

Rebel Romantics

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there anything known of either to the bank of public opinion, totting up material profits. We must send in the account. With a view to press it, there are one or two considerations to be remembered. It was the default of science, and everyone's consequent absorption in those material profits, that lately brought about a world disaster. Why, during fifty years or more, had she no time for the soul of man? On learning that skulls had grown bigger, why did she assume that they had grown only by the development of her own kind of faculty? Is the bank well satisfied with the gains of mere curiosity in Europe?

The plain truth is that the arts, including the great art of life, are the main concern of man on his planet, and that, if they are neglected or belittled, the peril of his situation becomes unendurable and meaningless. The sooner they reassert some authority the better. If they indeed spring from the same root as morals and religion, we should demand from science that chapter on the æsthetic of evolution without more delay, and make the most of it. Any journalist catering for the man in the street would find it topical. Any man in the street, remembering what the mere beauty of the world meant to him in war-time, might begin to respect himself. As for music, whatever indirection she may have suffered, her special claim is that alone, perhaps, among the arts she has not bent the knee to materialism.

## REBEL ROMANTICS

BY MRS. FRANK LIEBICH

An unruly 19th century romantic composer infringing the laws of his predecessors, the classicists, seems a tame, conciliatory individual compared with a combative and apparently untrammelled contemporary modernist. Yet to the fageydom of their time, Schumann, Chopin, Berlioz, Liszt, and even the reputable Brahms, were lawless revolutionaries. It is conceivable that the work of the most ultra-modern composers of to-day and to-morrow may appear as temperate and mellifluous to the plain man of the 21st century as the 19th century romantics seem now to us.

But these romantic composers had their own battles to fight, and much derision and abuse to contend with. Among them no finer knight-errants existed in the cause of music and the convictions of musicians than Schumann and Liszt. Delving among their writings we may come across paragraphs and pages that with slight substitution of terms and names might have been used by present-day writers commenting on contemporary composers and their compositions.

Schumann, most equitable of critics, writing to Keferstein, reproaches him for not displaying the same interest in the efforts of the younger generation of artists as he used to do. Keferstein had said that it was only through Bach and Kuhnau that he could understand where Mozart and Haydn got their music from, and that he could not imagine where modern composers got theirs:

'I don't quite share your opinion [says Schumann]. Mozart and Haydn had only a partial and imperfect knowledge of Bach, and we can have no idea how Bach, had they known him in all his greatness, would have affected their creative powers. But the thoughtful combinations, the poetry and humour of modern music, originate chiefly in Bach. Mendelssohn, Bennett, Chopin, Hiller—in fact, all the so-called romantic school (of course, I am speaking of Germans)—approach Bach far nearer in their music than Mozart ever did; indeed, all of them knew Bach most thoroughly. I myself confess my sins daily to that mighty one, and endeavour to purify and straighten myself through him.'

Schumann naturally dismisses the idea of Kuhnau being placed on a level with Bach. 'There is no getting near Bach,' he says, 'he is unfathomable.'

Among Schumann's articles contributed to the *Neue Zeitschrift* there is a short one headed *The Devil's Romanticists*. An attack, he says, had been made on them by a director of music at Breslau, and the *Universal Musical Times* 'for ever thunders against them':

'Where are they, and who are they? [he continues]. Perhaps Mendelssohn, Chopin, Bennett, Hiller, Henselt, Taubert? What have the old gentlemen to say against them? Are Vanhal, Pleyel, Herz, or Hünten of more value? But if those and others are meant, people should speak more plainly about it. And if some people twaddle about the "torment and martyrdom of this epoch of transition," there are grateful and far-sighted ones enough who entertain different opinions. A stop ought to be put, however, to this mixing up of everything together, and of throwing suspicion on the endeavours of every young composer, merely because there are weak and objectionable points in the German-French school, as in Berlioz, Liszt, &c. And if you are not satisfied, old gentlemen, why not give us works yourselves—works, works, not only words?'

Schumann's remarks on equal and unequal rhythm and measure in connection with Berlioz's Symphony, *The Life of an Artist*, are in advance of his time, and have a bearing on the fluid time, the barring by phrase instead of by time-unit, even to the dancing of Massine to phrases instead of to measure.

'It seems [writes Schumann] as though the music sought to return to its origin before it was confined by the laws of time, and to elevate itself to more unfettered language, more poetic accent—such as we find in the Greek chorus, the language of the Bible, the prose of Jean Paul.'

Then he reminds his readers of the prophetic remark made many years ago by the child-like, poetic Caul Wagner (1722-1822):

'When it becomes possible [said he] to render the tyranny of measure in music wholly imperceptible and invisible, so that this art is made apparently free; when it attains self-consciousness, then it will possess the complete power of embodying lofty ideas, and become from that moment the first of the fine arts.'

