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The Musical Times

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

MAY 1, 1917.

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— TO-DAY. —

THE TOWN MOUSE AND THE COUNTRY MOUSE.

BY ERNEST NEWMAN.

Some innocent suggestions of mine in the *New Witness* as to what musical criticism might be in an ideal world has brought on me, I see, the severe disapproval of my friend, Mr. H. A. Scott. I had urged that the critic of a big provincial paper like the *Manchester Guardian* had a better chance than the critic of the average London daily to do the best work that was in him, for two reasons. In the first place, the general policy of the paper demands that he shall be an interesting personality in himself,—readable, that is, for his own sake, independently of his immediate subject,—and in the second place he has not to waste so much of his time and energy on unimportant concerts, unimportant works, and unimportant performers. My contention was, and is, that a critic, whether of music or of any other art, does not justify his existence, and still less his engagement, unless he can produce work that has some claim to be literature. Mr. Scott playfully hints that I am cracking up the provincial critics, of whom I have the honour to be one, against the London critics, who have the honour to number Mr. Scott among them. Of course I did nothing of the kind; I hope I am not such a Pharisee as that, or so lacking in respect for the many able men, almost all of them personal friends of mine, who write in the London papers. It was not the country critic that I was setting up in opposition to the London critic, but the country system (I mean of course in the largest towns) as against the London system. And in spite of his slight irritation with me, I feel that Mr. Scott largely agrees with me. For it can hardly have escaped the notice of the careful reader of his article in the March number of the *Musical Times* that he and I are sometimes talking about two quite distinct things. I am anxious to see good musical criticism in all our leading papers, and to bring about a condition of affairs that will make it possible for the best men to do that sort of work, and for them to put forth the best that is in them. Mr. Scott argues for the retention of the musical reporter,—a person for whom, I frankly admit, I myself have very little use. But since Mr. Scott has taken this line I am quite willing to follow him along it, on the understanding that we shall part company when we reach the end of it.

His contention is that a concert is 'not only an artistic event' [it is not even that sometimes!] 'but also an item of news, and good journalism requires that it shall be dealt with accordingly.' My reply to that is that in nine cases out of ten the 'news' is not of the slightest interest to anyone, and not worth the while of the paper to print it. No one, I imagine, would say that the average reader of the *Daily Monitor* is interested in the announcement that Miss Jones has played a Beethoven Sonata at some little hall in London. The country is too full of Miss Joneses, all of them able to play a Beethoven Sonata quite well, for it to feel any stirring of the pulse at the news that one of the vast brood has been amusing herself in this fashion some scores or hundreds of miles away. I myself would not dream of reading, through a paragraph of this nature in a London paper; a glance at it would be enough to show that it dealt in a most ordinary way with a most ordinary occurrence, and that I had no more concern with it than with the adjacent reports of an inquest on a chimney-sweep in Bermondsey and of a company meeting in Holborn. Mr. Scott may reply that if I don't read paragraphs of this sort I shall not know what is going on. But that is just it! I don't want to know what is going on, when the goings-on are of such insignificance as this. I have always urged that the merely ordinarily good performer and performance are not worth writing about or reading about. Their work stands on much the same level as that of the ordinarily capable actor or elocutionist or photographer, or any other skilled reproducer. No paper would dream of reporting the doings of *these* people day after day; and for the life of me I cannot see why it should report the doings of all sorts of musicians who are merely average practitioners in their own line. The concert is undoubtedly 'news,' as Mr. Scott says; but I think he will find, on inquiry, that it is a species of news in which the average reader takes little or no interest. He would be surprised, I imagine, to discover how few people read news of this kind in the daily press. The case is a little stronger for 'news' as to the performances of the bigger people, though even here I doubt whether many people in Aberdeen, say, would read right through a paragraph in a London daily that told an unlistening world the programme played by Paderewski at his yesterday's recital. To those who were not at the recital, all this is about as interesting as a catalogue of the public buildings Paderewski had passed on his way from Trafalgar Square to Westminster Abbey.

The only thing, surely, that could make all this interesting would be the treatment of it by the critic. If he can say something fresh about either the works that Paderewski played or Paderewski's playing of them his paragraph will be worth reading, but not otherwise. But the critic will be able to supply this readable matter only if he *is* a critic, and not a reporter supplying 'news.' Mr. Scott pours scorn on the idea that the critic should be the central figure of the article. I would reply that if he is not, his article is not worth reading. I do not mean, of course, that the critic should set himself up as a bigger person than Paderewski or Chopin. What I mean is that there is no justification for his writing about these familiar two unless what he writes has an artistic value of its own. If all he can convey to us is that Chopin was a great composer and Paderewski is a great pianist, he may as well save himself the trouble. We knew all that long ago, and do not need reminding of it in a merely platitudinous way. The critic will only be readable, will only justify his writing at all about the performance, if he can say something that will quicken the nerve of the reader's appreciation—or, it may even be in some cases, his depreciation—of the work or of

the player. I would not contend that the best of critics could help falling into platitude at times; but that would be because he was bound, under the present imperfect system, to say something about certain works or performances about which the most sensible thing would be to say nothing.

