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The Musical Times

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

NOVEMBER 1, 1915.

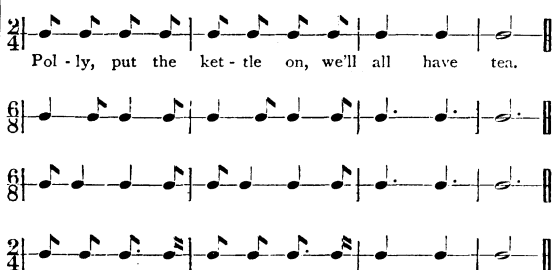
HUGO WOLF AND THE LYRIC.

BY ERNEST NEWMAN.

The Editor of the *Musical Times* is kind enough to suggest that I should supplement the merely negative results of my examination of certain aspects of Brahms's lyrical writing by an exposition of Wolf's counter-merits in the same field. As, however, I have enlarged on most of these points in my book on Wolf, I do not think it necessary to go over them all again here; though a few supplementary remarks and a correction of some common misconceptions may not be out of place.

The most frequent misconception with regard to Wolf is in connection with his 'declamation.' The whole subject of declamation in music is, indeed, in a state of great confusion. That whatever liberties some of the older composers may have permitted themselves with poetry, a modern composer should be careful not to wed the words to melodies that make nonsense of verbal accents and quantity—this, I suppose, will hardly be disputed by anyone. As we have already seen, even the Brahmsians, in apologising for the slight violence that is done to the sense of the words in 'Wie bist du, meine Königin,' ask us not to attach too much importance to the 'momentary infraction of a rule which Brahms elsewhere shows himself most careful to observe'—a plain admission that it is the primary duty of the composer to respect verbal values. But one needs to guard against the mistaken notion that there is one way only in which a given line of poetry can be accurately 'declaimed' in music. I venture to think that M. Romain Rolland goes a little astray in his treatment of this subject in his 'Notes sur Lully.'^{*} He tells us how Reichardt, when setting Goethe's lyrics to music, used to get the poet himself to declaim them to him, note down the declamation, and then try to reproduce the same values in his music. M. Rolland goes on to say: 'A comparison of the same poems in the various musical accentuations given to them by musicians of different epochs—all equally solicitous for accentuation—enables us to fix the varieties of poetic declamation during a century. The musicians have more or less consciously transposed into music the manner of declamation of their epoch; and in their melodies we hear again the voices of the great actors who were their models, or who were accepted as authorities in their own circle. So it was with Lully: his musical declamation brings before us that of the Comédie-Française of his time, and especially that of the [actress]

Champmeslé.' Surely there is a triple error here. In the first place, whatever may have been the practice of a great *operatic writer* here and there, it is certain that the *lyrists* have never troubled themselves in the slightest about the declamation of actors. In the second place, there is no such thing as 'the declamation of an epoch'; actors of the same epoch declaim in different styles, and composers of the same epoch adopt different systems of declamation in their songs. Who could guess, for instance, from an examination of their lyrics alone, that Wolf and Brahms were of the same generation, and actually lived in the same town? And in the third place, it is impossible to fix upon any one way of 'declaiming' a poem in music as the only right one. There may be half-a-dozen ways, to none of which could objection be taken. 'Polly, put the kettle on, we'll all have tea,' for example, might with equal reason be set to melodies having, among others, the following different note-values:



It is quite impossible to record in musical notation the thousands of minute shades of difference there may be between one way of speaking a line and another; so that the best musical declamation can never be anything more than a compromise. Though Wolf's declamation is, on the whole, a model of fidelity to speech-values, it cannot be denied that now and then he sacrifices the proper proportion of a syllable in order to avoid disturbing the outline of a melodic figure, just as Brahms and hundreds of other composers have done. But after all, these lapses are rare in Wolf, and exceedingly rare in his maturer works. On the other hand, a great deal of misunderstanding exists as to the purpose of some of Wolf's accentuation. In an article that appeared a few years ago in an American magazine, combating some of my own opinions on Wolf, the writer displayed a curious insensitiveness to the subtleties and delicacies as distinct from the mechanics of poetic scansion. In the song 'Tretet ein, hoher Krieger,' for example, he thought such stresses as the following 'unfortunate or even absurd':



But Wolf *deliberately* lengthens the 'mir' in order to throw it into special relief—a very different proceeding, of course, from making a naturally short syllable long merely because the melody,

* In the volume 'Musiciens d'autrefois.' The reader should be warned that the English translation of this book, that appeared recently, is rich in inaccuracies.

