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THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular. JANUARY 1, 1870.

BACH'S GROSSE PASSIONS-MUSIK.

(ST. MATTHEW.)

By G. A. MACFARREN.

THERE is, perhaps, no musical composition extant wherein is embodied so thoroughly as in the present the implicit faith—at once childlike and mature in its simplicity and its depth—of a devout member of the Christian church. This is said with a full knowledge of Handel's *Messiah*, of the sublime conception it presents, and of the pre-eminent artistry it evinces. The two works, however, are as different in character as they are unlike in form, and they are as distinct in the nature and means of their expression as the two masters who wrote them, were in the constitution of their minds and the habit of their lives. It is not here to compare these masterpieces; and allusion is only made to the English Oratorio, in deference to the just position it holds as an illustration of religious feeling in this country. The music set to St. Matthew's history of the *Passion* is essentially an unveiling of the personal feelings of the composer, his vivid sense of the truth of the incidents it depicts, and his loving devotion to the divine sufferer, whose relation to himself is shown to be regarded as of the closest intimacy. It relates the facts with the vivacity of an eye-witness, or one, at least, who witnesses them by the second sight of firm belief; and it comments upon them with the affection of a participator in the benefits which have resulted from them, and who feels that his special welfare is due to their enactment. This great work is, notwithstanding the three public performances which have been given of it within the last fifteen years under Professor Sterndale Bennett's direction, but little known in England. In the hope of drawing attention to its infinite beauties, a sketch will here be offered of the precedents upon which it was modelled, of the circumstances that induced its composition, and of its peculiar structure; and an attempt will follow to describe, or, at least, acknowledge, some of its chief points of interest.

From primitive times it was the custom of the church to keep green the memory of the sacred history by a public recitation, on Palm Sunday and Good Friday, of those chapters in one or other of the Gospels which relate the circumstances of the *Passion*. To give dramatic force to the narration, the several personages who speak in the course of it were represented by different individuals, whereas, he who recites the story was, throughout, the same. Thus, a letter of Mendelssohn recounts how, at Rome, among the solemnities of Passion Week, in the Sistine chapel, in 1831, the portion of St. John's Gospel was sung on Good Friday, when the part of the Evangelist was sustained by a tenor, the words belonging to Jesus were assigned to a bass, those of Peter, Pilate, and the Maid Servant were given by an alto, and those of the multitude—whether the disciples, the populace, or the priests—were sung by the chorus. These choral fragments are defined as *Turbæ*. The whole was chanted upon so-called Gregorian tones; and its Roman use, in the same form and to the same music, has been from time immemorial.

It was a special design of Luther, to retain, in the Reformed Church, this primitive usage of the periodical recitation of the *Passion*. According to his desire, the simple manner of its intonation, by two priests only in his own time, was early amplified, and a German version of the text was printed at Wittenburg, in 1573, with music for the recitation, and introductory and final choruses, which, like the *Turbæ*, are harmonised in four parts. A more elaborated composition appeared in 1588, the work of Bartholomäus Gese, in which the part of Jesus is always set for four voices, those of Peter and Pilate for three, those of the maid and servants for two, and the *Turbæ* are written for five voices—a peculiar distribution, that would distinguish the several individualities, but little tend to the dramatic effect of the performance. Heinrich Schütz, one of the most distinguished musicians of his time—who, having passed some years in Italy and witnessed the dawning there of the modern lyrical drama, wrote the first German opera upon the Italian model—composed, shortly before the close of his very long life, music for the *Passion* as related in each of the four Gospels. The advanced resources of the art are applied in each of these four works, especially in the elaboration of the chorals or hymn tunes that constitute the final choruses. In 1672, the year of the death of Schütz, Johann Sebastiani produced a *Passion*, in which, for the first time, the part of the Evangelist, or Narrator, was set to original recitative, instead of to the old ecclesiastical Plain-Song, and in which, also for the first time, string instruments were employed, instead of the accompaniment being restricted to the organ.

