The Reality of the Opera. Part II (Continued)

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JUNE 1, 1917.

THE REALITY OF THE OPERA.

BY COLIN MCALPIN.

(Continued from May number, page 203.)

PART II.

Our present contention is, then, that all the arts, within their several spheres of limited operation, bring with themselves something over and above the palpably real. For idealism, which is born of the imagination, is a call from the 'within' of reality. It uses mental means, and is endowed with spiritual powers far removed from the customary life of man. And an operatist merely requisitions the additional wealth of an intensive beauty; just as painting, with its superior warmth of colour, adds to the world of art a higher endowment than we find in sculpture, with its colder outlook and severer charm. Where, then, is the inconsistency of opera which simply seeks to endow the drama with an added wealth of expression?

But what of idealised reality does the accession of music exactly contribute to the drama? To answer this question is to bring us right into the heart of our inquiry. In the first place, music enhances the situations of the plot, heightens our interest in the characters, and, in a word, intensifies the inner aspect of the dramatic. Hence, even in legitimate drama, incidental music is introduced—a willing tribute to its inherent power to quicken the human elements of the play; though we are fully aware that much of the entracte music merely serves to stimulate conversation between the wearisome 'waits.' But it is more expressly the mission of music to bring out the 'in-ness' of the truth of the words, and to emphasise, more impressively than speech can possibly do, the secret nature of the hidden man. Shakespeare's eloquence may be nearer akin to the norm of general experience; but though it may express in unsurpassable language the mind of man, it cannot, and does not, express with the like intensity of music the surging passions and craving affections of the soul. Goethe, on hearing Schubert's setting of one of his poems, is reported to have said that never until then had he realised the full significance of the words.

So, although poetry may—as we have already seen—add an enriching 'something' to the bald reality of life, it fails in its limiting verbalism to express, like music, the clash of interests and the strife of wills. And what is more real than the strivings of the spirit and the instincts of the heart? What more natural than the tears of woman and the rage of man? Indeed, they belong to the very soul of music itself, and are of the essence of the drama. They are rooted in reality: they energise the centre of our life. And of all realities, none have so strong a claim to the subtle touch of art's more magic power. And just because of what music expresses with indubitable success is the opera intensely real. Besides, its very differentiation from the real constitutes its claim to the ideal. Art is higher than the real, in the sense of being a higher reality. Idealism is but the artistic version of the real; and the inherent ideality of music makes it peculiarly real. The function of music, therefore, is to adequately express the essence of reality in divinely-ordered, soul-inspired sound. Hence the alliance of music with the drama brings about an æsthetic enhancement of the real. It is a marriage made in heaven.

Now what the opera really aims at—but seldom achieves—is the raising of the drama, pure and simple, on to a higher level of exalted enthusiasm. And the part that music specifically plays in this conjunction is the reinforcement of just such moral qualities as make the drama worth the having. Music is the voice of the inner reality. It radiates from the central core of being. It expresses directly what poetry really only suggests: such ethical influences as render human nature wholly real. It expresses what we cannot describe in words. It lifts bald speech into the finer atmosphere of spiritual intensity. Indeed, music may be said to be just an extension of the divine-human faculty of speech; not, however, as to its intellectual meaning, but rather as to its spiritual force and moral passion-power. Music becomes, therefore, the idealisation of speech. Hence in opera the language of the drama is idealised beyond the common currency of words. And to idealise is to realise more fully. So true is this, that music has been known oftentimes to rescue even the most indifferent words from being hopelessly dull and commonplace. And this because it revealed the inner soul of thoughts imperfectly expressed.

Why, then, quarrel with the opera because it adds the 'even more' of beauty to our common speech? It merely exemplifies the upward trend of all the arts which, with increasing vigour, seek more and more to emphasise the æsthetic supremacy of the emotions. In fine, the opera might with relevance be said to be a kind of super-ideal drama. Yet, by reason of its added mode of æstheticism, it is other than the drama, for it inhabits a different realm. It lives its life of beauty on a higher plane, and is entirely artistic within its own peculiar province. Being, therefore, quite another kind of art, it must be judged by quite other standards of æsthetic criticism. The opera and the drama differ as do painting and sculpture, poetry and prose.

