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Some Considerations of the Effect of Orchestral Colour Upon Design and Texture in Musical Composition

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MAY 18, 1909.

J. A. FULLER MAITLAND, M.A., Esq.,

IN THE CHAIR.

*SOME CONSIDERATIONS OF THE EFFECT OF
ORCHESTRAL COLOUR UPON DESIGN
AND TEXTURE IN MUSICAL COMPOSITION.*

BY H. P. ALLEN, M.A., MUS. D.

THE subject of this paper is one which deserves some attention. With it is bound up some of the remarkable developments of the present day in Germany and in France, to say nothing of our own country (so deliberate and cautious in all its proceedings), developments which have caused us wonder and amazement, mingled with some sorrow, and which undoubtedly have set us thinking as to the attitude we should adopt towards them and as to our hopes of a future state. We seem to be arriving at a period in our musical existence when form and structure, balance and calm reasoning, are of little account as compared with the creation of impressions and atmosphere by means of what we call colour.

These developments in recent years have been so rapid and so fearless that we find it almost impossible to believe that most of us, a few years ago, considered the classical forms as the final thing in music, and the sounds which clothed them as the last word in musical expression.

To-day we seem to be within sight of an almost new musical language, capable of expression in ways undreamed of, and producing impressions so extraordinary and so unconventional that we wonder if we hear aright; a language in which new forms of thought seem to find their expression, and in which the almost unintelligible becomes interesting.

What has produced this? In what direction does it tend? What part in this development has orchestral colour had, and what are its functions?

By colour is meant that recognisable quality of sound which, apart from its pitch, intensity or position in a melodic phrase, produces its effect. It is an important point to consider in what way does the quality of the sound of an instrument or a voice affect musical expression, or does it affect it at all?

Has a melodic phrase, played on three different instruments, such as the flute, oboe and clarinet, the same musical expression even though it be played in identically the same way as regards phrasing, rhythm and intensity? There is, of course, as much difference as there would be between three parallel lines coloured red, blue and green. It would be difficult to mistake them; the uninitiated person might get wrong as to which instrument was which, but he would assuredly know they were three different instruments with entirely different qualities. Again, in the case of stringed instruments or of voices, it requires but little power of discernment to distinguish between high notes played on a violoncello from low ones played on a violin, or between the high sounds of a tenor voice and the low sounds of a boy's voice. Although the production may be practically the same, each of these sounds has a particular character or quality which can be readily appreciated, and which can be used for the special purpose of the moment to produce an effect in which quality plays the most important part. Many examples of the use of quality in this way are to be found. Of course, in the case of groups of stringed instruments or of voices, the quality is much more alike and continuous and therefore more subtle, yet there can be but little difficulty in distinguishing it.

This appreciation of the quality of sound in vocal music is very evident in the works of the early polyphonists, perhaps more than in any others in those of Palestrina, where every possible gradation of tone is used with the most wonderful sense of fitness, and the contrasting qualities of the voices by means of high and low sounds, and particularly by the crossing of the parts, produce the ethereal effect and delicate waviness of the most beautiful etching. This kind of composition, in a vocal medium, has many points of similarity to work of the black-and-white artist, whose medium is a limited one, and whose contrasts depend upon quality of line and upon his powers of shading.

The power of appreciation of the quality of sound is a fairly simple thing where the medium is limited and where a few lines only are concerned. But in the case where—as in the modern orchestra—every conceivable quality of sound is mixed together and presented in every kind of rhythm, and in the combination of every kind of motion of parts, the power to analyse these complexities has been a very rare gift. An orchestral colour-sense, if we may so call it, can only be

developed in an orchestral surrounding. In the early days of the beginnings of orchestral music composers were too much taken up with the problem of an instrumental style, or with the delight of a new-found vehicle of expression which could equally supply a much-needed contrast or provide a support to the voices, to give much attention to the more subtle appreciation of the various qualities of the instruments they employed. At the same time, in their choice of instruments and in their use of them, they often showed that they were not insensible to the subtle influence of tone-colour. Monteverde has given us unmistakable evidence of his appreciation of the quality of some of his instruments as especially suited to certain members of the *dramatis personæ* in his "Orfeo." His grouping of instruments for the sake of variety and dramatic effect is a sure indication of his feeling for orchestral colour and contrast. The increase in the resources of the stringed instruments by his invention of the "tremolando" was of the greatest importance. For his time he displayed remarkable insight into the possibilities of instrumental colouring, and nothing is clearer than his desire to colour his picture in a way as new and as striking as possible. He lived in the atmosphere of the orchestra, and was one of the first to realise its possibilities and to pave the way to the astounding developments of modern times.