The great advance that had been made in dramatic music, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, which was especially manifest in Hamburg, induced there the extended development of art forms in the settings of the *Passion*. So, in 1704, the voluminous Reinhold Keiser, who was then director of the opera in that city, brought out *Der Blutige und Sterbende Jesus*, a work to the same purpose of relating the Gospel story, but peculiar in being set to an original poem instead of to the biblical text. In this first occurs the term *Soliloquia*, to define a species of Cantata or intermixture of recitative and rhythmical movements, of which there are three specimens in the work, that consist of reflections, for a single voice upon the principal incidents. Another composition, by Keiser, appeared in 1712, which also was set to an original poem, wherein, however, the scriptural order of the story was more strictly followed than in the preceding.

Handel set the same text in 1717, and the first hearing of this work in England was at the Norwich Festival, in 1866. Telemann and Mattheson also wrote music to the poem; and, subsequently, some passages from it were interspersed in St. John's version of the *Passion*, when this was set by Bach.

When, in 1723, Bach went to Leipzig, as cantor of St. Thomas's school and musical director of the churches of St. Thomas and St. Nicholas, he found the learned and zealous Solomon Deyling filling an important church office in that city. This eminent divine, who had struggled into his position through the utmost difficulties of poverty, perceived the extraordinary powers of the musician, and had the happy thought of turning them to best account in the Church's service. The musical works above named, which were only the most notable among

many, have excited wide interest in the Hamburg celebrations of Easter. Still more was public attention drawn to the Dresden performances of the Roman Service, in which the singers of the renowned Italian opera, under the direction of Hasse, took part. Deyling deemed that it would be for the welfare of the Reformed Church to present in its Service some counter attraction to these popular celebrations of the Mass, and he deemed our Lord's Passion a worthy subject, and the season of its commemoration a fitting period for the fulfilment of his design. He proposed to Bach, therefore, the composition of a *Passion* in which the text of scripture should be rigidly preserved, but interspersed with reflective passages upon the principle of the Hamburg Soliloquiae, and further interpolated with pertinent chorals, of which the words with the tunes formed, as they do now, the first step in North German schooling, and of which, therefore, the congregation at large could participate in the performance. Here were to be combined the ecclesiastical, the artistic, and the popular elements, and their concentration in a single work was to be confided to the man of all others, in all time, best qualified for the task, whose competency was proved by the devout habit which fitted him to penetrate and expound the purport of the Gospel text, by the consummate musicianship which enabled him to bring all the appliances of art to bear upon the subject, and by the vast experience in teaching, accompanying, and elaborating the popular hymns, which familiarised him with the sympathies of the people and the capabilities of the tunes. It is alleged by Julius Rietz that the *Passions* of Bach were the first works of the kind in which the standard Lutheran hymns were introduced, and in the rendering of which, therefore, the congregation was implicated; but Handel's *Passion*, before named, offers apparent evidence to the contrary, and the constant employment of the same resource, in the Oratorios of Graun and others that immediately followed, shows that its use must have been general.

There are three *Passions* ascribed to Bach; the first, according to St. Luke, is unprinted, and its authenticity is questioned on internal indications; the second, according to St. John, is printed in several editions; and the third, according to St. Matthew, is the work under present consideration, and by far the most important of them all. This was performed for the first time at St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig, at the Evening Service on Good Friday, 1729. The extraordinary distribution of the score, which will presently be described, shows that extraordinary means must have been employed in this performance. If these means were adequate to the requirements of the work, and if—that chief of all means for its true effect—it was heard with religious and musical susceptibility to its beauties, the great design of Deyling must have been fully accomplished in its performance. After this the *Matthew Passion* lay in forgetfulness for a hundred years, and seems not to have been performed in public again until its revival in Berlin, under the youthful Mendelssohn's direction, on the 12th of March, 1829. This important event in the young musician's career—and, indeed, in the musical history of the present century—is fully described by Eduard Devrient, in his *Recollections of Mendelssohn*, with all its inducing circumstances; and the writer's enthusiasm for the work, his participation in that performance, and his