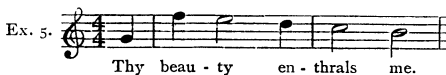
originally conceived without reference to that particular line, happened to have a long note at that point :



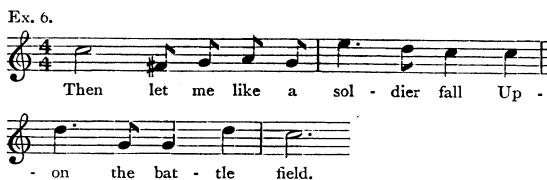
This is defensible on the same lines as No. 1.



In both these cases only an ear that could not distinguish between mechanical scansion and natural flexible speech could imagine it had detected an infelicity. The prolongations of the final syllables of 'lassen' and 'Seele' are not only justifiable by the general character of the melody and of the poem, but are in accordance with one of the commonest practices of musicians; for many a syllable that the mechanical prosodist would declare to be short by nature can with impunity be made long by the composer—for example, the word 'beauty' in the following passage :



Here the prolongation of the 'ty' would offend no one but a pedant, because the general balance of the line is felt to be all right. The first syllable of 'soldier' is not given, in ordinary speech, two or three times the time-value of the second syllable; yet no one feels that there is anything wrong with such a piece of musical scansion as this :

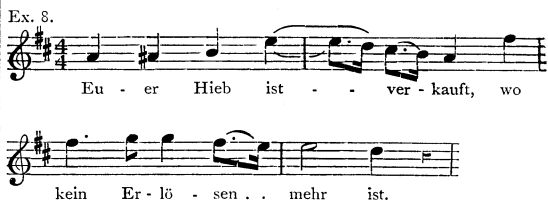


though everyone will agree that the stress on the second syllable of 'upon' is excessive.

In the following passage from 'Tretet ein, hoher Krieger,' we may object to the undue stress on 'ist'; but to object to the prolongation of 'wo,' as the American writer to whom I am referring did, is again simply to scan with a foot-rule instead of with the ear of a poet and a musician :



All that has happened is that Wolf, at the climax of the song, has emphasised certain significant words by means of a *rallentando*. Instead of writing the line thus :



as another composer might have done, he preferred to write it in a form that suggests just the emphasis a speaker would give to the words. It is a little too bad to hold Wolf responsible for the lack of poetic and musical understanding of some of his critics. If anyone tells me he does not like the melody Wolf has written to the line, I might not agree with him, but I would recognise that his objection is, in its way, an æsthetic one; but to quote the line as a specimen of 'unfortunate or even absurd stress' is to write, not Wolf's epitaph as a judge of poetic values, but one's own.

Here and there, as I have said, valid objections may be taken to Wolf's accentuation. As a rule, little weaknesses of this kind show themselves in his lyrics of the folk-song type, in which the effort to maintain a certain uniformity of melodic and rhythmic pattern leads now and then to the prolongation of a syllable or an excessive stress on it. It is precisely because Brahms was so obsessed by German folk-song that his lyrical forms are so often mechanical—a point that is forgotten both by those who commend him for his devotion to folk-song, and by those who prescribe English folk-song as the model for our own composers.

But as a musical notation that shall accurately reproduce the more delicate values of speech is impossible, and as, in any case, a line of poetry may be phrased by different composers in different ways, we must be tolerant rather than dogmatic in these matters. What we can never tolerate, however, is a misplaced accent that either perverts the meaning of a line or greatly weakens the force of it. A striking example of an error of this kind is to be seen in Schubert's setting of Goethe's 'Prometheus.' At the end the chained Titan hurls defiance at Zeus, his oppressor—'Here sit I; men do I make in my own image,—a race that shall resemble *me*,' &c. Schubert, being too much engrossed in working out the accompaniment figure indicated in the following quotation :



weakly allows the all-important 'mir' in the voice part to slip in almost unnoticed at the end of a bar, while the relatively unimportant 'gleich' receives the whole force of the strongest musical accent of the next bar. Wolf rightly not only stresses the 'mir,' but throws it into extra relief by giving it a higher and a longer note than any of the others:

Ex. 10.

