Review: A Haydn Biography

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THE MUSICAL TIMES

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

SEPTEMBER I, 1882.

A HAYDN BIOGRAPHY *

By F. WEBER.

"THE difficulty of the task is to portray the developing and gradually maturing Haydn, seeing that of him and of the prevailing circumstances and influences little or nothing has, as yet, been brought to light. The Haydn whom every one knows is not Mozart's predecessor, but his contemporary and successor." Thus, in a letter to a Viennese friend, Otto Jahn expressed himself concisely, and no less truly, concerning a subject for the elucidation of which he was just then collecting materials with the intention of writing an exhaustive life of the composer. However much we may regret the fact that the great Mozart-biographer should have been prevented, by a comparatively early death, from carrying his design into execution, we must admit that the actual accomplishment of the task could not have been intrusted to worthier hands. Indeed, in the two volumes of his biographical work which have so far been published, Herr Pohl has once and for ever disposed of the difficulties pointed out by Jahn; and the earlier Haydn—concerning whom "little or nothing" was known, as distinguished from the "Papa Haydn" whom "every one knows," or professes to know—stands revealed in his youthful struggles and disappointments, his subsequent successes and growing fame, together with the "prevailing circumstances and influences," above alluded to, which have in any way affected the career of our composer during the period in question. It is essentially a *human* picture which Herr Pohl draws of his hero. He does not attempt to idealise his subject at the expense of historic truth, nor does he at any juncture of his narrative indulge in what frequently passes as "ingenious combination" on the part of some biographical authors—who, if they cannot discover a definite motive for certain manifestations of genius, supply one—unless there be a solid foundation of fact to support his surmises. In a sober, systematic, almost matter-of-fact style the biographer traces the career of our composer from a "singing-boy" to an orchestral member, and thence to an orchestral conductor, confined, in the latter capacity, during a period of some thirty years to the service and the residence of the princely house of Esterhazy. An uneventful life enough, so far, wherewithal to fill two good-sized volumes. But, in his apparently mere chronicling treatment of events, Herr Pohl betrays the subtle hand of an artist. By means of the admirable grouping of his well-digested facts, and of the symmetrical arrangement of his elaborate detail studies regarding the general art history of the period with which he deals, the author enables the reader to arrive at a most vivid conception of the whole personality of his hero as a creative genius, and a generous, kind-hearted, lovable individuality. On comparatively rare occasions only does Herr Pohl add slight but telling touches of his own to the portrait which otherwise he allows the reader to form for himself, tending either to add an expression to the features which might otherwise pass unobserved, or to point out a special significance of certain phases in the artistic development of the composer. Considering the almost marvellous industry and untiring care

displayed by the author in collecting, sifting, and finally selecting the materials for his work, it is scarcely surprising that an interval of six years should have elapsed between the publication of the first and the present second volume. With such results before us we have no reason to complain of being kept so long in suspense. Although the work will be complete only by the addition of a third volume, comprising indeed the most important creative activity of the master, it does not require the gift of prophecy to predict for Herr Pohl's "Haydn" a foremost place amongst the standard artist biographies of our time.

