MUSIC AND MATERIAL EXPRESSION

(A Plea for Aristotle)

By CYRIL SCOTT

I ONCE came across a man who rather wittily remarked that there was no more moonlight in the Moonlight Sonata than there was sunlight in Sunlight Soap. And in the face of all the modern tendencies to stretch the expressibility of music to its utmost limit, one is bound to doubt,—if one weighs the “pros” and “cons” of the matter—whether the programists are pursuing methods consistent with musical truth at all, and to ask oneself if Aristotle was not correct after all when he stated that “music expresses nothing but itself.”

The problem in fact is worthy of being looked into, and to begin with it is essential to see how music lies in its relationship to all the other arts. For as to these, it indeed bears towards them a unique position. Presuming that Aristotle is right and that music expresses really nothing but itself, at any rate the same cannot be maintained of painting and sculpture, since these must inevitably portray some things physical and material, however remote and ideal that portrayal may be. And this, although to a less extent, applies to poetry as well; for in spite of its frequent dealings with things abstract and spiritual, yet in that it uses words, it uses something definite, and in so far material. It is in short subject to limitations which if discarded would lead it into the realm of nonsense, and nowhere beyond.

True it is, however, that poets allow themselves licenses with regard to the exact meanings of words, just as philosophers very frequently do: yet it can only be with those words whose meanings in any case are somewhat elastic or very widely embracing. For a poet, as an instance, to use the word “forest” and by that word to mean a region where there are no trees; such a thing would be inconceivable and absurd: he might imply a celestial forest, or a dead one or a buried one, but there the matter would end—since a word must denote a certain limitation. But with music this is by no means the case: a sound, unless it be purely imitative, portrays nothing; it may undoubtedly awaken certain feelings in the listeners’ breasts; it may engender a sensation of boredom or of delight: but that is an entirely different matter from

inherently expressing boredom or delight. The word "rapture" denotes rapture, but it may awaken a great despair in the man who reads it—for he may become conscious of how very far from rapturous he himself is feeling at the moment. Likewise the word "death" not only means cessation from terrestrial existence, but also the very quintessence of dolefulness—and yet, if this word be perused by the unloving but expectant relation of the person who happens to be dead, it might awaken within his expectant heart a thrill of considerable elation.

To engender a feeling, then, is quite different from expressing it: and again, to have certain emotions associated with a thing, is surely not to express that thing either: wine does not express the maudlin, hilarious, visionary or soporific states of mind it may call forth in the mortal who partakes too lavishly of its allurements. Wine is nothing but wine: wine expresses nothing but wine; and as to whether it causes one person to sink to sleep gradually underneath the table, or another person, metaphorically speaking, to wake up more than under ordinary circumstances he ever could wake up—well, that has, as far as this argument is concerned, nothing to do with the matter. Moreover—to revert to music—if it really gave definite expression to that overpowering despair and melancholy, which not a few writers have read into the last movement of Tschaiowski's Sixth Symphony, for example, would not every compassionate eye in the whole auditorium be suffused with tears; and would not, at any rate, sensitive natures think twice before submitting their delicate constitutions to such a highly affecting and heartrending ordeal? To witness real and overpowering despair, when all is said, cannot even to the most hard of heart be exactly a pleasant thing; and although I am aware that there are certain persons who visit the theatres in order, as they put it, "to enjoy a good cry," yet fact goes to prove that even should they visit the concert-halls with the same purpose, their expectations would remain hopelessly and assuredly unfulfilled—sniffing, unless caused by a cold in the head, being a distinctly rare occurrence in the concert-hall.

But it may be asked, in contention to the horrible blasphemy of Aristotle which I have quoted, "if music then expresses nothing how has such a very reverse idea come into existence? And what about Symphonic Poems and Programme Composers?" And here these supposed interrogators must not forget the remotely imitative faculties of certain forms of music: they must not forget that certain chromatic and long-drawn string passages are something suggestive of a wail, and that it would be unusual to disassociate a

wail from distress. And, this being the case, it requires but a step further to arrange a system, which, however remotely and falsely shall express everything from a lamb's bleat to a cyclone. It is in fact perfectly conceivable that music—as a few thinkers have already contended—began with certain imitations, just as poetry is said to have originated in exclamations. To mimic the bird's song, for instance, was to produce a lively strain; to mimic a moan of distress, was to produce a plaintive strain, and so forth, until the wind and other mightier elements in nature came to be imitated as well—and until (what is more important to our subject) music passed almost entirely beyond the scope of mere imitation, and became *Itself*. And yet, after all these centuries of evolution, people seem to think that they are paying a musical composition the highest compliment when they, as it were, banish it back to its first primitive beginnings; when they, in fact, tell its embarrassed composer, how they are reminded of birds and cascades and rustling tree-tops, and what not—all very arcadian and rural, it is true—but did the particular composer happen to think of these when he wrote his *Fantasy*, or whatever it might be? And is it not conceivable that he might considerably dismay his admiring commentators by replying, that there was nothing further from his mind at the time than tree-tops and the like—for the singing birds were the united merriment of mother and first-born, the cascades were the gurgling of Baby's evening bottle, and the rustling tree-tops—well those he could not place at all.

