Beethoven, after a Hundred Years

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such co-operation was strikingly shown the week after the gathering, Messrs. Brinsmead's public announcement of their inability to produce pianos at a profit being followed by a joint statement of a group of manufacturers to the effect that they found no difficulty. We are glad to be able to add that as a result of a conference between the firm and the workmen, Messrs. Brinsmead have decided to revoke their decision to close down. It is to be hoped that manufacturers will in future be so well and truly federated as to make a repetition of such a contretemps impossible.

Several readers write pointing out that the author of the articles on 'Bach's Organ Works' has done a good deal less than justice to the young composer's pedestrian powers. Bach walked not fifty miles, but anything between two hundred and two hundred and fifty, to sit at the feet of Buxtehude. The mistake has been commonly made in England because our translation of Spitta gives the distance as fifty miles. It appears, however, that Spitta spoke of German miles, and a German mile is about four times as long as one of ours. The error has become firmly grounded since Parry repeated it in his book on Bach. Mr. Henry Davey draws attention to a more serious slip on the part of our contributor. It was not Bach who went to the wineshop during the sermon, but Rambach, the choir prefect, who was duly punished by four days' partial imprisonment.

Another correspondent inquires as to the authenticity of the fugue on the subject beginning :

He rightly considers that neither subject nor treatment suggests the work of a beginner, especially at so early a date as 1704. The fugue is omitted from the Widor-Schweitzer edition. Our correspondent says that he has met with it in a book of pianoforte music, where it was credited to another member of the Bach family. The editors of the Novello Edition state that Clementi, in Part 3 of his 'Practical Harmony,' attributes the Fugue to C. P. E. Bach. The subject is quoted in Marchant's 'Fugue Subjects and Answers' (No. 164) as being by the same composer. Perhaps some of our Bachites can throw further light on the matter.

The English Folk-Dance Society announces an Easter Vacation School of Folk-Song and Dance to be held at York from April 3 to April 10. Ordinary class instruction will be given in folk-singing, children's singing games, morris, country-, and sword-dancing; and special courses will be organized for those who do not wish to study the Morris. There will also be daily demonstrations by the staff, and a Country Dance Ball. Full particulars are obtainable from the secretary, Miss Elsie W. Austin, 7, Sicilian House, Sicilian Avenue, Southampton Row, London, W.C.1.

Our note in last month's issue on the possible use of the gramophone as a substitute for church choirs called forth a paragraph in the *Observer* of February 8, from which it appears that considerable progress has been made in this department of mechanical music. We hope to take an early opportunity of hearing some records with a view to giving our readers further information.

Credit to whom credit is due! We note a tendency on the part of critics to speak of the opera season at the Surrey Theatre as if it were the first attempt to provide South Londoners with the standard operas at popular prices. Yet the 'Old Vic.' has been performing all the old favourites, from 'The Bohemian Girl' to 'Pagliacci,' for years past, and giving them in capital style to large and enthusiastic audiences. Only a few weeks ago 'The Marriage of Figaro' was well done, the production being in the hands of Messrs. E. J. Dent and Clive Carey. We hope the very deserving Surrey venture will be a great success. In fairness, however, to Miss Lilian Baylis and her hardworking staff at the 'Old Vic.,' we cannot refrain from pointing out that South Londoners are amongst the best educated opera-goers in London, save in respect of the more modern works.

BEETHOVEN, AFTER A HUNDRED YEARS

BY GEORGE GARDNER

(Archdeacon of Aston.)

When a lad goes away from home into the outside world for some years, he does not on returning necessarily despise his old surroundings. But they cannot seem to him quite the same. He probably has acquired a new sense of values. Therefore certain elements of nobility and antiquity show now with deeper impressiveness than they did to his childish eyes. On the other hand, he finds himself alive to imperfections and incongruities that in earlier days were unperceived.