In the second volume of his work (a detailed notice of the preceding one will be found in vols. xvii. and xviii. of this journal) the biographer deals with twenty-three years of yoke on the part of Haydn as capellmeister to the Princes Esterhazy, embracing the period from 1767 to 1790. During this time the composer was but rarely permitted to pay even a flying visit to his beloved Kaiserstadt Vienna, the musical and intellectual centre of Southern Germany in those days, in order to enjoy the stimulating society of congenial friends, and to observe at the fountain-head the musical current of the age. Nevertheless, his isolation at Esterház, where at least he was the supreme ruler of a small but excellent orchestra, was, in other respects also, by no means the mere prison it has been described, wherein his genius languished until it was set free by the composer's visit to England. Indeed, Haydn himself would in after years look back with satisfaction upon the years of undisturbed, harmonious development of his artistic individuality spent at Esterház, under the surrounding circumstances of which he was "bound to become original." The significance of this fact may be easily tested by a glance at the numerous operas, written to Italian librettos, which Haydn produced for the gratification of the varied artistic tastes of his revered prince. That he had no mean estimation of his own talents as a dramatic composer is apparent from more than one of his utterances on the subject. Thus he remarked, on the eve of his life, to his friend Griesinger: "Instead of the many quartets, sonatas, and symphonies, I ought to have written more vocal music, as I might have been one of the foremost operatic writers." And to his publisher, Artaria, he writes, on another occasion, with reference to two operatic works just completed: "I assure you, the like of this has not yet been heard in Paris, and perhaps not in Vienna either; my misfortune only is my residing in the country." That which the dear master, at any rate in such moments, deemed to be his loss has been the world's gain. His operas are, one and all, cast in the traditional mould of the older Italian school, and are now of value only to the musical antiquarian. As Herr Pohl aptly remarks: "We must feel grateful, in the interest of the development of German music, that Haydn little more than touched upon Italian opera, and that his wish to go to Italy was not gratified. He would there, under most favourable conditions, have become a successful imitator, hardly a reforming leader; for he lacked that higher degree of dramatic conception, the characteristic delineation and objective insight, which are indispensable to the dramatic tone-poet." The number of compositions, apart from his operas, produced by Haydn during the period above mentioned, would seem incredible were it not for the fact that much of it had been written to serve a passing purpose—for festivities in one form or another were the order of the day at Esterház—and consequently bears an ephemeral character. Still, many a true gem will be found amongst them

* "Joseph Haydn." Von C. F. Pohl. Zweiter Band. Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel. 1882.

which has preserved its youthful freshness to this hour. Herr Pohl enumerates, as emanating from this period, sixty-three symphonies, twenty-one divertimentos, forty-four string quartets, sixteen concertos, twenty-eight sonatas for pianoforte and six for violin, thirteen pianoforte trios, five masses, and numerous cantatas, songs, and minor compositions. An analysis of the more important of these productions, dating from what may be termed the composer's middle period of his creative activity, is contained in a separate division of the volume, of which it forms not the least valuable and instructive feature.

Among the number of "symphonies" just mentioned, the famous "Kinder-Symphonie" (known in this country as the "Toy Symphony") is included, concerning the origin of which, although a trifle in itself, it may not be uninteresting to hear Herr Pohl's account. Haydn wrote this musical *jeu d'esprit* in the year 1788. "How it originated?" asks Herr Pohl—"well, the thing speaks for itself, and willingly we follow the tradition on the subject. At the festively decorated fair we see the country-people making their purchases for the house and family. Kitchen, cellar, the living-rooms, and their inmates: all are thought of. A motley throng there is; every one praises his wares, every one seeks and finds what he may want for himself and others. The lover thinks of his sweetheart, and she of him; the husband of his wife, and she of the children. And of the latter there are here enough and to spare. From merely gazing at the wonders around them they proceed to make a selection, and whatever produces a noise of some description they are sure to like best. One of the boys imitates the note of the cuckoo, another blows the trumpet, a third has discovered the screeching night-owl, a fourth exerts himself with a rattle; but the drum produces more noise than all the rest. Haydn (for he, as a matter of course, is amongst the crowd) is in the best of humours, but more than with anything else is he pleased with the children who with so much genuine enjoyment are meddling with his art. He buys every one his favourite instrument, and finally, for himself, an entire septet, for already the waggish spirit has been stirred up in him. Returning to his room, he places his collection in proper order before him, seizes pen and paper, and adds to the various instrumental parts, by way of cementing links, those for a bass and two violins. His work finished, he summons a portion of his orchestra to an important rehearsal for the coming morning. The rehearsal in question was an unusually protracted one, since, for the first time in their lives, the musicians, admirably trained though they were, broke down at the very commencement, and had to begin again and again, in consequence of ever-recurring fits of laughter. This was Haydn's 'Kinder-Symphonie,' the play of marionettes transferred upon instruments. The original 'orchestral' parts bear the superscription, *Sinfonia Berchtolsgadensis*, so called after the well-known little market-town in Bavaria famous of old for its toys." The story as here told is a pretty one, and bears repetition. It is, moreover, whatever the extent of its literal accuracy may be, eminently characteristic of the composer's naïve humour and kindly simplicity of heart. The mere fact of the "Toy Symphony" having been produced at this period goes far to prove that the "abject slavery" wherein the master is supposed to have been held at Esterházy had at all events not succeeded in crushing that spirit of playful humour which Haydn himself defines in the words, "one is seized by a certain waggishness which cannot be subdued." Indeed, so far from being monotonous and dreary, the master's life at the residence of the Esterházy abounded in artistically stimulating