But Mr. Scott rejects the theory that the critic should be—in the way and to the extent I have indicated—the central figure of the criticism. 'The newspaper reader,' he says, 'who turned to his morning paper for information about last night's concert, would have legitimate cause for complaint if he found himself confronted with nothing nearer the mark than a study of the critic's soul-state.' That remark, I think, is both indiscreet and disingenuous. It is indiscreet because Mr. Scott himself would be the last to hold that the reader turns to his morning paper merely for 'information' about last night's concert. If 'information' were all that he wanted, the reproduction of the programme would be sufficient. Mr. Scott says later that 'there is no reason why such notices should not also be quite interesting and readable if properly done,' *i.e.*, are 'made the subject of intelligent discussion by a critic who knows his business.' Precisely. That is just what I am contending for,—that as a mere matter of 'news,' last night's concert is of infinitesimal importance: the only thing that could engage our interest in it would be an able critic's treatment of it. I will not ask the reader to say how many concert notices have this desirable quality. I prefer to point out how disingenuous it is of Mr. Scott, while admitting that the critic's treatment of the concert alone can make the account of it readable, to try to discredit the same principle, when put forth by me, by a half-sneer at 'nothing nearer the mark than a study of the critic's soul-state.' 'Soul-state' is a term with which it is easy to raise a laugh; it can be made to suggest sentimentality and the shallower sort of 'fine writing.' But it is needless to say that there is no earthly necessity for criticism to be of this kind. Criticism is, or should be, the play of a reflective and instructed mind upon the phenomena with which art supplies it. When Mr. Scott sets down the amazing statement that 'such an attitude as is implied on the part of the critic by this kind of treatment approaches too nearly in its arrogance and self-sufficiency that of the old Quarterly reviewers, who utilised the volumes which they professed to notice merely as pegs on which to hang entirely independent disquisitions of their own,' I simply raise my hands in wonder and ask in what school of criticism Mr. Scott has studied his own business. The 'entirely independent disquisitions' is, if Mr. Scott will not be vexed at my saying so, pure nonsense; an 'entirely independent disquisition' upon 'Also sprach Zarathustra' would of course not be a criticism of that work at all. But Mr. Scott will surely not deny that all the enduring criticism of the world has been done by men who not only made the orbit of their criticism wider than the particular man or work that they happened to be considering, but wrote themselves upon their every line. It is for this reason that their criticisms have endured in many cases in which the works that called them forth have been forgotten. Lessing's 'Hamburgische Dramaturgie' is still fascinating reading to thousands who know nothing and care less about the majority of the plays he discusses. Sainte-Beuve and Hennequin and Brunetière are so readable because they add to their subject something that was not in it to begin with—something that is a distillation of their own personality and experience. Even a notice of Miss Jones's pianoforte playing might be made interesting by a critic who could bring it, in virtue either of its

goodness or of its badness, into focus with things that transcend it.

I find Mr. Scott strangely muddled on this point. In one breath he admits that the critic must be a man of ability and personality, able to attract attention by his own qualities. In the next breath he will have it that any such attraction of attention on his part must be 'of the irresponsible and irrelevant order,'—which is merely writing at hopeless random. Mr. Scott shows the fundamental weakness of his case by his persistent attempt to guy my principles instead of refuting them. To my remark that a good critical article is often of more value than the work or the performance that called it forth, all he can reply is that 'an ode to St. Cecilia or a sonnet on Debussy might be more valuable too, but neither would be accepted as a satisfactory substitute by the average newspaper reader who happened to be wanting something entirely different.' But I have never suggested that the critic should write wide of the mark; if he is discussing Miss Jones he must throw some light on Miss Jones. All I contend for is that if he does not throw this light on her, nobody—broadly speaking—will take the trouble to read him, for nobody except Miss Jones and her friends cares two pins how Miss Jones played last night, or whether she played. Miss Jones as a 'news item,' as Mr. Scott calls it, is not worth the printer's ink expended on her. Mr. Scott has only to turn to the literary world to see the truth of my main contention. The only people in the world who are read are the people who have proved themselves to be worth reading. The office boy on Shakespeare would not detain us for ten seconds; but Mr. Chesterton on a wretched book by the office boy would mean that we should all read the review to the end. 'The whole thing,' says Mr. Scott, 'boils itself down into the question of "what the public wants."' I am quite willing to argue on that basis; and my experience is that the public emphatically does not want a mere report of a concert as a 'news item,' and that it emphatically does want the critic who is worth reading for his own sake. It may not always agree with him, but it certainly reads him. No critic in this country has ever had a larger circle of readers than the late Arthur Johnstone, of the *Manchester Guardian*. Many people took the *Guardian* simply for Johnstone; on the morrow of every important concert in Manchester, musical readers all over England turned to the *Guardian* not for the 'news' of the concert, but solely and simply to see what Johnstone had to say about it. Mr. Scott is very strong on the distinction between criticism and 'good journalism,' by which he means 'information' and 'news items.' The distinction is fallacious. The musical critic who is worth reading for his own sake is a far better commercial asset to his paper than the musical reporter with his 'news' about all the Little Miss Nobodies of the profession. That is to say, his work is proved to be *better journalism* by the fact of its helping to sell the journal. There has never been a musical critic yet in this or any other country who did not make his following purely by his ability to lift his work out of the banal category of 'news.' I want to see more of this kind of critic in England. There are several of them in London who never get the chance to realise their full powers because of the evil conditions under which they have to work,—because of the stupid view of musical criticism that is taken by so many newspaper editors who are ignorant of music. I am not, as Mr. Scott apparently imagines, disparaging my London colleagues for the benefit of those in the provinces; I am trying to put an end to a state of affairs in London that is bad for music, for the reading public, and worst of all for the really able critics themselves.