A like change of perception should naturally come to us from time to time in the realm of musical art. Yet because that art specially expresses the mystical side of human thought, and also perhaps because it can be written only in a particular and an esoteric language of its own, it is unduly liable to become the object of fixed and uncritical veneration. Idols are set up for indiscriminate worship. There are idols, so to speak, of the market place—idols of the Choral Society and its clientèle found in Handel, and to some extent in Mendelssohn. Or, there are the idols of the cultured amateur, embodied in Beethoven and in Brahms. Something superhuman, a perfection that lies outside all cavil, is felt to exist in the godlike creatures who are thus revered.

None of us take up this attitude towards the great poets. With them we are only too ready to find marks of age, or downright tediousness, in some of their productions. But with music it is different. There, unstinted approbation seems to be expected. To take one instance—in the Oxford History of Music it is said of Beethoven's work: 'We may grant a few inequalities and a few mannerisms... yet these, even if judgment of them pass unchallenged, are but flecks in the sun.' (Here is indeed exalted praise, when one remembers how sun-spots are indistinguishable to the naked eye!). Or, again, the same volume (No. V.), when discussing the peculiarities of Beethoven's 'third period,' tells us, 'They are but enigmatic utterances of the Sphinx on the Pharsalian Plain, and we answer as Heine answered, "You cannot touch them: it is the finger of Beethoven".'

At this moment, just a hundred years have passed since Beethoven was writing the masterpieces of his later years, such as the Choral Symphony and

the great Mass. Since then many things have happened in the world of music to put its denizens in the position of the boy who has had to leave his quiet home and to enter into the larger experiences of life. Most significant of all has been the emergence and the acceptance of Wagner. To some of us older ones it has indeed been a thrilling experience thus to watch the rising of a new star through mists of obloquy and opposition, till that star has swum into a settled and exalted place in the musical firmament. One should be careful not to claim overmuch for Wagner's artistic achievement. Admit that in it is to be found something of the crudities that we associate with the word 'melodrama,' or that in it are undeniable *longueurs*; yet we cannot but feel that here has been imparted to us a new sense of breadth and spaciousness in the treatment of musical forms. And size *is* an important element in art—at least if unity of building and continued interest can be secured, if the whole production is found to have in it the qualities of a living organism, of, say, a magnificent spreading tree. Think of how the masterly powers of Wagner's genius are shown in the way that his four immense works—'The Ring,' 'Tristan,' 'Meistersinger,' and 'Parsifal'—each maintain throughout their structure a unity of their own, obviously differentiated from the characteristics of the others. Wagner has shown, too, how a far deeper intensity of expression can be obtained through the power of music than had been known before his advent. In other ways, also, he has enlarged our outlook. So, too, men like Verdi (in his old age), Elgar, Franck, Strauss, Debussy, and some of the Russians, have helped to give us wider horizons. Many of the old landmarks are forgotten. The 'classical'—in the sense of what is, say, pre-Victorian—can no longer claim our unflinching allegiance, as it did in the time of our forefathers.

How do we stand, then, in regard to Beethoven—the composer who is commonly regarded as the last and the greatest of the classical school? It would be presumptuous to speak words of praise about some of his evident masterpieces—as impertinent as to set about belauding 'Lycidas.' What can be said adequately about the noble outline and the unfaltering vigour of the first movement of the 'Eroica' Symphony? Or about the cosmic dance at the end of the seventh? Or of the expression of stony grief along with virile hope at the beginning of the Choral Symphony—only comparable to what we see in the statues of the Medici Chapel at Florence?

All the same, it may be permitted to urge that the work of this grand master has often been unduly and indiscriminately praised. Wagner himself, writing in 1870, has declared that 'Beethoven's music will be understood at any time, whilst the music of his predecessors will, for the most part, remain intelligible only through the medium of light thrown upon it by the history of art.' Now, after another fifty years have gone by, we are in a position to see that this exalting of a great musician into a class by himself—a class from which Bach and Mozart are excluded—is not the result of sound judgment. No one, for instance, can nowadays have listened to a recital of several of the Pianoforte Sonatas without feeling that here and there they begin to 'date'—many parts of them undeniably have an air of speaking in the language of the past.