In a tentative way, Heinrich Schütz, one of the most important and fascinating people in the history of music, used his instruments, few in number, with very frequent regard to their suitability as a means of illuminating his text. In the second book of *Symphoniæ Sacræ* there is a Magnificat for soprano solo, with accompaniment for a bass, with pairs of instruments selected according to his idea of their fitness for the words at the moment. At the words "hath rejoiced" two violins are used in a fairly high register. At the more dignified words "and His mercy is on them that fear Him," the accompaniment is for two violas or two trombones. Two cornetti or trumpets suggest the feeling contained in the words "He hath showed strength with His arm"; with a considerable sense of humour the mighty are put down from their seat to the accompaniment of two piccolos (flautino), and the emptiness to which the rich are subjected is left with nothing but the figured bass. Altogether this appears to be a remarkable example of instruments being selected for their particular qualities, and for which, in each case, music has been written to bring out the special character of the instrument. Another remarkable example is the setting to the words "O Absalom," with an accompaniment for four trombones. Two violins may, however, be substituted for the two top trombones.

The Symphonizæ Sacræ are full of wonderful indications of the desire Schütz had to get a means of expression with an appropriate and striking colouring to bring out the meaning of his words, and to create an impression of fitness in the surroundings. There are points of a similar kind in the "Resurrection," and in addition some very beautiful examples of vocal colouring, particularly at the words "und seid traurig?" The enormous influence that Heinrich Schütz had upon Bach cannot be forgotten. Many of the wonderful touches in the "S. Matthew Passion music" are suggested in the Schütz "Passions," and it is very interesting to see how, in some of the weak places in the earlier composer's work, Bach saw his way to an improved setting. It is not for a moment suggested that Bach helped himself to the inventions of Schütz, but that he built on his foundations and carried his structure to amazing heights. In sheer sincerity and simple-mindedness the use Schütz made of his instruments is unrivalled. Feeling for orchestral colour as we know it at the present day had but little recognition in those early days of instrumental music, but there was an undoubted appreciation of instrumental characteristics, although it was a very limited one. As has already been pointed out, the composers of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were naturally more concerned in the development of an instrumental style than in the delicate manipulation of the colouring. They had still to find out the possibilities in technique of the instruments they used. The progress they made in this direction is one of the remarkable things of the period. The immense increase in the resources of the violin, due to a large extent to Corelli's influence, gave ample scope for the ingenuity of composers. Again, a comparison of the writing for wind instruments of Schütz and Bach shows how great an increase in facility had been developed in certain instruments. In no case is this more apparent than in that of the organ. Within fifty years the scope of this instrument had been enlarged beyond recognition in the works of Bach. In point of fact, the probable reason for the dearth of works for this instrument since his day is that he brought to full maturity its legitimate functions, and that there is nothing more to be said in this medium except on the lines laid down by him. The organ in modern times, as regards its technique, has only developed along lines of colour, that is to say, of stop-manipulation, and as modern organs have increased so enormously in size and in stop contrivances, there has been considerable scope in this direction. The case of the orchestra is much the same, except so far as it involves the technique of a large number of instruments and players, and that therefore the process of development has been a much slower one.

