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FITZGERALD ON FOLK-SONGS.

BY WILLIAM BARCLAY SQUIRE.

Towards the middle of the year 1851, Mr. Ingram, the proprietor of the *Illustrated London News*, conceived the idea of issuing a series of illustrated supplements to that newspaper on some subject 'which might recommend it more especially to ladies and families.' On the suggestion of George Hogarth, who was then acting as musical critic to the *Illustrated London News*, Mr. Ingram determined that some of the supplements should take the form of a series of national English melodies, a hundred in number, the words to be written or edited by Dr. Charles Mackay, and the music arranged by Sir Henry Bishop, with illustrations by Gilbert, Birket Foster, Kenny Meadows, William Harvey, and others. The first number appeared in December, 1851, and the series went on for a short time, but was eventually discontinued before it was completed. Dr. Mackay, in his 'Forty years' recollections of life, literature, and public affairs, from 1830 to 1870' (1877), acknowledges that it was not a success, for a variety of reasons: the awkward size of the paper, the simplicity of the accompaniments, &c.; but he does not hit upon what was probably another important reason, viz., that both words and music (the former in particular) were so severely edited and altered that they failed to appeal to a public that was beginning to appreciate national music in its genuine and primitive state. Bishop, who in 1851 was an old man, entered enthusiastically into Mr. Ingram's scheme; but his whole life had been spent in altering, adapting, and tinkering the music of others so as to bring it to the level of what he considered was the taste of the public. Nothing was sacred to him, and instead of developing his own real talents, he laboured incessantly at disfiguring the masterpieces of such composers as Beethoven, Mozart, and a host of lesser men, by his additions and alterations. The spirit in which he approached the task proposed by Mr. Ingram is well displayed in the following letter to Dr. Mackay, one of a mass of correspondence on the subject which has been preserved in the British Museum:

Cambridge Street,
Hyde Park,
June 23d, 1851.

MY DEAR SIR,

I intend myself the pleasure of calling on Mr. Ingram this day; and, should I find him at the office (in the Strand) will hope to make the basis of an arrangement with him by which we may commence *our* labours without delay.

I inclose a slight list of Songs &c., the greater part of which would be available for our purpose to commence with. In making that selection I have had that object in view which I conceive to be all important; namely, the necessity of bringing forward beautiful and, many of them, excellent melodies, the words of which are not at present suitable for *female* lips, but which can be made so, *de novo*, through the aid of your genius. For it appears to me, that although in some instances the words of those Songs may not be objectionable, still, they are not such as a *female* could sing—the melodies, therefore, are to *them* but as a 'sealed book.'

In looking into 'authorities' I find a vast field for us to glean from. There are many of the Scotch, Irish, and Welsh Melodies, the words of which have not hitherto been rendered unobjectionable by modern Poets—and which, even if they have been, might have new versions—and many English Melodies, from the earlier part of the 17th century to almost the present time.

Hoping very shortly to have an opportunity of seeing you on the subject of a work which I conceive likely to

be so interesting not only to ourselves but to the Public of the United Kingdom,

I remain, my dear Sir,
Yours very faithfully,
HENRY R. BISHOP.

No better illustration of the mid-Victorian idea of editing could be wished for than the above. Suitability for 'female lips' was to be the touchstone, even if the words were unobjectionable! It is not to be wondered at that the series failed, and has never—even in its incomplete state—been reprinted.* Such as it was, however, it seems to have attracted the attention of Edward Fitzgerald, who throughout life was always something of a *fanatico per la musica*, as is shown by many passages in his correspondence. In the collection which contains the above-quoted letter of Bishop's there is to be found a letter from Fitzgerald which has been omitted from Mr. Aldis Wright's edition of Fitzgerald's works. To judge from the context, it seems to have been preceded by another letter, drawing Bishop's attention to the song of the 'Poor old Horse' (as to the various forms of which song reference must be made to the Journals of the Folk-Song Society, vol. i., pp. 75, 260; vol. ii., pp. 263, 264). The poet seems also to have sent some words entitled, 'The Forester,' fitted to an old tune: these I have been unable to trace, nor to identify the song of the 'Old Hen,' which is also alluded to. It is to be regretted that neither the first nor any subsequent letter of Fitzgerald's correspondence with Bishop has been preserved; but the one printed below is evidently the most important, and is an interesting and characteristic addition to Fitzgerald's utterances on music. 'Goldington House, Bedford,' from which it is dated, was the address of William Browne, whom Fitzgerald used to visit every year. The letter is as follows:

Goldington House, Bedford,
June 18/52.

