Review: Why the Greeks Made No Advance in Harmony

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"C. Our chorus?"

"B. Yes; your park. What are your pieces, and how many have you?"

"C. We have ten twelve-pounders.

"B. Pooh! that's very feeble. Can't you give me some twenty-fours?"

"C. *Mon Dieu!* we have only six twenty-fours.

"B. Well, give me these six principals and the ten choristers; next we will arrange all the mass of voices on the bank of the great moat near the esplanade, as close as possible to the military orchestra on the platform. Monsieur the captain will be good enough to keep his eye upon us. I will have a fire-work man at my side, and at the moment the princes arrive a rocket will go up, and then you will blaze off the ten choristers successively. Then we shall begin the performance of the piece, and you will have time to reload. Towards the end, another rocket will be fired, you will count four seconds, and at the fifth you will be good enough so to strike a grand chord all together with your ten chorister twelve-pounders, and the six principals of twenty-four, as that the *ensemble* of your voices shall coincide exactly with the last instrumental chord. Do you understand?"

"C. Perfectly, sir; that will go of itself. You can count upon it."

As the officer retired he was heard to say, "'Tis magnificent; only musicians can have such ideas."

In due course the time came, the princes (De Montpensier and D'Aumale) arrived; all Lille was assembled, and Berlioz stood *bâton* in hand with a fire-work man by his side, when up ran the captain, panting for breath: "For heaven's sake, M. Berlioz, don't give the signal yet, our men have forgotten the matches, and one has gone to the arsenal for them. Give me only five minutes." Five minutes passed; then seven, and Berlioz received an intimation that the princes were waiting. "Go on," said he to the pyrotechnist, "and so much the worse for the choristers if they are not ready to light them up." The rocket flew heavenwards, but the cannon held their peace. The captain had not yet found his matches. Still Berlioz hoped for a master-stroke at the final chord. All would be right then, and confidently he gave the signal for the second rocket, which soared into the sky like its predecessor—with no better effect. The cannon, principals and choristers, all remained silent, and the good people of Lille dispersed, says Berlioz, "fully persuaded that the two rockets, of which they had heard the noise and seen the sparks, were simply a new orchestral effect invented by me, and agreeable enough to the eye."

(To be continued.)

WHY THE GREEKS MADE NO ADVANCE IN HARMONY.*

MANY reasons have been suggested why the ancient Greeks made no advance in what the moderns understand by harmony—that is, polyphony. To begin with, music differs in one important respect from other fine arts. It is largely assisted by physical science and mechanical appliances and skill, in which the ancients made relatively small progress. Moreover, in some regards, music resembles a language that at an early stage may be made the medium of commanding efforts of genius, but remains, nevertheless, barbarous, and requires centuries to attain, not only polish and style, but that suggestiveness and wealth of meaning which entertains the cultivated mind, independently of the ideas directly conveyed.

* "Perchè i Greci Antichi non progredirono nell' armonia." Baldassare Gamucci. Firenze, 1881.

With the ancients, as we all know, music was a ministering muse to her sisters, poetry and the drama. Not that she was younger, but weaker; and would, under any circumstances, require a longer period to develop.

Irrespectively of the natural process of development, it has been thought that there were certain fundamental reasons why the Greeks made little progress in harmony.

They were admittedly an exquisitely sensitive people, and lived at a period, and under a moral and religious *régime*, in which the pleasures of the senses were cultivated for their own sake and made the basis of a worship. It is assumed that quality of tone, to us a mere material of the art, had for them an essential significance. Hence Plato has condemned the flute as immoral. To us, the musical interval we call a major third is, under particular conditions in regard to average power and register in the instrument, more or less agreeable. To the Greeks it was unpleasing, under most conditions, and in just or in pythagorean intonation. Their exceeding sensibility induced them, it is thought, to confine the use of such intervals—or, indeed, of any interval in harmony, except the octave and unison—to what we should now call the *ritornello* or interlude of the accompanying instruments; very often stringed instruments of the harp family, and probably weak even of their kind, on which the *nuances* of harmony would be undistinguishable. A major third, delivered with the strong *timbre* of the human voice, and particularly male voices, would, it is supposed, have been intolerable to the Greeks.