The national movement in music is touched upon by Schumann in words which have an even stronger bearing on present-day methods than the beginnings of it in his own time. In an article on the Danish composer, Gade, and his *Ossian Overture*, Schumann says :

‘It really begins to look as if the nations bordering on Germany desired to emancipate themselves from the influence of German music. This might annoy a German nationalist, but it could only appear natural and cheering to the more profound thinker, if he understood human nature. So we see the French-Pole, Chopin ; Bennett, the Englishman ; Verhulst, the Hollander ; and the representatives of Hungarian music giving promise and performance of what must lead them to be regarded as most worthy embodiments of the artistic tendency of their native lands.’

Then he speaks of Lindblad, of Stockholm, transcribing old folk-songs, and Ole Bull—both pioneers of our own modern folk-song experts—and he reminds these Scandinavians of their lakes, mountains, aurora-borealis, and antique runes, so that the North may well dare to speak its own language.

Over and over again Schumann’s insight and keen musical comprehension were placed at the service of his contemporaries. Thus in 1838, when writing to one of the contributors to his journal, the *Neue Zeitschrift*, A. W. von Zuccalmaglio, on the subject of another critic’s objection to Berlioz’s *Overture to Les Francs Juges*, he says :

‘Honestly I grudge the paper for it, for so far as I am concerned Berlioz is as clear to me as the blue sky. I think there is really a new era dawning for music,—in fact it must. Fifty years bring many changes and advances.’

And later, in 1852, writing to R. Pohl :

‘I am quite used to the public not understanding my compositions, especially the better and deeper ones, after a first hearing. Of course, without studying the score, no work that is at all important can be understood at a first hearing.’

Gade, Field, Chopin, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Liszt, one and all are considered in Schumann’s *Essays and Criticisms*. There seemed no limit to his understanding—until one day there appeared a stumbling-block, and at the same time a lack of perception, the unhearing ear : a fate that may at any moment befall the widest- and clearest-minded critic of to-day. It may overtake anyone. When it does, he will know he has reached the end of his tether so far as modern music is concerned, and he will be wise to own to it. For Schumann the limit was Wagner. To-day the limit for some people is Bartók, Stravinsky, Malipiero, or a few of the younger Englishmen or Frenchmen :

‘There is Wagner [Schumann writes to Mendelssohn in 1845], who has just finished another opera [*Tannhäuser*], undoubtedly a clever fellow, full of crazy ideas, and bold to a degree . . . I declare he cannot write or imagine four consecutive bars that are melodious or *even correct*. And now the score lies beautifully printed before us, and its fifths and octaves into the bargain.’

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Eight years later, writing to C. Van Bruyck, he resumes :

‘What you tell me about Wagner has interested me very much. To put it in as few words as possible, he is not a good musician, he lacks feeling for form and harmony. If you were to hear his operas on the stage I am sure you could not but feel deep emotion in a great many instances . . . But as I said before, the music apart from the whole performance is poor—often downright amateurish, meaningless, and repulsive.’

‘Neither Schumann nor Berlioz could rest satisfied at seeing the steady advance of Wagner’s works,’ wrote Liszt to Dr. F. Brendel in 1868. Both of them suffered from a suppressed enthusiasm for the music of the future. But Schumann could see clearly ahead in most matters. Writing of Chopin’s *Sonata in B flat minor*, he says :

‘Only Chopin begins and ends so : with dissonances through dissonances into dissonances. But how many beauties this piece contains ! The idea of calling it a *Sonata* is a caprice, if not a jest, for he has bound together four of his wildest children, to smuggle them under this name into a place to which they could not else have penetrated.’

Then he proceeds to imagine a worthy country preceptor visiting a music-shop for the purpose of buying some new music. A pile of novelties is placed before him, but they do not interest him. Finally a *Pianoforte Sonata* is produced. It is Chopin’s, in B flat minor. Thinking a sonata is a good old-time composition, he purchases it, and takes it home. Similarly, nowadays, another such an old-fashioned individual might inadvertently buy Bartók’s latest *Sonata* for violin and pianoforte, and take it back to a quiet, retired home in the wolds. On closer acquaintance the German preceptor is shocked at the rank blasphemy of the composition, and tosses it aside. Then Schumann sees in fancy, in years to come, some descendant of this individual chancing on the *Sonata*, brushing the dust off its cover, playing it, and saying to himself, ‘This man was not very wrong.’

Elsewhere Schumann reminds his hearers that he prided himself on having introduced Chopin from an unknown world into publicity, and of how triumphantly Chopin issued from the fight with the ‘ignoramuses and Philistines.’

Parallels with the past and present can be found in plenty in the writings of this 19th century composer, which will furnish profitable subjects for meditation. The disagreements between rebels and reactionaries are and have been a constant source of interest and diversion. If ever they should cease much dulness would ensue, and a considerable amount of entertaining literature would be lost to posterity.

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