Confessedly it is a perilous task to find any fault with what have been for so long regarded as flawless

objects of beauty. And judgment is inevitably complicated by the personal factor. It seems almost indecent to decry what one has learnt to admire, perhaps from boyhood. On the other hand, the very fact of close familiarity with a fine work may blind one to the charms which it might reveal were it approached with fresher perceptions. Still, after making all allowance for the existence of individual prejudice, it may be permissible to suggest that such movements as the following, taken almost at random, are open to the kind of criticism which has been indicated.

Look at the *Andante con variazioni* of Op. 26, as it unfolds its length, or the *Andante* of the Sonata quasi una Fantasia, or the *Adagio* in B flat of Op. 31. Here, and in other places, some of us are obliged to recognize a kind of sentiment and a way of expressing emotion that belongs to the past. No doubt a skilful pianist can still put plenty of feeling into such passages. But some listeners cannot help thinking that here is matter which made more appeal to a generation that admired Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King,' than it does to the changed palates of the 20th century. And when the Beethoven Sonatas are given in large doses, we are in danger of carrying over to places which unquestionably have suffered no deterioration an impression of something touched and aged by time. The air of the plains, as it were, clings to us even when we get on to the hills. Yet how mistaken it would be thus to approach the 'Appassionata' Sonata—that tremendous expression of heights and depths in human emotion, to which we might almost apply G. K. Chesterton's words and say that through it we 'list the trump of fate and hear a linnet sing.' Or, to cite further illustrations, remember the light-hearted cheerfulness of the last movement (*Allegro assai*), Op. 2, No. 3, and the noble gloom of the *Largo e mesto* (in D minor) of Op. 10, No. 3. Here are songs that age cannot wither or familiarity stale.

But to go back to the bad occupation of the *advocatus diaboli*: The 'Encyclopædia Britannica' describes the popular *Andante* in F, intended at first for the 'Waldstein' Sonata, as 'a spacious and gorgeous rondo.' Does it not now sound rather as if it belonged to the class of sentimental 'Lieder ohne Worte'? And does the modulation into D flat, made more sententious by repetition, still excite keen interest? Even as regards the slow movement of that great work the 'Hammerklavier' Sonata, some of us, if we are honest, have to confess that it has about it a quality that is decidedly soporific—though Dr. Eaglefield Hull asserts that it is 'one of the sublimest things in all music.'

The same authority tells us that the 'Pastoral' Symphony, though 'often slighted on account of its so-called realisms and its classification amongst "programme music," is nevertheless one of the finest pieces in the whole range of music.' And yet, once we free ourselves from the mental obsession that everything written by Beethoven is superb, we shall hardly fail to recognise that here is one of his weaker works, and that parts of it are not a little wearying, especially the *Finale*. This, however, is a bold thing to say, for Grove's Dictionary lays down that 'the man who listening to the "Sinfonia" Pastorale cannot see the beautiful landscape, sit down beside the brook, &c., &c., must be dead alike to every sense of poetry and art.'

Each detail of these works is held up to the same indiscriminate laudation. Here, *e.g.*, is a bar that

occurs in the fifth Symphony. Repeated about seven times with slight rhythmical changes, but always in bare unison, it does not strike us as being particularly exhilarating :

'No!' says Grove, quoting the passage, it is 'essential to our pleasure.' And in a like exaggerated and impossible fashion it has become customary to praise every feature of the symphonies and the sonatas.*

Let it be clearly understood that the present is no attempt, made out of mere 'cussedness,' to depreciate the work of an immortal genius, for whom the writer of this article has profound veneration. Were the same process to be carried out in connection with the mature works of Bach, no doubt certain elements could be indicated which belong to the period of the writer, and which now sound to us formal and old-fashioned. On the other hand, it might be urged that a greater distance separates the best of Beethoven's work from the worst, than is the case with the older composer. And if the delicate and dubious task of comparison is attempted, some would even be ready to assert that Bach's writings are more interesting to-day, rhythmically, harmonically, and even in point of melody, than those of Beethoven. Further it might fairly be argued that the harmony of the latter is singularly limited and tame compared with that of Bach, and that the comparatively small amount of fine polyphony in Beethoven involves a real loss of vitality in his creations.

