artists feel in hearing much of that composed in the modern taste is not the pleasure arising from melody or harmony, but of the same kind with the pleasure we feel on seeing the surprising feats of tumblers and rope-dancers who execute difficult things.

Many modern pieces are to Franklin 'mere composition of tricks,' and he adds, 'People who listen to such music disdain a plain old Scotch tune.'

Every age has its pieces consisting of mere tricks, but even the good modern music of Franklin's day was based on a scheme which he did not understand, one in which there was art as well as nature, though Polixenes, in 'The Winter's Tale,' tells of an art:

Which does mend nature—change it rather; but
The art itself is nature.

Franklin continues as follows:

The reason why the Scotch tunes have lived so long, and will probably live for ever (if they escape being stifled in modern affected ornament), is merely this, that they are really compositions of melody and harmony united, or rather that their melody is harmony.* And then he adds:

Now the construction of the old Scotch tunes is this, that almost every succeeding emphatical note is a 3rd, a 5th, an 8th, or in short some note that is in concord with the preceding note. Thirds are chiefly used, which are very pleasing concords. I use the word *emphatical* to distinguish those notes which have a stress laid on them in singing the tune, from the lighter connecting notes, that serve merely like grammar articles in common speech to tack the whole together.

After some remarks on the power of memory, he explains the circumstances under which the old Scotch tunes were composed, namely,

... by the minstrels of those days to be played on the harp accompanied by the voice. The harp was strung with wire (which gives a sound of long continuance) and had no contrivance, like that of modern harps, by which the sound of the preceding could be stoppt the moment a succeeding note began. It was therefore necessary that the succeeding emphatic note should be in concord with the preceding, as their sounds must exist at the same time. Hence arose that beauty in those tunes that has so long lived, and will please for ever, though men scarcely know why.

* Franklin defines melody and harmony thus: 'In common acceptance indeed only an agreeable *succession* of sounds is called *Melody*, and only the co-existence of agreeing sounds, *Harmony*.'

Further on we read :

That they [*i.e.*, the old tunes] were originally composed for the harp, and of the most simple kind, I mean a harp without any half-notes, but those in the natural scale, and with no more than two octaves of strings, from C to C, I conjecture from another circumstance, which is, that not one of these tunes, really ancient, has a single artificial half-note in it, and that in times when it was most convenient for the voice to use the middle notes of the harp and place the key in F, there the B which if used should be in B flat, is always omitted by passing over it with a third.

'The connoisseurs in modern music will say I have no taste,' remarks Franklin, but he believes that the Scotch tunes afforded more real pleasure

... than is communicated by the generality of modern operas, exclusive of that arising from the scenery and dancing. Most tunes of late composition, not having this natural harmony united with the melody, have recourse to artificial harmony of a bass, and other accompanying parts. This support, in my opinion, the old tunes do not need, and are rather confused than aided by it.

Franklin may not have cleared up the mystery of the origin of the Pentatonic Scale, and his simple definitions of Harmony and Melody will naturally cause advanced musicians of the present day to smile. But the quotations will, I hope, be considered of sufficient point and interest to justify their length. The Scotch songs appealed to Franklin as melodies on the condition named by Mr. Colles. For the same reason Beethoven enthusiasts who had never studied the ecclesiastical modes might find the *Canzona di ringraziamento* in his Quartet in A minor impressive, although the apparent mixture of the major keys of F and C and the unexpected cadences would prove disturbing elements. The music could not make a full appeal to them.

Franklin's statement that 'the minstrels composed the old tunes to be played on the harp' is open to question. The word 'accompanied' which immediately follows evidently has the sense of *doubled*. The expression 'accompanying parts' in the last quotation of course means middle parts, those between the melody and the bass.

It is interesting to learn that Franklin was a frequenter of the opera, and there he heard ballads of a very mixed order. Even those of Arne would not have appealed to him with the same force as the ancient Scotch tunes.

Occasional Notes.

The thoroughness of the Germans in operatic matters, even in war-time, is remarkable. It may be remembered that some time ago a prize was offered for the best new German text of 'Don Giovanni.' The winner was the well-known baritone Scheidemantel. The Berlin authorities are however not content with this. They are arranging for a new production of the work this autumn, and asked Herr Scheidemantel to revise his libretto. Still they are not satisfied. Herr von Hülsen has sent the amended translation to a large number—several hundreds—of managers, singers, and teachers, with requests for further suggestions, as to which Herr Scheidemantel will finally decide. Some native singers who have to sing so much bad English may well wish that some managers here would pay as much attention to texts, though the machinery employed in the case of 'Don Giovanni' seems awfully cumbersome.

Sir Thomas Beecham is the most optimistic-pessimistic musician we have in our midst. He has a way of doing very nice things and saying nasty things. Having just given us in London, in the dog-days, a remarkable season of opera by which he has earned our undying gratitude, if not much cash, he tells us (in the *Era* of August 9) that, after all he does not love us. We meekly submit to the lash if only he will persevere, as we firmly believe he will, with the jam. Here are some of his *obiter dicta* :

The public don't know anything about opera, and care less. And why? It's the fault of the Press. There isn't a newspaper in the kingdom that doesn't devote columns to a new musical comedy or revue—that doesn't hail the revue star—who has arrived at first magnitude proportions after about a month's training in an 'academy,'—as a marvel of charm and cleverness, that doesn't laud the whole production to the skies until you'd think it was a chapter out of the Book of Revelation or an earthly vision of paradise. But when they come to the discussion of a new opera, staged at immense trouble and expense, and played by people who have devoted their lives to the subject, they immediately adopt a chilling and carping attitude, and dismiss the whole matter in a few lines. Somebody sang fairly well and acted badly; somebody else acted all right but couldn't sing; the orchestra and scenery might have been worse, and so on. Consequently the public get the idea that opera isn't worth troubling about. There's no centre of artistic life in London. There can't be. It's too big. There are too many distractions. It's not a city—you might as well call Portugal or Bavaria a city. London is nothing but a mob. It has no pride in its institutions—no character—no dignity—no anything. There are two publics for opera. There's the upper-ten public, who don't care very much about paying for it, but are willing to come and hear it—that is, after the first or second Act. To suggest that they might change their dinner-hour, and so arrive at the theatre in time for the overture, would give them a galvanic shock from which they would never recover. Besides their shortcomings in that direction, the aristocrats only really care for opera sung by a bunch of great stars—foreign ones, of course. Give them opera adequately sung by a good cast, a well-staged, well-balanced, artistic production, and they don't care a button about it. They're eaten up with the particular kind of snobbishness that appreciates the art of every country but its own. They'll fall down and worship every long-haired, unwashed foreigner that comes over here to bang the piano or scrape the fiddle out of tune, but they simply won't believe that English people can play or sing or do anything. Then there's the other public who like 'Faust,' because they know it; 'Butterfly,' because it's sentimental; 'Bohème,' because it's short and lively, and they don't want to hear any other opera ever. [What about 'Tristan,' which drew at the Aldwych?] But no opera company that respects itself can keep on giving the same old operas.

He concludes :

I am a confirmed pessimist about everything. Still, I believe that after a hard fight for five or six years, and the loss of an enormous sum of money, we shall manage to accomplish something.

So, after all, there is hope of salvation! The odd thing about this tirade is that it comes after a surely not unsuccessful opera season given in war-time.

An Association of British Musical Conductors has been formed. It has so far attached most if not all the best-known orchestral conductors. We have not seen its rules and regulations, but we understand that the main objects of the Association are to protect the interests of native conductors, and that its policy is not necessarily hostile to conductors of other nationalities.