(To be continued.)

THE SCORES OF BERLIOZ AND SOME MODERN EDITING.

By TOM S. WOTTON.

One result of the War has been that musicians have had their attention drawn more particularly to the general untrustworthiness of modern German editions. The truth indeed was long known to the few, but the many had not quite grasped it. Some were too busy to inquire closely into the matter; and others preferred to indulge in that ignorance which is bliss. After all, the editions were well engraved, artistically produced, and, above all, cheap. It really was not of great consequence that Herr X, Dr. Y, or Prof. Z had eliminated a few bars here, or altered the phrasing there, had changed the dynamic signs in one place, or introduced harmony or even passages of his own in another. The result was not displeasing,—and it was cheap!

But the subject is of great importance. As Saint-Saëns says, in his 'Ecole Buissonnière,' of Berthold Damcke, who assisted Mlle. Pelletan in her magnificent edition of Gluck, 'he was of the same race of those German professors, who have since become legion, whose nefarious influence is such that, in a short time, the ancient editions having disappeared, the works of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, even Chopin, will have become unrecognisable.' Amongst Damcke's sins were the changing of Gluck's *Hautes-contre* (male altos) to contraltos, and the marking of his clarinets as being in C, when the composer specified merely 'clarinets,' leaving it to his performers to choose the form of instrument (in C, B \flat , D, &c.) suitable to the key, for clarinets in those days did not possess a full chromatic scale, and thus could not play in every key. *Coups d'archet* were added by Damcke, and in 'Armide' he even went so far as to re-orchestrate the ballet airs, 'believing naively that he was fulfilling the author's intentions.' It must be

added that some of Damcke's errors were continued in the operas published after his death, as Mlle. Pelletan wished to preserve the unity of the edition.

In 'Beethoven and his IX. Symphonies,' the late Sir George Grove remarks on the 'curious disregard of the composer's [Beethoven's] wishes' displayed by the editor. But we have to come to more recent times to appreciate the full flavour of the iconoclastic spirit pervading German editing of scores. Of this we can have no better example than the so-called Complete Edition of Berlioz's works, which is not complete, and probably never will be. In this the Leipzig publishers' part is thoroughly well done. The engraving is clear, the scheme of the edition excellent, and the price moderate. Their fault lay in their choice of editors. Yet, on the face of it, they would appear to have chosen wisely,—Felix von Weingartner, under whose direction fine performances of Berlioz had been given, and the late Charles Malherbe, who not only possessed a valuable collection of Berlioz's autographs (now in the Library of the Conservatoire), but had done creditable work in the way of analyses for concert programmes. There does not seem to be much doubt that the leading spirit was the former, M. Malherbe being too amiable a man to struggle successfully against Teutonic arrogance.

Whether a conductor makes an ideal editor is a moot point. Having made an effect with some particular reading of a work or a passage, it does not take much self-persuasion for him to believe that his author intended that reading, even though his absolute text is opposed to it. On the other hand, a conductor is able to elucidate many technical points not understandable by one who has only heard an orchestra from the auditorium. In Weingartner's case, this ability was, however, tempered by the fact that he was not conversant with French orchestral traditions, as is proved by his mutilations of Berlioz's bassoon parts. Worse still, neither of the editors knew the whole work of their author. They not only dealt with one score, ignorant of those that were to follow, and thus had to change constantly their method (if they ever possessed one), but they had little acquaintance with Berlioz's literary work and letters, in which many hints may be found. As an example of the latter may be cited a letter to Liszt (June 27, 1852), in which Berlioz, referring to the two violins and violoncello behind the scenes in the last movement of the 'Harold' Symphony, points to an error in the second violin part in the French edition, and remarks that he wishes two oboes and a bassoon to be added to the three string parts, except for the psalmody (the repeated G's and B's). The fault of engraving is repeated in the 'monumental' edition, and the composer's wishes disregarded in respect to the wood-wind instruments.* As an example of the former, the case of the

* In a later letter to Liszt (April 12, 1856), Berlioz says that he has been engaged in correcting the faults of engraving throughout his works. These corrected scores are doubtless those that Lavoix says are now in the Bibliothèque Nationale. Such a collection, revised by the composer himself, should prove invaluable in preparing a conscientious edition of his works, which is perhaps the reason why it has been ignored by the editors of the Leipzig edition.