But there is little gain in the setting up of one great music-builder against another. The point to be insisted upon is that no one of them is immune from the impairment wrought by lapse of years and by changes in artistic outlook. Doubtless, *e.g.*, after another hundred years, the time-spirit will reveal a seamy side to many of the brave clothes that Wagner now wears.

Evidently, then, Beethoven has been put into an impossible position by his panegyrists. Compare him, if you will, to Westminster Abbey as we see it now, with defects patent to all—yet, with its compelling and mysterious beauty, a deathless possession for ages to come. But to claim more, to state oracularly that there is a sort of universal perfection, admitting no qualification, about all Beethoven's greater works is to confuse our ideas about art. Doctrinaire pronouncements of this kind go far to discredit in the minds of the rising generation what is the real and abiding value of the great 'classical' tradition. And such criticism is surely a belated survival from that period of ignorance about musical values, when it was customary to place Mendelssohn on a pedestal almost as lofty as that reserved for Beethoven.

The Blackheath Branch of the British Music Society provided an interesting programme on January 19. Besides some well-chosen songs and pianoforte pieces the following part-songs for women's voices were given: 'Arcady' (Walthew), 'Full fathom five' (Ireland), the 'Nuns of St. Mary,' Carol (arr. Kennedy Scott), 'Slumber Song' (Rebikov), and two 'Old English Carols' by Holst.

* Any consideration of the chamber music has been designedly omitted.

The Musician's Bookshelf.

BY 'FESTE'

The 'Bookshelf' having been crowded out for a couple of months, and the publishers having been very active lately, so many books are awaiting notice that I can make up the leeway only by giving some of them much briefer notice than they deserve.

The local historian is a doubly useful person. He collects a vast amount of detailed fact without which the biographers and historians in general would be badly off, and he does much to nourish the pride of place which is so powerful a stimulus in all kinds of local activities. Thus any future writer on Sterndale Bennett cannot afford to overlook 'Sterndale Bennett and Sheffield,' by W. T. Freemantle (Sheffield: Pawson & Brailsford. 10s.). The work is in two parts, the first dealing with the Bennett family and their connection with Derbyshire, Cambridge, and Sheffield, the second with the composer's associations with his native city. Mr. Freemantle has gathered together such a store of information of various kinds that the general reader who cares little for the subject of the book can hardly fail to be interested. To the older generation of Yorkshire folk especially the volume will be welcome for its notes on local worthies. Opening the book almost at random I come across a good example in the account of Samuel Slack, a famous bass who flourished at the beginning of the last century. Slack seems to have had a voice of unusual depth and power, a voice which, in the words of a contemporary concert report, 'whilst it enlivened the moments, added astonishment in those who had never before heard its wonderful and tremendous efforts.' Like so many of these old singers, Slack looked on the wine long and frequently. Going home late one night after a convivial gathering, he sank down, overcome, by the wayside. Presently a bull came sniffing round, and gave a roar. 'Oh,' said Slack, 'aw can sing fower notes lower nur that,' and presumably did so, whereon the bull rolled him over. 'You may be a very fine bass singer,' said Slack, 'but you are no gentleman.' When he realised he was up against a savage animal, he bellowed his lowest and uncouthest notes with such effect that the bull left in a hurry. A new and very practical kind of Orpheus, this.

The book contains many interesting facsimiles of old programmes, tickets, bills, and autographs, besides about three dozen illustrations of various kinds, ranging from portraits of Sterndale Bennett to a quaint old drawing of the three-decker pulpit and organ in Sheffield Parish Church, where the composer's father, Robert Bennett, was organist. One lays the carefully compiled record aside with a feeling of regret that the excellent man and musician of whom it treats is just now so completely out of fashion. He was unlucky in belonging to a period that has left a very faint mark on our musical records, but he was in some ways so much better than his period that his work deserves more notice than it gets. Is all the orchestral music we hear to-day so much better than the 'Naiades' Overture? And can his fourth Concerto be less interesting than some we have to sit through?

No doubt we lose much through giving such composers the heavy responsibility of overseeing our big teaching institutions. When Bennett the Principal of the R.A.M. came on the scene, Bennett the composer went off. Against the direct loss to