MY DEAR SIR,

About the 'Old Horse' I can only say at present that I have not got it: that, as I never heard it but once, I cannot sufficiently remember it: and that the Clergyman from whom I heard it has lately been in such family affliction that I scarce like to apply to him on such a subject just yet. I will, however, get it for you as soon as I can. From what I remember, it is not so original and complete an Air as the 'Old Hen'—but, as I remember, of true English Breed, quite suited to the pathetic words it went to. However, you shall have it to judge of directly I can get it.

In talking of *words* to these English Tunes, I will say that it seems to me a great pity that when the old original words, or something at all equivalent, is available, your clever coadjutor does not avail himself of them. It struck me as a mistake (I dare say, attributable to the Publishers, who will go with the stream of Public taste) that so many of the Songs (meaning the *words*) in your present Edition run upon what the Germans call '*subjective*' feeling, and that too of *one* kind, suited chiefly to mere Ladies and Gentlemen; and that so few were '*objective*'; such as stories, Ballads, scraps of narrative, supposed to be uttered, with variety of Humour, Naïveté, or Pathos, by *other* than Ladies and Gentlemen—by Country People, Soldiers, Sportsmen &c. This not only produces monotony, but really alters and injures the character of many old Tunes which really are characteristic of various Times and habits of Thought from which they arose. I was struck by this in Dr. Mackay's song to the Tune of 'The King shall enjoy his own again &c', where, though the *subject*

* Whether it might not be worth while to replace Mackay's verses by the original words, retaining Bishop's accompaniments (which are comparatively inoffensive), may be recommended for the consideration of some enterprising publisher.

was alike, the very regularity and greater elegance of modern versification and thought was not of a piece with the rollicking Cavalier Tune. I could not see why the humorous and quaint Cavalier words (with perhaps a little Amendment) should not have been retained.

As I had scarce anything to do with the words of the 'Forester,' I may say that I think those words will suit the old Tune better (I believe) than some aspiration about an Evening Star, or Evening Bell, or Evening Gun, fitted for a modern young Lady at a rose-wood Pianoforte. There is a little *story*; some dramatic variety of Character; really an old copy of verses, perhaps coeval with the Tune, though never yet married to it. As Goethe said, nothing is now so hard as to make a modern *Ballad*: just because people now *felt within*, instead of simply *seeing without*. So as I think one should retain what one can of any such old Ballads as were at least of the age of the old Tunes, and arose at least out of a kindred spirit of invention.

As to the simplicity—not to say, *silliness*—of some of the old Songs, I am sure the last thing a Song should be is, *to be wise*.* The Thought should be as simple as possible; and *Argument* of all kind avoided. Even Moore overdid his Songs, not with Argument indeed, but with Fancy, the due understanding of which interfered with the easy flow of Attention which was due chiefly to the *Ears*. The old name of the 'Twisting of the Rope' seems to indicate something more of the Spirit of the Tune than the lovely words he has set to it. But he took care, in his Irish Melodies, to avail himself of any *legends* of the Country, of any *objective* interest, in short to vary the subjects of his Songs.

As to polite singers not liking the old words relating to the habits and thoughts of simple people, Country People &c. (to whom the Tunes are so natural, and with whom they have survived), who that remembers Miss Stephens and Miss Tree in Auld Robin Gray—yes, and even such delicate fooling as 'We're a' noddin', will not confess that excellent music may be discoursed that way?

I am ashamed to have run on thus to you, when I ought to have done so (if it were to be done at all) to Dr. Mackay, whom I do not the less think a very clever man.