observation of the influence this has wrought upon modern musical culture, render his account most interesting. The success of the *Passion*, when it was awakened from its hundred years' sleep, led to its frequent repetition in different German towns, where it is said to hold the same popular esteem that Handel's *Messiah* does in this country; it led to the investigation of other works of the master, which till then had been unknown; it led to a general study of Bach, which has spread from the land of his birth to England and America; and it led to the establishment of the Bach-Gesellschaft, for bringing to light and rendering universally accessible a multitude of the composer's labours, of the existence of which the world had hitherto been ignorant. More than all this, in value to the musical art, is the fact that this second birth of the most important work of the master helped to mould the minds of the three greatest German musicians, whose activity dates from since the occasion of that Berlin performance; for the traces are manifest and unmistakable of the deeprooted influence of Bach throughout the writings of the departed Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann, and the now working Johannes Brahms.

The *Matthew Passion* comprises the 26th and 27th chapters of that Evangelist's gospel. The first Part proceeds to the 56th verse of the 26th chapter, and the second Part includes from the 57th verse of this to the last verse of the following chapter. The two Parts were originally separated by the preaching of a sermon—a point for particular notice, since proving how especially the work was integrated in the Church Service, and showing how strongly the Lutheran divines felt upon a subject upon which there is an unfortunate difference of opinion among English authorities of the present day, namely, the superior fitness of the church to any other edifice for the performance of oratorios. The Soliloquiae with which the gospel text is interspersed, were written, under the pseudonym of Picander, by Christian Friedrich Henrici. Their poetical beauty is not remarkable; they are notable rather for a kind of sentimental personalism, expatiating painfully on the physical sufferings of Jesus, that belongs more to the religious feeling of the time when they were written than of our own. These the composer has, seemingly at his own discretion, and for purposes of musical more than of dramatic effect, set either as soliloquies or concerted pieces; and in these, in a performance out of church, at least, the most attractive features of the work will be found. In some of them, where a solo part is intermixed with chorus, the former is defined by the author as the Daughter of Zion, or as Zion, and the latter as the Faithful; but the composer makes no note of these allegorical personifications, which, indeed, appear to be arbitrary, if not accidental, since applied to some and not to other of the interspersed verses.* It is obviously intended, however, that whether or not the name of such person be indicated, the solo parts throughout should represent the voice of the Christian Church, and that the chorus should stand for the true believers who are gathered under her wing; in this light Bach has felt and interpreted the passages. The chorals with which the gospel text is further interpolated, are selected from those in ordinary use in the Lutheran Church, and consist of such as specially

* This is stated on the authority of Rietz's description of the separate vocal and instrumental parts and of the score, all in Bach's handwriting; some printed editions contain these designations.

illustrate the several points of the story at which they are introduced. These hymns—the verses nor the tunes—can, unfortunately, never produce elsewhere the same effect which they must always have in Germany, where they are intertwined with the fondest and most intimate affections of singers and hearers from childhood. In England, for instance, we can but admire them, as we do those in *St. Paul*, for their abstract musical beauty, since they are to us divested of all those strong and endearing associations which spring from life-long familiarity, and of that inseparability of words from notes which connects every hymn with its peculiar occasion, and thus makes each awaken the household sympathy of a Teuton, with the incident to whose enforcement it is thus applied.