This very common solution—this physiological solution of the question—is pronounced by the author of "*Perchè i Greci Antichi, &c.*," to be "superficial." Signor Gamucci appears to be a disciple of Professor Abramo Basevi, whose investigations in regard to what harmonists understand by "auxiliaries" were noticed by Helmholtz, who adopted independently, and in a slightly different signification, the terms *sensation* and *perception*, the principles of which underlie the technical system of Basevi. In place of these terms, Signor Gamucci adopts the words, "physiological" and "psychological."

With a certain sense of weariness one is obliged to confess that all these terms are only verbal substitutes for *sensibility* and *intelligence* Fétis employed in his theory of tonality; or for the terms *euphonic* and *dynamic*, employed by musical theorists time out of mind. Basevi himself recognises the gradual development of the principles he adopts, and, whilst justly claiming the merit of his own labour and insight in regard to their special application, he gives a faithful epitome of the theories of his predecessors, most of whom, either expressly or by implication, acknowledged the "insufficiency," as Signor Gamucci would say, "of a theory of music exclusively physiological." And so far, Signor Gamucci is entirely agreed with the modern scientific theorists who admit at once that these questions of dissonances and scales are matters of *habit*, and that the raw musical sensation is modified by memory and perception. But, says Signor Gamucci, whilst Helmholtz adopts the terms *sensation* and *perception*, he only appeals to æsthetics and musical expression when his physiological theories begin to fail him.

The remark is quite fair; but, of course, Helmholtz and his imitators, taking up one side of the question, would naturally be inclined to force the bearing of physical facts. Signor Gamucci asks the pertinent question, "Are we to assume that the present progress in harmony is a growth of blind habit, or is it that the actual state of modern harmony only consolidates the effects of habit?" It cannot be sup-

posed, as he says, that the physical organisation of modern ears differs from that of the Greeks; and if it be a question of artistic sentiment—that is of the æsthetic sense of beauty—in which, as Helmholtz insists, the Greeks must be accepted as unsurpassable models, they ought to have been the first to attain the advancement we find only in modern harmony.

As an alternative in the question, Signor Gamucci seems to imagine that between the physiological theory, which is admittedly insufficient to account for the evolution of music, and the æsthetical theory adopted as a *pis-aller* by Helmholtz, there is a well-determined place for a special *psychological theory*, independent of æsthetics.

Signor Gamucci's essay is written in the easy conversational style of the day, without scientific pretence, but it is to be feared that the literary element in its composition induces him to create theories from words rather than facts. We were particularly anxious to discover what the special and intermediate psychological theory might be; and we cannot say that it turns up anywhere in an intelligible and neatly defined form. By gradual inference we are led to assume that the "psychological theory" is only after all a resetting of the old principle of *tonality*. In our search for the theory we were carried, as a matter of course, under the guidance of an Italian of the present time, to Schelling and the German æstheticians. But, after a dip into objectivities and subjectivities, we were plunged without warning into the "speech-theory" of Herbert Spencer; and, apparently in complete innocence on the part of Signor Gamucci, that objections had been raised to any such theories of the origin of music. He is of opinion that so much was music with the Greeks a question of sensation and imitation, that it may be said they ascribed to sounds in music an office similar to that of the contortions of the body in the dance. "Every sound," he says, "was considered in itself alone as a possible imitation of a possible inflexion of voice, responding to an emotion of the mind. By degrees the sounds became the object of psychological operations, by dint of which they appeared to have a tendency to group, or, so to speak, organise themselves."