Bach in the treatment of his orchestra shows a decided preference for keeping his instruments on very definite parallel lines, and in his vocal solos he treats an obbligato more in the way of a definite thread in the texture than from any perception of its use as a contrast. He did not realise the possibilities of orchestral colouring otherwise than in blocks, and had not, as he had to a supreme degree in almost everything else, much idea of the modern orchestra. On the other hand there are innumerable touches in his works of instruments specially chosen for their fitness in quality to particular cases: for instance, in the "S. Matthew Passion music," "O Lieber Heiland Du" and "O Schmerz," with the two flutes and two da caccia oboes, and particularly in the soprano solo, "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben," with one flute and two da caccia. Again, the repeated sounds of the flute in "Liebster Gott, wann werd ich sterben," and the pizzicato chords in the recit. "Siehe, siehe, ich stehe vor der Thür," the solo "mein gläubiges Herz" with an accompaniment for the oboe, violin, and violoncello piccolo, giving an effect of delightful sprightliness. There are wonderful touches in the cantata "Christus, der ist mein Leben," especially in the alto solo, "Schlage doch." Bach's use of trumpets, not only for the sake of a glorious noise but for the solemnity of the moment, are too well known to need any mention. One remarkable case of a rare combination of instruments is that of the Brandenburg Concerto in F, for solo trumpet, flute, oboe and violin, a combination which, astonishing as it seems, produces, especially at the end of the last movement, the most heavenly results. There can be little doubt that these early composers were to some extent under the influence of the quality of their instruments, and that they made their selection for special purposes with a due regard to those qualities. The tendencies towards the modern phase in which colour occupies an almost supreme position were scarcely recognised as such, yet they existed, and were only kept in the background by reason of the many vital problems that attracted the attention and energies of composers. Among these problems the chief one was that of Sonata form, which occupied composers very fully from the days of the Suite to the time of Beethoven. It was a period in which design and drawing and harmonic balance were all-important to the expression of musical ideas, and in which the number and the quality of the instruments employed was of little account as compared with the mould into which the music written for these instruments should be cast. Side by side with this structural growth there was going on the development of the technique of the various instruments of the orchestra, and the addition of many members new to the

organization. Chief among these additions may be mentioned the clarinet, an instrument with the most wonderful range of sounds and quality. Used timidly at first, it soon won its way to a position of the first importance. Trombones also, when included in the scores of Mozart and Beethoven (although used much earlier in a tentative way), added immensely to the resources at their command. The modern orchestra has again added to its organization to such an extent that it seems as if the paint-box is about full, and it is certainly not too much to say that if the limit to the increase of the numbers in the orchestra is not soon reached, performances of new works will assuredly involve bankruptcy. With this increase, and the immense improvement in the powers of performance of the individual players, the actual material at the command of a composer to-day seems very fairly matured. And as in the case of the organ, already discussed, the orchestra of to-day seems to lend itself more and more to the manipulation of the infinite combinations of orchestral colours and to the dependence for effect more upon the actual beauty of sounds than upon the shape in which those sounds are cast. In proportion as the number of instruments has increased, together with their resources and the facility of execution, so to some extent has the sense of form become less distinct. We cannot deny that as composers have enlarged their scores and added more colour to their palettes, they have shown many signs of restlessness under the restraints imposed upon them in the past, and have tried to find new forms, or rather new methods of expression in which the scoring counts for much more than it did.

In England, until quite recently, the opportunities afforded to students of hearing orchestral music were very rare, and as no appreciation of orchestral sounds can be cultivated apart from an orchestral surrounding, it is not strange that little progress was made in this direction. However, during the past twenty years the growth in the number of orchestras has been remarkable, and the opportunities of hearing them have increased enormously, with the result that there is growing up a real sense of orchestral colour and a very remarkable ability to score well; so much so that, although one may feel that the technique in composition leaves much to be desired, yet the scoring can rarely be found fault with. The young composer takes to orchestration as a duck to water, and it is very rare to find a modern composer who does not possess very considerable mastery of the great resources the orchestra of to-day provides him. His delight seems, to a large extent, to be in the sounds themselves.

In what way has this sense of orchestral colour and this ability to score well affected the composer?

Dexterity of any kind tends to a devotion to activity in its own direction. When a man finds he can do things with considerable ease (or perhaps better than his friends), he finds it difficult to resist devoting a large amount of his attention to them. This is common in all spheres of work, and in music particularly so. For example, a composer who writes for the pianoforte produces that kind of pianoforte technique in which he himself probably excels. This is particularly noticeable in the case of Brahms.

