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(SUPPLEMENT.)
THE MUSICAL TIMES,
And Singing Class Circular.
 DECEMBER 1, 1870.

CHRISTMAS MUSIC.

BY HENRY C. LUNN.

If it were necessary to perpetuate by any artificial aids the feeling of brotherhood annually called forth by the great English Festival of Christmas, there can be little doubt that the task ought to be effectually accomplished by the mass of appropriate literature which the season invariably produces. Pictorial geniality is profusely represented by every illustrated paper, from the highest to the lowest. Family groups in the drawing-room, surrounded by every luxury, are powerfully contrasted with family groups in the street, surrounded by every misery. Village scenes, with the conventional snow effects, are carefully rendered in consonance with the period by the introduction of children bringing home the holly and mistletoe, or of men cheerfully tugging along a large piece of wood which we are told is the "Yule log." In the cheaper class of Christmas pictures (where the presence of gaudy colours may be presumed to compensate for the absence of drawing) we have strange and heterogeneous masses of fruit and flowers, plum-puddings and mince-pies, in the midst of which grey-headed men and women and chubby red-cheeked children are seated, apparently absorbed in the one resolution of enjoying themselves and wishing an equal amount of enjoyment to others. As a rule, it would be better to say but little of the letter-press illustration of these illustrations. Written to order, and with the fixed conviction that the author is merely the lacquey to the artist, it can scarcely be expected that any large amount of literary excellence should be found in them; and many therefore often serve to light the fire upon which the holly is thrown after the festivities of the season have closed. Christmas books, too, with their attractive and artistically designed exteriors, have rarely an abstract merit which can raise them from the drawing-room table to the library-shelf, when the occasion which called them into existence has passed away. As titles often act as a dead-weight to the exertions of poor noblemen, so does the author of a work of this kind feel that it is not easy to exercise his power in a legitimate manner, because he knows that he is not so much expected to write a good book as one which shall justify its name. The exceptions to this fact of course prove the rule; and lest we should be thought to undervalue the most brilliant of all these exceptions, let us hasten to say that the "Christmas Carol," of Charles Dickens—although it called up a host of imitators, amongst whom must unfortunately be included the author himself—is not only one of the most delightful stories in our language, but one of the purest sermons ever preached from a pulpit in any Christian country.

Passing from the passive home enjoyments provided for this festive season to the recreations supplied by managers of our public places of amusement, we shall find that they are about on an equality with those already mentioned. Whenever an attempt is made to combine pleasure with science—as at some of our "Institutions"—it is usually a signal failure;

for as men naturally throw aside the pleasure to get at the science, and children throw aside the science to get at the pleasure, both young and old are equally disappointed. That time-honoured juvenile Annual, the Christmas Pantomime, no doubt at one period appealed to the sympathies of the little people for whom it was intended with an irresistible power which stamped it as a National Institution; but the comic element has long since departed from it, and in its place we have scenic display, long, dreary ballets—in which children are made to see for the first time how lightly fairies are clad—wearisome dialogue, the rhyme of which is supposed to conceal the want of reason, and tricks, based upon the excellent pantomimic changes of old, the temporary political or social meaning of which is too clever for the children and too stupid for the parents.