influences and occurrences, while his chief troubles would seem to have arisen at his own domestic hearth.

The reader will be glad also to hear, through Herr Pohl, that the current accounts of Haydn's poverty up to an advanced age are much exaggerated: "Haydn's pecuniary position, although by no means commensurate to his high merit as an artist and to the services he was expected to render, has been far too gloomily represented. In addition to his income as capellmeister, many of the sums realised by his compositions can be accurately ascertained. Up to the end of the seventh decade of the past century we cannot, it is true, state with certainty that Haydn derived any pecuniary benefit whatever from compositions of his published at Leipzig, Berlin, Speyer, Amsterdam, Paris, and London. After that period, however, we find out in many cases how Haydn managed the matter, and how well he understood the business side of the question. Let us consider, in the first place, his connection with Artaria. Thus Haydn received for three pianoforte trios ten ducats each 'as usual'; for twelve minuets with trios, twelve ducats (= 4½ florins); for the well-known Capriccio in C, twenty-four ducats ('the price is somewhat high,' Haydn adds, but assures Artaria that he will make his profit by it nevertheless). For six pianoforte trios he was paid 300 florins. For six string quartets (1784) Haydn agrees to accept likewise 300 florins, although 'I usually received more than 100 ducats when publishing by subscription, which sum Herr Willmann (of Paris) has also offered to pay me.' For the following six quartets (1788) 'the old price of 100 ducats remains.' These payments were for those days by no means inconsiderable, although on one occasion Haydn, in a letter to Artaria, complains of 'not being paid sufficiently,' and of being obliged, in consequence, to seek to derive some further remuneration from his pieces directly they had left the engraver's hands, he having a greater right thereto than the middle-men in the trade. . . . It was a matter of paramount necessity with publishers in those days, when copyrights were as yet unknown, to protect their interests as much as possible. Hence their first object was to make sure of their composer. Documents framed for that purpose are still in the possession of the firm of Artaria. In one of these Haydn engages (1790) to hand over to that firm the original manuscript of three pianoforte trios, with all rights of sole proprietorship, for the sum of 135 florins, upon condition, moreover, that the composer should 'neither here nor elsewhere dispose of them to others.' Shortly after his having become connected with Artaria (1780), Haydn corresponded also with Paris firms (Willmann, Nadermann, Sieber), to whom he sold his symphonies, quartets, and pianoforte pieces, likewise at a good price, as also with London publishers (with Forster, who, in the year 1786, paid him £70 for several works; Longman and Broderip, and with Bland). These were in many instances the same works over again, and from which he thus derived a threefold profit. . . . If, nevertheless, Dies maintains that Haydn had been in want up to his sixtieth year, the statement is, to say the least, exaggerated. Griesinger, however, goes still further in maintaining that Haydn had, up to the period of his departure for London, either derived no benefit at all from his compositions or that they had been considerably underpaid; an assertion which the above items sufficiently disprove. Griesinger likewise tells us that on the eve of his departure the composer's available capital scarcely amounted to two thousand florins. This we can readily believe, and rather question whether the composer really possessed as much. For we need only call to mind the kind of domestic management

on the part of his wife, the frequent calls made upon Haydn's purse for the support of his poor relatives, upon one of whom, a most worthless fellow, he expended by degrees a sum of over five thousand florins! There was, moreover, his invalid brother Johann, whom likewise he supported unceasingly." The kind, generous-hearted master might well be occasionally in want himself who so bounteously administered to the wants of others!