I will perhaps make you some amends by noting down an air which an old musician at Norwich used to declare was *Handel's*. Is it not more like Arne? Whosoever it be, it seems to me well worth preservation and acknowledgment: especially the four last bars. I will also note down a fragment from the same quarter—of quaint rhythm, to be sure—but a theme (it seems to me) that Handel could well have used in some grotesque Cyclopean Chorus.

If I can be of further use to you, I shall be at home—Boulge, Woodbridge, in a fortnight—and am, yrs. very truly,

EDWD. FITZGERALD.

I send the *melodies* of the tunes only, for easy reasons, to a Musician like Sir H. Bishop.

On July 29 the above letter was forwarded by Bishop to Mackay, with the following comment:

I think it well to inclose you the 'crotchety' letter. I received from Mr. Fitzgerald, with the Air, and a 'fragment.' I do not believe either of them to be by *Handel*. Mr. Fitzgerald seems at all events to be friendly; though his arguments are to be taken '*cum grano*.'

Neither the air nor the fragment is now to be found with the letter. Shortly afterwards, Fitzgerald must have sent Bishop the song of the 'Poor Old Horse,' for on August 25 the composer wrote to Mackay:

I send you the 'Poor Old Horse' scrap, which I have at last received from Mr. Fitzgerald. It is but a

'scrap' to be sure; but I thought you would like to see it. I send his letter also; as it refers to the tune.

In a postscript he adds:

You will perceive that the 'Old Horse' tune begins like 'All round my hat.'

SOME NEW BRAHMS LETTERS.

The indefatigable Herr Kalbeck has just issued, as may be gathered from the German papers, a collection of Letters of Brahms, most of which had not been published before. They are chiefly addressed to his Swiss friend, J. V. Widmann, and his daughter and son-in-law. In the present state of affairs it is only possible to gather fragments from reviews of the book which have appeared in various newspapers, but some of these are of no little general interest to musicians. We may forgive the writers of the reviews for their praise of a letter in which Brahms eagerly defended the German Emperor from an attack by the Republican Widmann; just now they could hardly do otherwise, but it is somewhat surprising that Brahms should have held such views.

Coming to musical subjects we find an interesting piece of self-analysis in a letter where Brahms speaks of his desire to write an opera, and his difficulties. He says: 'The whole type is a puzzle to me' (this is not quite a literal translation of 'will mir nicht eingehen': it really means something like 'it will not get into my skin'). 'I really don't know why and when and where at all I should begin or end with music. With this kind of opera I feel as if with a little more care and trouble they might have become just simple plays. (I will have nothing to do with conventional Dance, Drinking, or Hunting tunes.)'

Perhaps even more interesting is what he says about male choruses and 'coarse brass bands' which Widmann wanted to attack. He says it is like trying to deprive the masses of spirits: this would be all very well, he adds, if we could give them good substitutes by making wine, beer, and coffee cheaper. It is the same with the male choir and the brass band. If we could give the poor better music, well and good, but we cannot. The remedy, he suggests, is to make people teach their children other instruments than the pianoforte. Singing should be better taught in schools, and the violin should be more commonly played.

In one letter he gives us a fascinating glimpse into his workshop. Widmann's son-in-law, Herr Schubring, wrote that there was a motif in the third Symphony which he looked on as the foundation of all the themes. This Brahms energetically denies, and he continues:

If it is so, I want no praise, but am ready to confess that my thoughts have not a sufficiently strong flight when I am at work, and therefore unintentionally return to their starting point. But if I want to keep to the same idea, then it should be easily recognizable in every metamorphosis, augmentation, or inversion. The other would be a sorry jest and a sign of poverty-stricken powers of invention. . . . In a theme for variations almost the only thing that really means anything to me is the bass. But that is holy to me, it is the solid foundation on which I build my history. If I vary the melody I cannot easily be more than brilliant or graceful or euphonious—perhaps with charm of mood—and, I admit, the idea may be beautiful. Over a given bass, I really invent new things, I find new melodies for it, I create.

This is an exceptionally instructive commentary on Brahms's methods: it is hardly too much to say that it contains much of his æsthetics in a nutshell.

ALFRED KALISCH.

* The next words in the original are 'What are all burdens.' They occur at the bottom of the page, and probably should have been crossed out, or possibly the writer forgot to finish the sentence.