Were it within our province, we could multiply instances to prove that the level of mediocrity in the departments to which we have alluded is scarcely creditable to the artistic and literary talent of the country; but we have now to speak of the art to which our Journal is devoted, and have merely thus prefaced our observations upon Christmas music to show that, although this is generally bad enough, it is no worse than other so-called intellectual amusements provided for the season. In the first place, however, let us glance at the music of the Church. As devotion should precede pleasure in a purely religious Festival like Christmas, it might naturally be supposed that the greatest musical intellects of a country would be employed to glorify a day of all others the most important in the history of the world's progress. But how can this be possible whilst, with few exceptions, music plays so secondary a part in our services, even upon Festivals and Fast-days, when, if admitted at all, it should be brought with all its wondrous power to dispose the hearts of men for the solemn duty before them. Surely at Christmas in every Church in England where a choir can be obtained, something more than the conventional musical service should be attempted—some special setting of that portion of holy writ which bears upon the event which has sanctified the day. Were this the case, composers for the Church might eventually obtain that recognition which in days gone by was awarded to them, and exceptional genius in this department of the art would be directed and encouraged as it should be. But, independently of the service of the Church, why is it that we have no great performances of works suitable to the time, in other buildings? It is true that the "Messiah" is always given, not only in the metropolis but in the provinces; but, to say nothing of the many fine compositions which, strangely enough, are consigned to comparative oblivion, has not Bach written a "Christmas Oratorio," and would it not be appropriate to the season to re-produce the grand and noble thoughts contained in this sublime work before a Christian audience in the nineteenth century? Music was with Bach, as with Handel and Mendelssohn, the language in which he preached Christianity to the world, and it certainly appears unaccountable that in a country which prides itself upon its appreciation of the highest sacred works, the compositions of so profound a genius should be so little known.

Domestic Christmas music, like domestic Christmas literature, rarely survives the season. The piles of compositions now lying upon our table for review

are gradually assuming a holiday exterior. Holly, mistletoe, and the other characteristics of the time of year, bloom with as much regularity upon the front page of these works as they do in our fields and gardens. Who plays or sings such pieces we are at a loss to comprehend; for it has been our good fortune never to meet with a genuine specimen of them in private drawing-rooms. Why a composition should be sacred because it is called "Christmas Thoughts," or "A walk to the Church," we cannot understand; nor can we be made to believe that a common-place melody followed by equally common-place arpeggios, should be appropriate to the season because two or three sprigs of holly, brilliantly coloured, appear on the title-page. Surely if sacred pieces, either vocal or instrumental, are required, we have but to extract from the works of those great religious composers who wrote not for a period, but for all time. Christmas music! why are we not already in possession of enough to last for our life-time; and should we throw aside this substance in vain pursuit of the shadow?

But apart from sacred music, or what is usually termed so—for in the instrumental compositions of the great masters it is indeed difficult to determine the line which divides sacred from secular works—we should be glad to see a higher style of piece take the place of those vapid effusions which usually fill the portfolios of our juvenile friends from school. We do not know the exact locality of the "Salon," for which most of our pianoforte works appear to be written; but if, when translated into English, it means "drawing room," we can only say that this is a part of the house which a musical parent would especially avoid when his children are home for the holidays. This is not as it should be, and not as it would be were real men of genius encouraged, to the exclusion of successful pretenders. Let our readers who really know good music from bad, play over the exquisite little composition by Mendelssohn, given in the present number of our Journal. This is No. 1 of "Six Christmas Pieces," dedicated to his "young friends;" and yet how many of our "young friends" know it—nay, how many of the teachers of our "young friends" ever heard of it? Mendelssohn-lovers as we profess to be in this country, we may venture to say that, even in schools where music is made a "feature," as it is called, this collection of little gems has never yet penetrated. Of course we know that to play these pieces according to the intention of the composer requires a training in the right direction, but then it is a training in the right direction that we are advocating; and were such music as this universally taught, only those masters who could form the hand and taste of the pupil for the performance and appreciation of such pieces would be retained in educational establishments. It is no argument to say that young people like trifling and showy compositions better than more solid works—children may prefer sweets to wholesome and nutritious food—but this cannot be admitted as a reason why those who have the charge of them should indulge this taste. Were Mendelssohn's Six Pieces interpreted in the true spirit, they would make their way to many holiday circles, and be welcomed with pleasure by young and old, even without the conventional Christmas berries upon the title-page.

Something must also be said respecting the music supplied for the principal theatrical attraction during this children's jubilee—the Christmas Pantomime.