Again: the natural instinct of man is to break forth into song in moments of high exaltation, to become vocal on occasions of high moral tension—all such visitations of true inward experience as are most highly prized of art. This we find conspicuously true of all religious peoples. Psalms must be sung—they gain in vividness—they become spiritually vitalised forthwith. This, too, is the psychological meaning of spontaneous choral utterances. Topical songs at mass meetings—they give unity to the soul of the crowd; national anthems at national crises—they consolidate the people; the lilt of soldiers on the march—it gives them spirit. And what more natural, what more real, in this our deeper sense of reality? Indeed, we cannot with impunity antagonise the fundamental instincts of humanity: it is more than useless to inveigh against the necessities of our human nature.

This, again, is the meaning of the many sentimental songs which flood the musical market. They at least, with their strange assortment of angels, moonbeams, snows, and stained-glass windows, liberate such sentiments as would lose their lustre in the light of our cold, grey speech. Let us, moreover, be generous. Better these than no tone-visions at all. Better a pretty picture-card than no picture at all. For at least they bespeak a certain amount of imaginative activity however inadequate, and save from the dull, drab monotony of existence. What more natural, therefore, than that these inveterate instincts of the human heart should find their glorification in some more highly evolved form of art. So we hold that the momentous step from drama to opera means, not the extinction, but rather the extension of the natural.

But if to be properly ideal we find speech alone to be inadequate, what are the kind of words which most

successfully court the friendly offices of music? The question follows naturally on the foregoing. Now the words that are best suited to musical treatment are those which breathe the spirit of pure affection—such words as are aspirational, heart-felt, and soul-inspired. And yet not words, but their earnestness; not speech, but its sincerity; not language, but its fervency: this is the main business of the musical. It is with spiritual truth, moral reality, that music holds high commerce; for in music we speak from a plane interior to the intellect. And it is interesting to note, in this connection, that the young musical aspirant, who seeks to scale the precarious heights of musical invention, so often flies to the ancient psalms as material for composition, since they are so pre-eminently rich in personal experience and religious affection. Many also have been the Doctors of Music who have found, for their 'theses,' mines of wealth and funds of inspiration in these self-same flowerings of the spirit. And this because it is the varied vicissitudes and changeable conditions of soul that are most expressible in music. Hence, in the opera, the musical and poetic give and take in mutual consilience—the one sparing much of its formal and rigid classicism, and the other renouncing much of its circumlocution.

But that there is, and has been, much of both the unnatural and unreal in the opera, none but the raw, uncultured musician will for a moment deny. To cite but a single instance—the mad scene from 'Lucia di Lammermoor.' Here we have a 'number' which, from the first bar to the last, is at utter variance with the first principles of expression. It contains not a vestige of æsthetic semblance with the reality it purports to portray. It is wholly divorced from the fierce frenzy of a mind distraught. With its saucy, lyrical ineptitude, its fanciful trills and turns, the only madness it communicates to the audience is the madness of its false and futile setting. We do not, from the view-point of legitimate art, doubt so much the sanity of the cantatrice as the sanity of the composer. Being entirely void of the genuinely tragic, we would prefer that the artist practised such hilarious vocalism far from the enactment of so sad a scene.

That there are, and have been, dramatic inconsistencies which militate against the artistic reality of the opera, must likewise be readily confessed. Even so great a master as Wagner sins in respect of dramatic consistency. To take an example at random. Recall the protracted agony of a Tristan, who is seen lingering in the death-throes of a mortal wound for an unconscionable length of time. All we can say in mitigation is that the scene is only miraculously saved for the beautiful, and marvellously sustained in interest, by the red-rose passion of its music.

But that there have been attempts, in these latter days, to naturalise (strictly speaking) the opera, we are also aware. Debussy, for instance, seeks to revolutionise the music-drama by substituting the perpetual flux of declamatory singing of the recitative order for the pure, unadulterated melodism of the voice. But it must be owned that we hereby, in such a form of operatic art, lose the great artistic asset of legitimate tunefulness. And nothing that heightens the æsthetic interest of art, nothing that enhances the spirit of beauty, can with impunity be ignored. Besides, the voice is as much an instrument of music as, say, the horn or clarinet, and so claims respect for its peculiar characteristics and attention to its specific capabilities. It threatens, moreover, an ominous descent from the idealistic altitude of glorified speech to the more monotonous mode of elocution. After all, why should we be so fearful of soliloquy, or even song, in opera? Even in the plays of Shakespeare we find these introduced with marked effect. And when

we recall the vocal monologues and set songs in the 'Meistersinger' we cannot fail to appreciate their artistic possibilities. They are appropriate to the plot; they meet the requirements of dramatic action, and so are æsthetically fit.