The latter part of this description points plainly to the embryonic principle of tonality, represented, as Signor Gamucci admits, in the tetrachord of the Greek system; and, in the same shape, it still survives as the basis of the modern system of technical harmony. The real question then, to be solved, is "Why the ancient Greeks made no advance in the development of this psychological principle of tonality?" The answer, we suppose, is that the main condition* of the advance was the employment of harmony, which has the power of unsettling or of completely changing the tonality of any melodic passage; whereas, with the Greeks, not only were harmonic intervals in most cases repugnant to their subtle appreciation of the pleasures of sensation, but if "every inflexion of voice responded to an emotion of the mind," certain inflexions of sound would remain inviolable and unalterable, as representing a particular *mood*; which Signor Gamucci, unknowingly following an opinion already suggested by Addison, thinks was named after a particular tribe—such as Dorian, Æolian, &c.—to whose mode of speech it corresponded in regard to vocal inflexion, as in the various provincial dialects of all countries.

No doubt this inviolability and fixation of the Greek mode, not only in respect to the endings of the octave scales, or in the more musical sense in which they can still be utilised, but in regard to the political, moral, and educational purposes to which they were applied, is the most obscure and also the most

interesting part of the question. Signor Gamucci, with his views in regard to the primitive and physiological state of the Greek musical mind, its intense sensibility and oriental proneness to symbolise and personify—for we must not forget that Greek music, like Greek philosophy, was exotic—is evidently amongst those who cannot credit the apparently fabulous effects attributed to the ancient modes, unless the means employed was something more than what we understand by musical.

There is, however, a little to be said on the other side. These marvellous effects are not peculiar to Greek history and Greek modes, or even to ancient history. There are certain traditions, more or less well founded, of similar effects, and even of mania, being produced by the minstrelsy of the early ages; but always amongst a rude people, or in the cases of heroes of a strong volitional, not to say brutish, nature. Modern and collegiate superstitions, in regard to the fellow-countrymen of Homer and Thucydides, may blind us as to the true nature of the Greeks. Admitting their extraordinary gifts, and the rude freshness of their sensations, there seems to be no particular necessity to search for extra-musical means in accounting for the marvellous effects of the modes. Those effects are, after all, not much more marvellous than the effects of a bagpipe on a modern Caledonian, the Dorian and true Spartan of the British Islands. And, with most people, it may be said that not all the "Dead Marches" of Handel, or the funeral marches of Chopin and Beethoven combined, can be compared, for one instant, in solemnity of effect, to the simply intoned *miserere*, providing the *mise-en-scène* is appropriate. This is a question of association, and remotely of sensation; for the lively imagination is fed by sensation. When we are told by Signor Gamucci that the psychological element was relatively absent in Greek music, we understand that it is the æsthetical element which ultimately leads to the gratification of the mere sense of beauty; and represents a degree of development following the physiological state of pure sensation and direct imitation. When an art is, to a certain extent, independent of sensation, and even of forms of beauty, estimated only for their own sake, the psychological element prevails, and the forms of art are estimated for the art's sake. In regard to music, it is doubtful if the Greeks ever attained even the æsthetical stage; and in that view of the case we can, perhaps, faintly understand why the absence of the psychological element prevented them from adopting, not only developments in harmony, but, as far as we can conceive of their musical attainments, anything like extended forms in any shape. We are rather inclined to be satisfied with the physiological theory in its simplest form, without any aid from the negative psychological theory. We can imagine that an ancient Greek, on hearing a symphony of Beethoven's, might gradually cull some meaning from the chaos of sound, could he be induced to stay and tolerate the absolute discords of the orchestra. There is, indeed, no necessity to travel back mentally to the age of Pericles to find Signor Gamucci's primitive and physiological state of development. In our own vaunted times, there are numbers to whom music is mainly a question of intonation, sensation, and direct pleasure. To them the dissonances in Wagner's music are abhorrent, and its dramatic meaning an enigma.

As we are told to expect wisdom from a multitude of councillors, there can be no doubt that we should in the present day be thoroughly acquainted both with the theory and practice of music; for the number of artists who, by virtue of their talents,