"We have seen before," continues the biographer in his vindication of the far more favourable view he takes of Haydn's position generally, while in the service of the Esterházy family, as compared with that hitherto accepted—"we have seen before that Haydn himself acknowledged the advantage of having an orchestra always at hand; it was to him a living score where he might reject or add at pleasure. He, consequently, rarely surrendered a work of his for publication before he had subjected it to this most sure test. Thus, in sending a series of symphonies to Artaria, he expressly remarks: 'I have myself tried them over with my orchestra.' And on another occasion: 'The quartets, which I have had played through this very day, will be forwarded to you.' In the absence of a public, properly so called, Haydn had to attach the more weight to the approval of his orchestra, whose sympathy supplied him with the stimulating element necessary for his artistic creations. And, surely, happy hours they were to him of pure gratification and satisfaction when he could read in the face of his little army of subjects the effect he desired to be produced by some new work. If then his Prince, too, approved of it, his work had not been done in vain, and mightier and mightier still grew the impulse to widen and to firmly establish the self-created paths. Like his brother Michael, the Abbé Vogler would often remark that if Haydn was to be envied it was for his position, wherein, with his talents, he was bound to become a great man. There can be no doubt, too, that our composer himself felt, on the whole, happy in the situation in which he had been placed." Nor does the author fail to make good this assertion in the course of his more detailed account of his hero's position, of which we will now endeavour to give a brief outline.

Of Esterházy itself, where our composer spent so considerable a portion of his life, a most glowing description is given by his biographer. Originally a small mansion, situated in the district of Oedenburg (Lower Hungary), in a marshy region, and frequented by the members of the princely family only during the hunting season, it had been converted by Prince Nicolaus into a palatial residence of truly royal splendour and magnificence. It had been the ambition of this pleasure-loving prince to create in his Hungarian home a second Versailles, and even fastidious French travellers of the period have freely borne testimony to his signal success in this respect. "Perhaps, with the exception of Versailles," one French eye-witness writes, "there is no place in all France which in respect of splendour could be compared to this." And in a similar manner a French ambassador, Prince Rohan, expressed his admiration, exclaiming: "In Esterházy I have found Versailles again." From the imposing and magnificently decorated principal mansion, designed in Italian style, the visitor to Esterházy beheld, extending for miles in the rear of the building, luxuriously laid-out gardens and pleasure-grounds emerging into an extensive wood, rich in varied foliage, and populated with deer and pheasants, an occasional hermitage or fanciful edifice inviting to rest or shelter. Adjoining one of the wings of the main building stood the opera-house, and on the opposite side the marionette theatre, the latter affording a species of diversion