We have already alluded to the absence of humour in these productions, and should be glad if we could add that we find it replaced by any improvement in other departments. Not to dwell, however, upon the utter unsuitableness of most of the scenes of a modern Pantomime for a juvenile audience, we cannot help affirming that the sweepings of Music-halls and the streets can scarcely be said to form a highly intellectual musical *melange* for an Overture, that the common-place dances of a mere theatrical "arranger" do not make very exhilarating ballet-music, and that the conventional scrapings which usually accompany the "harlequinade" have a wonderfully somnolent effect, even upon the children. If the Pantomime were really what it should be, a mirthful holiday dramatic entertainment, aided by exquisitely painted scenery, we have little doubt that music in sympathy with the refined character of such a piece would be speedily forthcoming. Why should not musicians of eminence compose a Christmas Pantomime, as well as a Fairy Opera? Has not Mendelssohn shown us in the music to the "Midsummer Night's Dream" how a man of genius can write both for fairies and clowns? For sparkling gracefulness, rustic humour, and true dramatic feeling this work stands unrivalled, and could not such music illustrate a piece which should equally delight children and grown people? Why the Overture to the "Midsummer Night's Dream" might be the Overture to a Pantomime—but not such a Pantomime, let us hope, as we have seen of late years.

A word before we conclude upon those privileged disturbers of our nocturnal slumbers, the Waits. We know that these midnight musicians have many enemies; but we frankly confess that we rank ourselves amongst their friends. Whether it is that we like to preserve the few old English customs still left to us, or that their strains during the still hours of night revive the dreamy scenes of childhood, when Christmas always brought us into the presence of the many loved and loving ones who have long since passed away, we know not; but certain it is that we always welcome these public Christmas serenaders, even when they break in upon the enjoyment of that universally prized luxury—our first sleep. It is true that we should like to introduce a reform both in the choice of pieces and the execution of them. The instruments are certainly not often in tune; and the refreshment necessary to support vitality in the cold night air is apt to tell upon the general steadiness of the performance. The bass too is usually "vamped," (as it is termed) by a player who, feeling that he has no field for expression, is content to blow or scrape a few notes when a favourable opportunity occurs, as if he were afraid of marring the general effect. But, with all their shortcomings, the Waits have our sympathies; and they have a right also perhaps to calculate upon our tolerance, for are they not the only artists who can fairly reckon upon their audience being half asleep?

Christmas Carols have a character which should ever render them peculiarly appropriate to the season. When we find it stated by Bishop Taylor that the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the hymn which the Angels sang to the Shepherds at our Lord's Nativity, was the ancient Christmas Carol, it is scarcely to be wondered at that of all Christmas customs Carol singing should be one still rigidly observed; for there are few of the other observances of the day which can be dated back further than the second century. In olden times

Christmas Carols were sung in the Churches instead of Psalms, the Clerk at the conclusion wishing the congregation a merry Christmas and a happy New Year. Many collections of Carols are annually published, and the simple beauty of the tunes attached to them will always recommend them to musical as well as non-musical hearers. To many, however, these well known airs frequently call up a feeling of sadness; for when the family circle is assembled in the drawing-room, the fire brightly burning, and the curtains closely drawn, how often do we hear them feebly uttered by a voice under our window; the poor vocalist, barefooted and clad in rags, forming a melancholy commentary upon the hopeful words she is singing. To her, Christmas music is but a means of getting a loaf: let us hope that the "merry gentlemen" upon whom she is invoking a blessing may, when such sounds meet their ears, not only pause in their merriment to exercise the true English virtue—Charity, but be led to reflect whether it is not a reproach to us that in a Christian country, poverty and hunger should meekly plead for relief through the medium of a Christmas Carol.

Reviews.

NOVELLO, EWER AND CO.

Fidelio. An Opera by Beethoven. Edited, and the English words translated, by Natalia Macfarren.