Let it not be supposed, however, that I wish to fall into the error of musical intolerance, and that I would add to the general whoop and cry with regard to Programme-music. My aim is not to condemn that form of musical composition, but to show, for purposes which shall be revealed anon, that music does not truly and actually express, beyond the few things that it really can mimic, those which many litterateurs and musicians would fain make it express. Indeed, even in the comparatively few imitative things, would not the listeners go very far astray if there were no text-books to keep them in the right path? And are there not likely to be many uninitiated mortals, like the two ladies I heard of recently, who when listening to the sheep-bleating variation in *Don Quixote* felt quite sympathetic for the conductor on account of the extreme annoyance he must have been feeling; the annoyance arising from the fact (as they supposed) that the whole orchestra had "got out." Furthermore, admitted, that music can be made to resemble the bleating of lambs and so forth—could it be said that on such occasions it rises to its highest flights of

beauty? Can the cuckoo-call in Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony be regarded as one of that composer's most sublime moments? And would Dr. Richard Strauss be flattered if one told him that the sheep-bleating variation in Don Quixote, which so puzzled the two ladies, was the finest thing he ever penned? And yet, if the criterion of good art consists, as Shakespeare unfortunately remarked, in its trueness to Nature, he certainly ought to be: for in spite of the two ladies, never has he been truer to Nature before or since, to my knowledge, at any rate.

However, be that as it may, I think it must be fairly obvious to every upright thinker, that beyond the limits of all things possible to imitate by sound, music ceases to express actually and truly anything but itself. To make it express such a thing as Love, for instance, may be all very well from the composer's point of view, and indeed highly elevating and entrancing from the listener's, too, but from the sane, cold-blooded attitude of logic it is merely an absurdity. If, as I have attempted to show, music can express only what it can mimic, how can an abstract, soundless thing like Love be expressed by a noise? One might almost as well try to express hatred by a perfume. Nay, the very fact that two people may glean two absolutely different meanings out of one piece of music; that, whereas one person may have imagined a storm, merely of wind, and another a storm of romantic passion, and a third, nothing material whatever, this is surely enough to prove that the medium which is *supposed* to express these things, does not in reality do so after all.

But there is still another aspect of music to consider in this connection; there is that point of view, which, I believe originated in the mind of a great man—namely, that music expresses the Inexpressible. And like most paradoxes, but by no means all, it is both true and untrue. For our purpose, however, I must dwell first on, and emphasize that side which is untrue. And to begin with, I am inclined to say of the Inexpressible what Edward Carpenter so wittily said of astronomy: for to use his own words, "Astronomy is (regarded as) the most perfect science, *because we know least about it*"—because our ignorance of the actual phenomena is the most profound. And although many of us may be highly incensed at this apparent slight on such a study as astronomical science, yet we are bound to admit that when it comes to the *inexpressible* the ignorance of most of us is undoubtedly most profound, if not *quite* so. Nor does this similitude end here, since not only are we ignorant of the actual phenomena of this Inexpressible, but we want to express it by a medium which expresses

nothing but itself: by the combination of two negatives, in fact, we are giving birth to a positive, which is impossible. In truth, we can with no real justification say that music expresses the "inexpressible," since, in the first place, we do not know what music really does express, and in the second, as aforesaid, we assuredly do not know the "inexpressible." But what we *can* say, is, that music may perhaps express certain things out of the myriads and myriads which go to make up that vast unfathomable region of thought which we call the Inexpressible: and beyond that we certainly are not justified in going.

And yet, in emphasizing what I have urged as the untrue side of this conception, does not the fault arise perhaps merely in that difference, already alluded to, between expressing a thing, and engendering a certain feeling? For it is undoubtedly true that music often gives rise to a sensation which is entirely inexpressible, and which perhaps no other medium could call forth. As far as music itself is concerned, it cannot signify whether its votaries write symphonic poems, or wish to express the inexpressible, or nothing at all but pure sound for sound's sake, as long as they give real intrinsic pleasure to their listeners, and above all, produce a novel work of art. Theories, however true or false, do not change a thing; the explanation which may be advanced to account for this or that, can not persuade the stars to move one inch from their courses, or the tide to politely refrain from wetting the feet of Canute. For the explanation is made to suit the fact, and not the fact to suit the explanation. If the adamant power of Originality asserts itself in the soul of the genius, no petty pre-existent rules can hold him back, for from this moment he makes, as it were, a new rule. As Edward Dowden puts it in his admirable work on Shakespeare—"In due time we fling away our manuals, our codes of spiritual drill, our little rules and restrictions. A deeper order takes authority over our being, and resumes in itself the narrower order; the rhythm of our life acquires a larger harmony, a movement free and yet sure as that of Nature." And as to these new laws, the explanation and also the justification thereof, that is left to the pundits and to those whom a somewhat bitter philosopher has termed "learned idlers."

With regard to the theory which lies at the basis of the whole Programme-system, although with the lesser lights it may on the one hand often stand as an excuse for barren and uninspired ugliness, yet on the other, if it also gives us such sublimities as the prelude to "Tristan and Isolde," or the conclusion of "Tod und Verklärung," well, we can afford to take the evil with the good, and forgive

it all its transgressions. That certain composers find a stimulus to their creative faculties in a material or abstract idea, and by the translation, however wrongly, of that into music engender beauties which otherwise they might not have been able to engender, this is quite enough, in one sense, to justify the system. Moreover a system which so many musicians have at times adopted must have something considerable in its favour, and its evil side could easily be mitigated if its votaries would select exalted and abstract subjects in place of those sordid and grotesque ones, necessitating sundry subterranean gruntings and bass-tubal uglinesses, meant no doubt as a hair-stimulant, in the way of making it stand on end, but most often resulting only in a stimulant for the risible muscles instead.

Indeed—if one takes into account all the aforementioned things—it is almost self-evident that music (with certain exceptions, principally to be found in Wagner) is at its highest artistic pinnacle when furthest from the plain of mimicry. And the reason lies in the fact that on those occasions it is more truly and intrinsically itself; it is, in fact, entirely unfettered by the material element. And—if one wishes to put it in that way—it has passed onto the plane of the inexpressible; the word “inexpressible” here meaning that which is not expressible by any other medium *but* music. In short, the whole thing comes back to the phrase of Aristotle—music expresses nothing but itself.