But why not compromise, as in some of the earlier operas? Why not let speech be spoken, and songs sung? Now while admitting it to be a possibility, as in the 'ballad-operas' of the earlier school, we cannot but regard the method as a serious declension from the higher estate of music-drama. It represents a reversion to the original type, when the opera and oratorio were one. Besides, the constant and sudden change from the higher plane of musicalised speech to the lower plane of spoken utterance constitutes a very real and violent wrench to the artistic susceptibilities. The æsthetic mind resents what we might call such a contradiction in terms. A picture is either an oil-painting or an etching; it cannot be both. And now that the opera has arrived, a finished product, we instinctively revolt against the hybrid methods of the past.

After all, if the opera be not artistically real, we come across the following strange, psychological riddle. With but few exceptions, all the great composers have at one time or another dedicated their ripened genius to the opera. All down the musical ages the æsthetic efforts of the great musicians have been directed towards the furtherance of the higher fortunes of the music-drama. They have given of their best, they have expended time and labour in developing and perfecting this particular form of artistic medium. And all for what?—the prosecution of a great 'unreality'? Did they follow a false ideal in helping to build their stately palaces of sound? Surely its steady growth and changeable history, its survival and present-day vigour, are proof enough of its inherent life-reality. Only the true and real can withstand the shocks of time.

The opera was cradled in Athens. With the Greeks, the drama and opera were one and the same art. Later in its chequered career it shared its fortunes with the oratorio. But only until comparatively recent times has it emerged a self-contained and self-subsistent organism. Even when working out its own salvation, it had perforce to purge itself of many lets and hindrances. Many were the puerilities that had to be banished from the stage, before the reality of the opera could be reached. Think of the one-time prima-donna warbling her disjunct numbers against a chorus ignominiously thrust into the background to set off her vocal vanities. Other such instances cross the mind which space forbids us to mention. But thanks to such operatic reformers as Peri and Monteverde, Gluck and Wagner—to mention no others—who trod the upward path of progress, and helped to round off the music-drama, we now know what we ought to be about, and what ought to obtain in this connection.

But we must not forget that music itself, as a medium for thought, had of necessity to develop before it could properly meet the demands of dramatic truth. The musical language of a Beethoven, for instance, though admirably suited to symphonic classicism, was in no way suited to the peculiar claims of operatic realism. With the subtle lights and shades which fall across the soul of the actor, with the many moral complexities which war within the breast of the singer, only the finer nuances of modern music can be said to successfully cope. Depth of pathos, intensity of passion, are not so adequately expressed in music of an archaic persuasion, as in the musical terminology which boasts of a wealth of chordal possibilities. Mozart's operatic music, therefore, does not really

move us deeply, or fire us with intense dramatic enthusiasms. His is really the pure soul of a child, innocent, gay, and irresponsible; and not the richer voice of grown men and women engaged in a struggle with 'principalities and powers.' Hence it is only on the full tide of music's ample flood that we can launch with safety our operatic craft, freighted as it is with the infinite issues of character and life.

Now the realities aimed at in the true music-drama are rational action, logical sequence of events, and a proper apportionment of the details of the plot. There should be a real adjustment and true articulation of the incidental parts, like joints in a living body; naught should be 'dragged in by the heels'—as Mozart put it. Chorus and principals should, each in their place, contribute to the harmony of the whole; neither should there be a suspicion of pandering to the pernicious self-esteem of the soloist,—for only so can organic unity of the drama be maintained.

But more than this: there is the still deeper reality of earnestness of purpose and sincerity of expression, of fidelity to the instincts of the heart, and a fine disdain of spurious sentimentality. Hence the healthy demand for better plots and better words. If, moreover, our loves and hates, our joys and sorrows are real, then is the opera real; for music above all the arts realises for us the eternal emotions and affectional aspirations of man. And in wedding music to the drama, we do but add one reality to another, making reality doubly real. And since the essence of music is truth to human nature, the characters in the opera are rendered still more real through the enforced æsthetic revealment of the hidden life of soul. Hence truth and reality alike are found within the genus of the opera.