It is the same with other instruments. So again with the modern orchestra, there seem to be many composers who feel that, to express themselves in music, painting—in which they are immensely clever—is all-important and design a bad second, whereas the great classical composers show that form was to them of enormous importance. There have always been periods of musical activity in certain directions, not only by individual composers but by schools of composers, in which so great a degree of perfection has been reached that it seemed as if nothing more could be said in that direction. Changes of opinion then take place, and a new outlet for energy and invention is discovered. It was so with the polyphonists to whom canons were the breath of life, and mattered more than any sense of beauty (not that many of them were not beautiful). It was so up to the end of 1600, when everything that was possible had been done in perfecting workmanship on contrapuntal lines and in the cultivation of an almost sensuous beauty in a vocal medium. It was so in the very rapid stereotyping of the Italian Aria so soon after the "*Nuove Musiche*" had made its start, where the only thing of importance was to give every chance of dexterity to the solo singer at the expense of everything artistic.

It was so with Bach, whose amazing skill carried musical expression to such heights. It was so with Haydn and Mozart, who crystallised the form in which their music was presented so that it stood out like a statue.

With all these there is the presentation of a phase of work brought to perfection, a definite endeavour towards a musical expression which, as far as it goes, satisfies the composer. At the same time, when there seems to be nothing more to be said in this way, then arises a sense of limitation and a desire for some change. Beethoven felt the need of expansion both in form and expression, and created a vastly wider medium in which to work. Chopin had to invent a new means of expression in terms of pianoforte technique which was utterly unlike that of his predecessors as it could possibly be. Schumann's most characteristic ideas found expression in new forms and new methods by which vividness and conciseness of thought could be best attained. Brahms, while using

classical forms, yet did so with such modifications that he could convey by these means the ideas peculiar to himself. And now it seems as if with certain composers the classical forms, and the means of expression in them, were giving way to a more elastic and subtle medium better suited to the thoughts of those who work in it. The thoughts themselves seem to be changing shape.

Some present-day composers feel as much as did any of those pioneers of the past that a new kind of expression—a new language—is essential for the presentation of their ideas; a kind of expression free from all restraints of form and from all harmonic restrictions, able to produce a musical atmosphere rather than any definite statement of a musical idea. It is a language of this kind that we seem to be within sight of in the modern French school and in some cases in the works of the modern English school. It depends very greatly on the vagueness of the thematic material, and the skilful handling of the orchestral colouring. To produce anything so indefinite as atmosphere, it is obvious that the demands which form and harmonic contrasts make are antagonistic to the creation of anything so indefinite as atmosphere. The intention is to create a transparency and gauziness which, by its indefiniteness, acts upon the imagination as a subtle stimulant and produces a state of mind which any attempt to analyse would more or less destroy. Its aim is to obtain the delicacy and evasiveness of the soap-bubble, and to provide something in which there are no gaps and no patterns to arrest the attention. This object can only be obtained (1) by the softening of the outlines of the design until they cease to attract notice except by their very vagueness; (2) by the use of a texture which, by the subtlest mixtures of orchestral colouring rather than by the use of melodic lines, is kaleidoscopic in effect and never ceasing; (3) by the absolute removal of any limits to harmonic progressions.

It is not for us to say that this new phase is wrong or unhealthy or that it is a sign of decadence. Many may think so, but few probably will, in the face of history, have the courage to condemn it out of hand.

What did the world think of the early attempts of the Florentine school? Yet their efforts, which must have nearly broken the hearts of the polyphonists, particularly when they saw them succeed, were the foundations on which modern music was built. The crudities and the almost childish attempts of C. P. E. Bach towards form helped to produce Haydn. Beethoven's methods and aims were little understood in his day, but he has managed to survive it.

We and our predecessors have proved that the inventions of the means of expression of the great masters have all of them been in one long order of musical progress, and we

should be very careful to avoid the error into which our forefathers sometimes fell—of condemning a work because we do not understand it. We cannot say that musical progress, having brought us to a certain point, there ceases. It may still be in the early stages of development.

One interesting point worth consideration is to be observed with regard to the performance of this kind of colour music: it requires the most perfect playing, and is only possible with the most highly-organized orchestras; and whereas music written in recognized classical forms, even with a moderate performance can produce quite satisfying effect: owing to the interest in the organization of the work, music which is primarily dependent for its effect upon actual beauty of sounds necessitates perfect performance. It is obvious that this kind of music is only made possible under conditions where the technique of the individual instruments of the orchestra (and especially of the wind section of it) has been developed to the full.