much in vogue in those days. A restaurant, too, had been provided, where the artists were wont to assemble, and from whence they could stroll through the various hothouses filled with all kinds of exotic plants. The opera-house, which again was decorated and furnished in excellent taste, was capable of holding some 400 spectators, among whom the princely officials and minor servants formed a regular contingent. Here, performances took place daily during the Prince's stay at Esterházy, opera being produced twice every week, and drama or comedy during the remaining days. A list, appended by Herr Pohl to the present volume, of the performances given at this magnificent private establishment during one year (1778) sufficiently testifies both to the relative excellence of these representations, and the enormous expenditure they must have involved. The *personnel* of the opera consisted of five or six male and as many female singers (mostly Italians), who, together with the members of the orchestra and others connected with the theatre, resided in a building specially set apart for them: "The orchestra numbered, on the average, from sixteen to twenty-two members, there being two or at most three first and as many second violins, two violas, two contrabasses, one violoncello. Among the wind instruments were flutes, oboes, bassoons, and French horns (of the latter generally four), and, according to requirements, trumpets and kettledrums (clarinets were employed only during the years 1776-78). The rehearsals were held in the morning, performances before the Prince or his guests took place in the afternoon; mixed 'academies' (vocal and instrumental) sometimes in the evenings. On specially festive occasions the grand saloon was used for the 'table-music,' an institution which, according to the then prevailing custom, existed also at the imperial court. At smaller family dinners one or two singers or virtuosi were heard in the private apartments. For his own person the Prince reserved the string quartet, which performed exclusively in the private music-room, Tomasini, the Prince's favourite, invariably occupying the principal desk. Here also it was where the Prince, surrounded by his most intimate friends, was wont to play those pieces for the 'baryton' specially composed for him by Haydn, Tomasini, Kraft, and Pichl." The above modest proportions of the orchestra should, as Herr Pohl also points out, be borne in mind if we would gain a proper estimate of Haydn's earlier symphonies, which in the hands of an orchestra of modern dimensions are apt to become entirely crushed. "The uniformity of life in general at Esterházy was frequently interrupted by visitors of the highest distinction, whose presence gave rise to all manner of private entertainments or brilliant festivities. On such occasions, as well as on the specially commemorative days and anniversaries of the princely family, music invariably took the leading part, and it was Haydn who had to arrange and provide for everything. He had, moreover, to superintend the rehearsals of the Opera and of the orchestra, to study their parts with the singers, to replace such artists as were leaving the company, to settle disputes that arose amongst them or to check their arrogant pretensions, to be their petitioner with the prince when in need; nay, even to look after the prompter. 'Concerning the music and *acteurs*, and likewise the prompting,' says one of the regulations of the time, 'Kapellmeister Haiden will do the needful, and know how to uphold order.' Burdened with such manifold and harassing duties, one may well be surprised how our composer was yet able to write, at the same time, such numerous works, and to retain for himself the necessary predisposition and cheerfulness." Haydn's

position also occasionally involved the obligation of his giving musical instruction in one or the other of the families related to his prince. That his services in this direction, however, were not unrequited may be gathered from the fact that on one occasion Count Erdödy, "as a token of his pupil's satisfaction," presented the master with a carriage, and a pair of horses to boot, for the maintenance of which the Prince generously granted him the necessary means, and of which Haydn made frequent use afterwards. It must be remembered also that it was only during the Prince's stay at Esterházy that the full exercise of our composer's duties was called into requisition, although, owing to the former's predilection for his "Hungarian Versailles," his annual residence there was sometimes considerably prolonged, much to the dismay of the artists, as has been so touchingly demonstrated by their beloved conductor and advocate in his "Farewell" symphony. Readers interested in the true origin (of which so many different versions are extant) of this characteristic piece we must refer to the circumstantial narrative given by Herr Pohl. Assuming an acquaintance with the symphony itself, it will suffice to quote the concluding paragraphs of the story as here given, and which, in connection with our above remarks, will easily explain its general purport. One by one, with downcast looks, the performers have put out their lights, and, in accordance with the instructions contained in their parts, have left the orchestra. "The few remaining candles," continues the narrator, "are extinguished, the last violinist has marched off, and Haydn, too, is about to follow, when the Prince, who has watched the proceedings at first with some estrangement, walks up to him, shaking him by the hand, and saying with some emotion: 'I think I have discerned your intention in all this; the musicians are longing to go home. Well, then, to-morrow we will get ready.'" Many of the artists, it should be added, had their families living at some distance from Esterházy. "In the anteroom, full of expectation, the orchestral members await the arrival of their chief, whose beaming looks, as he enters, soon tell of the happy issue; and it is needless to depict the scene which ensues, to describe how every one, the bachelors included, are thronging around him to press his hands, and how Haydn himself is scarcely able to hide his emotion—a happy father among happy children." The affectionate intercourse which existed between the composer and his orchestra was indeed one of the chief elements which sweetened his existence at Esterházy. The vicinity of the place, too, afforded many delightful walks, of which the master would naturally avail himself as often as he could; he whose mind, like that of every truly creative artist, was so susceptible to the beauties of nature. "They must," says his sympathetic biographer, "have offered him a compensation for the many toilsome hours which his position brought with it, a compensation, too, for the lack of domestic happiness; they must have inspired him with that blissful innermost tranquillity which so eloquently speaks to us in many a one of his devotion-inspiring adagios."