The work is written for two complete choirs, each consisting of solo voices, chorus, full orchestra, and organ. I depend upon the authority of Rochlitz and Rietz for stating that the chorals were originally sung by the congregation, that is, the tunes, of course, while the harmony was sustained by the two choruses, accompanied by the two organs, and sometimes other instruments of both orchestras. The part of the Evangelist, or narrator, is assigned throughout to a tenor, and it was Deyling's particular injunction that this should be the singer with the best voice, with the most articulate enunciation, and with the best declamatory powers that could be found—the Sims Reeves, in fact, of Dr. Sterndale Bennett's latest performance of the work, when the rendering of this most difficult part was, perhaps, the greatest manifestation that the public has yet witnessed of the rare ability of that distinguished artist. It belongs always to the singer of the first choir, as do those of Peter, Pilate, Judas, and the priests (written for basses), of the suborned witnesses (written for alto and tenor), of the maids who interrogate Peter, and of Pilate's wife (set for sopranos). The *Turbæ*, to use the ancient definition, or phrases for the multitude, are assigned sometimes to the chorus of the first choir only, sometimes to the double chorus, disposed responsively after the manner with which *Israel in Egypt* makes us happily familiar, sometimes with the two choirs singing and playing the same. The reflective pieces, or Soliloquia, are appointed to the solo singers of the two choirs in alternation, so that all shall have equal share in the responsibility of the performance. Let us imagine the scene that this distribution must have necessitated: a spacious church, invested with all the solemn associations peculiar to the sacred building, wherein the edification of hearts and souls must have been involved in the artist's design for the erection of columns and windows; at either end, the capacious orchestra filled with singers and instrumentalists, whose labour is rendered holy by the occasion, by the great human thought that has been brought to bear on the explanation of this, and by the sanctuary wherein it is celebrated; towering above each orchestra the lofty organ, whose time-honoured employment in church service has rendered its acceptance general as a symbol of worship; and in the great area between these galleries of solemn song, a vast public surrounding the pulpit, wherein the presence of the preacher gives sanction and significance to the whole, everyone imbued with the religious truths that are commemorated; and all—the little children who are learning to love the right, the women who are lovingly teaching them, and the men who are de-

fending mother and child in the fond task of mutual duty—all taking part in the choral hymns, lifting their common voice in the heartfelt testimony. Let us imagine this scene—which is no fabrication of fancy, but a feeble, very feeble picture of a once living fact—and we may, perhaps, be able to conceive with what impressions the congregation withdrew from St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig, at the close of evening-song, on Good Friday, 1729.

(To be continued.)

MUSICAL EDUCATION.

BY HENRY C. LUNN.

A PAMPHLET, called "The best method of developing the national talent for Music," written by H. L. Bellini, which has been recently forwarded to us, so thoroughly challenges our entire system of musical education in this country, that it may be well, perhaps, for its author to hear a few words on the other side. It will, we think, be unnecessary for us in the pages of this journal, where for years the shallowness of musical pretenders has been fearlessly exposed, to express our conviction that, both in many educational institutions and in private, those who profess to teach this art are so utterly incompetent for the duty that they can only maintain their place by carefully considering how they can hide their incompetence from their pupils. That this is tolerably successfully done in innumerable instances is evidenced by the fact of "finishing schools" being often unable to produce one pupil who has mastered the rudiments of music, whilst the professor of the establishment is calmly enjoying a comfortable income at the expense of those who have so innocently trusted in him. All this we have continually commented upon, and have even shadowed forth the obvious remedy for the abuse—that of compelling teachers to produce a diploma granted by a really competent board of professors; but in the pamphlet now before us the education of private artists is not so much discussed as the education of those who are desirous of appearing in public. At the commencement of the treatise, our author writes: "The failure of musical education conducted on the present systems (if systems they can be called) to produce a really *national school*, either of composers or artists, is manifest to all interested in the art." And further on it is stated that "this failure, though doubtless to some extent due to the absence of the best methods of imparting instruction, is still more owing to the want of *another* necessity, which is often entirely overlooked in dissertations on this subject, namely, the want of such a system as shall ensure to the student the *certainly of being brought before the public*." Before we answer this sweeping accusation against our present national school of Music, let us quote from a letter written by Rossini to the Director of the Conservatory of Milan. "The child," he says, "of a public musical establishment (the Communal Lyceum of Bologna), as I am proud to declare myself, I have always been the friend and defender of Conservatories, which must be looked upon not as nurseries for genius, God alone having power to bestow that privilege, but as fields for emulation, as great artistic vivariums, destined to supply concert-rooms, theatres, orchestras, and colleges." Here, indeed, the true mission of national schools of music is definitely laid down; and we should be glad if all those who imagine that genius is to be manufactured in Con-