Among pictures we have those in which the drawing is perfect and which will bear any amount of looking into, and we have others in which there is scarcely any drawing, the effect being dependent upon the grouping of the colours. The latter kind require to be looked at from a distance, and depend considerably on the lighting they are subjected to. In some ways the lighting of the picture corresponds to the performance in music.

In a composition that has definite outlines and makes sense structurally there is an abiding quality, whereas in music of an atmospheric kind the vagueness of the texture and the absolute indefiniteness of the harmonies produce a sense of monotonous restlessness which relieves the mind of any necessity of recognizing features and draws the attention to the indefinable appreciation of the charm of the sounds. How far back in the history of music the appreciation of the quality of sounds existed is difficult to say, but in some form or other, and in a greater or less degree, it was for a long time felt, though perhaps hardly recognized as a distinct force. The great masters of the Polyphonic period, up to the end of the sixteenth century, had to depend entirely upon the human voice and were able to produce the most amazing examples of the beauty of vocal tone, where everything that could possibly be got by the use of voices was in its right place to make its due effect; where every movement of the parts was so arranged as to bring out to the full the beauty of the voice, and in which the texture was exactly suited to the scope of the voice, and by its wonderful weaving produced the effect of perfect continuity. Such, for instance, is the music of Palestrina, whose work presents an almost unending stream of sounds woven into a most beautiful

fabric, with an occasional suggestion of some pattern by means of changes of rhythm, such as occur in the "Stabat Mater" and in the motets "Haec dies" and "Ecce nunc benedicite Dominum."

There can be little doubt that in his aims and in the results he achieves in his own medium Palestrina is analogous to Debussy who, with every resource of the modern orchestra, produces his vague, indefinite atmospheric effects in which there seem to be no gaps nor any reason why the music should ever come to an end. One of the first effects in this kind of music is the feeling of continuity, and the remarkable absence of any features that might attract the attention to a definite point. The thematic material, such as it is, is short and fragmentary. There is a sense of freedom from all restraint and a perfect fitness of the texture to the medium used, and lastly the reliance on rhythm for contrast. These resemblances are so remarkable that it would seem as if the processes of the human mind had been repeated, in the first case in terms of vocal music, in the second of orchestral music.

One other point of interest. Palestrina, writing at the end of the modal period, constantly shows a very definite leaning towards the modern scale, in fact it becomes almost an acceptance of it. Debussy has found it necessary to make use of a scale which provides him with those chords which never change by inversion, and which are interchangeable in almost all keys. He thus obtains a harmonic scheme in which tonality ceases to exist, inasmuch as all keys are practically one. The harmonic inventions were probably no less startling at the end of the sixteenth century than those of to-day are to us.

If phases of thought do repeat themselves under different conditions it is rather interesting to speculate as to the outcome of these modern tendencies, provided, of course, they are widely adopted. Will they lead us back into the paths of peace and orderliness of design, or will they carry us into a new world where discord will cease because the most violent combinations of sounds will, to our re-tuned ears, sound as pleasing as the major triad, where nothing so commonplace as melody will exist and where the attention need never be arrested by any appeals of form or design?

But the human mind loves order; and it is conceivable that after a period of indefinite tonality and absence of outline the most striking developments may be in the direction of redistribution of keys, and it is quite possible that the most astounding effects will result from the use of the common chord.

One cannot help feeling that this delight in use of the inexhaustible combinations of the sounds of the modern orchestra, which has grown up side by side with the immense

increase in the performers' abilities (no progression is an impossibility to-day to the horn or trumpet player) is a natural one. It has its analogy in the impressionist school of painters, and will take its place in the general progress of things. Its hold on the imagination of some of our modern composers has to be reckoned with, its effect upon the future of musical composition we cannot prophesy.

In the classical forms we have found so far the central and ruling force in composition; it is hardly conceivable that we should miss our way again.

DISCUSSION.