Further: it cannot be gainsaid that the most musical of the laity have ever followed with intelligent interest, and unalloyed pleasure, the rising fortunes of the music-drama, demanding more and more that it shall take advantage of its ever-increasing growth in truth and reality. The cultured are wisely impatient of shams and insincerity, and realise that the operatic ideal is in no way responsible for its heartless simulation. For we are fully aware that the reality we speak of ranges from the sensuous superficiality of a Balfe, through the scintillating theatricality of a Verdi, up to the dramatic profundity of a Wagner. Hence, despite its disputed reality, it has ever claimed the artistic attention of the master-musician and intelligent amateur alike. And this is no accident or chance, but the result of a definite and premeditated choice.

After all, we must, in matters of art, make appeal to the common verdict of æsthetic experience. Without being hopelessly committed to pragmatism, we are sufficiently pragmatic to believe that what ultimately 'works' with the music-loving public of the serious class, finally holds the field for artistic truth. And the sober love of serious opera is as strong as ever to-day. Besides, who, if not the operatic enthusiast, has the most right to speak of reality in this matter? The intrinsic virtue of any art is only known through loving appreciation. And the incongruity of the opera has never once been questioned by the thousands who throng to hear the master-products of the great. On the contrary, unless the canons of the modern music-drama are grievously violated, audiences will remain throughout the lengthiest productions absorbed in interest, and held—as only truth can hold—by the absolute realness of the work.

The fact is, they are appealed to by a certain kind or genus of beauty, sound and stable in its own peculiar province. From the very first bar of the

Overture—the 'Meistersinger,' for instance—the musical mind of the auditor addresses itself to a type of art wholly different from anything else in the known æsthetic realm. And it has its own specific scheme of beauty. Its standards of reference are within itself: its canons of beauty are within its own organic structure alone; for the opera has never claimed for itself the mission of mundane mimicry. It adds a higher truth to what of truth already is. It adds the spirit to the letter of the drama; and for this great addition we are raised, in a sense, from the letter which kills to the spirit which saves. We thereby vitalise the drama, giving a richness to its life, a wealth to its meaning. And, truth to tell, no drab literalist can rob it of its added glory and refinement of æsthetic life. Where beauty is concerned, man is venturesome enough to escape the thongs and trammels of the pedant. So, real or unreal, inquire of any of the numerous devotees of the opera, and we make bold to state that none but would confess that they were, for the time being, taken right into the very heart of artistic truth itself, nor felt in the least any theoretic incongruity when hearing the characters deliver themselves of musical utterance.

We hold, then, that the opera is founded on a very substantial rock of reality, against which all adverse criticism will break into harmless spray. Despite the ridicule of Addison and Steele, it has survived all the processes of experimentation. It lives, and will continue to live; for it has stood the test of stern experience. And so long as humanity finds an infinite interest in the fortunes of the soul, so long will the opera remain with its own artistic mission to the race.

THE PRESENT TREND.

BY ERNEST NEWMAN.

[We reproduce the following article from the *Birmingham Post* of May 15, by kind permission of the Editor and Mr. Newman.]

'This epoch has been more than once called critical rather than creative; not that a fair amount of first-rate creative work is not being done, but that the critical side of all artists has developed to an extent never known before, and has indeed, in some respects, outpaced the creative side, for many of us have dim visions of new things to be done in music that we find the creative musicians slow in realising for us. I think it is correct to say that until the last decade or two music worked out its destiny unhelped by criticism; and by "criticism" here I mean, of course, not the mere labelling of compositions as good or bad, but the viewing of a given work or a given tendency in its relation to music as a whole, and—which is the more immediate subject of this article—in its relation to art and literature as a whole. No man was ever written about so voluminously as Wagner; but nine-tenths of the writing was no more than a personal expression of liking or disliking of the music, and the other tenth was only argument for or against Wagner's special theory of the relation of opera to drama. Earlier than that, there was no criticism in the modern sense of the term—no attempt, that is, to see a composer as an unconscious part of a larger whole. People were for or against Schumann, for instance; but no one in his own epoch saw him for what he really was, the first German composer, as Saint-Saëns penetratingly said a few months ago, in whom German music became consciously and deliberately German. To-day we lay much less store by the criticism that merely commends or disapproves of this work or that, and