These then were, briefly stated, the surrounding circumstances in which our composer moved during his twenty-three years' residence at Esterházy. If they were to him, in a sense, years of imprisonment, it must be admitted that the prison was admirably suited to the harmonious development of an individuality such as his. Placed in the midst of an artistic life such as rarely, if ever, gathered around the private establishment of any other wealthy patron, constantly breathing the stimulating atmosphere of art-enterprise in one form or another, himself at the head of a small but excellent and most devoted orchestra, the honoured servant of a prince of refined

tastes, who took a pride in his already famous capellmeister—he was at least free to devote himself entirely to his art, and to mature in the quietude of his chamber those artistic impressions which his mind could not fail plentifully to receive even during the exercise of his certainly arduous professional duties. Haydn, with all these advantages, was, in fact, in an exceptionally favoured position as compared with many another musician of talent, and perhaps genius, of his time, whose life was ingloriously spent in the obscurity of the retinue of one of the many art-affecting noblemen of the period. Nor were the proud words, written by our composer during his very stay at Esterházy, and addressed to a Viennese society, viz.: "The free arts, and the fine science of composition, tolerate not the fetters of handicraft; free must be both mind and soul"; nor were these uttered by a man who was not himself conscious of the possession of such freedom as he demanded for the proper exercise of his creative faculties. It was time that the erroneous impressions which so long prevailed concerning Haydn's position with the princely house of Esterházy were removed, and the latter's share in the career of our composer placed in its true light. This has now been effectually done by Herr Pohl, who has succeeded in presenting in a new and altogether more cheerful aspect the twenty-three years of the composer's career with which he deals in the present volume of his admirable work. For this fact alone all lovers of dear "Papa Haydn" will feel grateful to him, while it furnishes another proof of the accuracy of Otto Jahn's assertion, viz., that "concerning the earlier Haydn little or nothing" had hitherto been known.

We have already drawn attention to Herr Pohl's interesting analyses of the works produced by the composer during the period covered by the present volume, as also to the valuable contributions to the general art-history of the time which it contains. We can only regret that space does not permit us further to enlarge upon these topics at present. The promised final volume—if indeed Herr Pohl find himself able to compress his material into that space—will be looked forward to with the greater interest by English readers since it will embrace the two important visits of the composer to London, whereof an attractive account has already been rendered by the author some fifteen years ago in his monography, "Haydn in London." Its appearance, and with it the completion of one of the best standard biographies of the world's great masters, may also afford us an opportunity of reverting more especially to the results of the extraordinary creative activity manifested by a composer whose name is justly inscribed in history as that of the father of the string-quartet and the symphony.

THE GREAT COMPOSERS

By JOSEPH BENNETT.

No. XII.—ROSSINI (continued from page 432).

M. AZEVEDO gives some interesting particulars—for which he claims the best authority—with regard to the symphony and quartet placed by some writers among Rossini's earliest works. The "symphony," we are told, was nothing more than an overture (*sinfonie*) composed in the style of that to Mozart's "Die Zauberflöte," with which the young Italian was enchanted. Upon the matter of the quartet and a companion work, let M. Azevedo himself speak:—

"With regard to the quartet for strings it appears, from investigation in the best quarter, that it was only an arrangement for double-bass, accompanied