THE CHAIRMAN.—Before we proceed to tear Dr. Allen limb from limb as a reward for the very interesting paper he has given us, there are one or two things I should like to have a little more talk about. The central and startling paradox about the analogy between Palestrina and Debussy is one we must all accept, because it is quite obvious that there is a most extraordinary resemblance between them. The classical forms are so much part of our ordinary nature now that we see likenesses between the two, because one is before and the other after the classical form. Both are outside of it. It is not so much that there is any actual likeness between them as that in both we find the negation of classical form. I should like to say a few words about this general skill in scoring which is so very evident a sign of the times, in England at all events. How about the Germans, who have always had plenty of orchestral opportunities and yet have not developed the sense of orchestral colour before the present day, at the same time with the French and English composers. It seems as if a wave of orchestral sounds were coming over the whole world—not merely in England, where it is explained easily enough by the fact that our opportunities are now so very much greater than they were. Also with regard to the shortness of themes in modern compositions, it seems to me you cannot have much shorter themes than some of the classical masters have employed, *e.g.*, the theme of the C minor Symphony of Beethoven consists of four notes, that of Brahms's Symphony No. 4, first movement, is all taken from two notes. Of course, in all schools there will be short and long themes, and I think we could find from the works of Debussy themes of considerably longer extent than that. That is all my personal grudge against the paper, which seems to me most interesting.

Dr. MACLEAN.—It does not strike me that we are living particularly in a period of short tunes. It may be so in the French school of to-day, but that is a special manifestation of its own. I think it is the reverse in any other school. What can be longer than the themes of Richard Strauss, to take one example? The fact is that small men make small tunes, and big men make big tunes. As to reverting to form, surely we are doing so already. Max Reger, who has all the modern atmosphere, and is Strauss's great rival in Germany, is nevertheless one of the strongest formalists that music has ever known.

Dr. SOUTHGATE.—Must not we conclude that the length or otherwise of a theme is after all little more than an accident? It is quite true that some themes of modern composers are very short; but just now we have Elgar's new Symphony ringing in our ears, and the first subject of the opening movement of that is a singularly long one. And then Tchaikovsky wrote very long, swinging tunes indeed. So I think it is an accident if some composers' themes are found to be short. But is not the modern idea that we now obtain an atmosphere through the medium of the colour of the instruments in the orchestra, and also texture to some extent—is not that a little like what has happened in the past? Trying to think of some works of old in which distinctly an atmosphere was created, I remember as a boy going to the Princess's Theatre, and seeing the famous play "The Corsican Brothers." Undoubtedly an atmosphere is created in that by the tremolo of the violins only in the terrible duel scene. And then, does not Weber in his "Oberon" overture create an atmosphere by means of that wonderful passage for the horn in the simplest possible way by the general romanticism of the music? So again, Mendelssohn, in the Nocturne in the "Midsummer Night's Dream" music, has given us an atmosphere. Nothing could be more representative of a quiet summer evening. Then Rossini has a similar effect in the Ranz des Vaches from the "William Tell" prelude. He there creates an atmosphere, if I remember rightly, by the use of the cor anglais with flute obbligato, and a simple accompaniment for the orchestra. Then we have Mozart's remarkable Ghost music in "Don Giovanni." Perhaps, also, there may be cited Haydn's Earthquake music in "The Last Seven Words." So this vaunted modern atmosphere is not altogether a modern device.

Dr. ALLEN.—My object was rather to prove that the kind of atmosphere about which I have been talking is that in which there is no definiteness of structure of any kind. The examples referred to by Dr. Southgate are set in particular places in an orderly scheme; but the impression that Debussy gives one is only atmospheric, with no sort of definite features,

and it is rather this tendency that I have been trying to discuss. I quite admit, and I also pointed out, several cases in the early composers where there was a distinct sense of atmosphere. With reference to the length of themes, I have perhaps expressed myself rather badly. I was thinking in particular of some works of Strauss in which the themes are certainly very short, and I think that in his latest opera this is the case. But the thing that I should perhaps have said is that the themes seem to be treated in a fragmentary fashion, and to be presented kaleidoscopically. I know there are many themes of earlier composers which are very short, and many of modern composers which are quite long, but it seemed to me that there is, on the whole, a tendency towards terseness in this direction. I am very sorry to have kept you so long. I have probably been somewhat indistinct and difficult to follow, but the subject, from its very atmospheric character, is one difficult to set forth clearly.