THIS volume forms No. 1 of "Novello's Octavo Edition of Operas;" and as it may be presumed to be a fair specimen of those which are to follow, we can safely affirm that the public will at length be supplied with the best compositions of the lyric stage so clearly printed, so thoroughly accurate, and so moderate in price that they may not only be used as hand-books by the audience, during the performance of an Opera, but take their place in the drawing-room or the study as reliable works of reference. Throughout the Opera the music is so well spaced out that the eye is never distressed; and the words being always legibly printed under the notes, not the slightest difficulty can arise in following the text and the music simultaneously. One important feature in the work cannot be too highly commended—the German words, to which Beethoven wrote the music, are given, with an excellent English translation by the editress, who, herself, a German and a musician, is in every respect admirably fitted for the task. To all who feel that the composer's intention can only be shown by giving the text which originally suggested the music, this will be a real boon; and as the majority of the audience at the Opera read only the English side of the conventional "Book of Words," there can be little doubt that a badly translated Italian version can be of no service either to those who wish to study the work in its integrity or to those who desire to follow the sense by a translation into their native tongue. The English text in the volume before us shows how earnestly Madame Macfarren has felt the music, for in every case the German words find a perfect equivalent in the translation, a merit which we need scarcely say is rarely met with. In order to lead the hearers of an Opera to a more thorough enjoyment of the work, the principal points of the score are indicated, and all the signs of expression are carefully marked throughout. In more than one respect we cordially welcome this edition, for not only does it ignore the garbled Italian text which so distorts the Operas not composed in that language, but it admits the artistic necessity of giving the original words, with a translation into our native tongue for those who wish it. Should the day arrive (for which we earnestly hope) when the fashion of forcing every Opera into the Italian language for performance in an English country shall cease, we can scarcely hope for a

better English version than Madame Macfarren has supplied in "*Fidelio*."

National Nursery Rhymes and Nursery Songs. Set to music by J. W. Elliott. With illustrations, engraved by the Brothers Dalziel.

WELL meaning authors who write poetry for children have but little sympathy with the minds they appeal to. Nursery literature "with a purpose," either in prose or verse, may be studied by youthful readers, but it will always be as a task, and not as a pleasure. Stern and wholesome truths may be thrown into excellent rhyme, but these carefully prepared moral lessons stand a poor chance by the side of "Ding Dong Bell," "Little Jack Horner," or "Sing a Song of Sixpence." The compilers of the attractive volume before us have acknowledged this truth by uniting their talents to glorify the rhymes which, time out of mind, have been the property of the English nursery; and the juvenile public have a right indeed to feel proud of such a noble offering; for whether regarded in a pictorial or musical point of view, it is entitled to the highest praise. The illustrations, which are all excellent both in design and execution, tell the little story to which they are attached with remarkable fidelity; and where there is really no story to tell—as, for instance, in the first rhyme "Miss Mary, quite contrary"—the artist has done his utmost to realise a little picture such as a child might conjure up by the constant repetition of the words. It would be impossible to call attention even to one-half of the beautiful drawings in the book, but we cannot help mentioning a few of the most striking. "Pussy-cat, Pussy-cat" is a homely little sketch which is sure to please. The wondering face of the little child opening the cottage-door for "Pussy," is beautifully conceived, and the cat has an important and self-satisfied air naturally induced by the fact of her having "been to London to visit the Queen." In "Little maid, pretty maid," the figures of the boy and girl in the field are well drawn; and the attitudes of both show that the artist has studied the childish verse which follows with as much care as if it had been an elaborate poem. A good word must also be said for the refined expression thrown into the features and positions of the juvenile actors in "Little Tommy Tucker." "I love little Pussy," "The Lazy Cat," and "Three Children sliding;" they are all the faces and figures of genuine English children, and of a type which it is good to place before the eyes of parents in these days of mental and physical distortion. Speaking of the melodies to which these household rhymes are wedded, it is stated by the composer in the preface that "in his own family he has found a young jury ready to test the various tunes, and has chosen only those melodies which found prompt acceptance, were easily remembered, and came trippingly off the tongue." This is precisely the test to which they should have been submitted; and we can in this case conscientiously endorse the verdict of the jury. All the tunes are thoroughly appropriate to the words, and many of them are exceedingly pleasing, apart from the verses to which they are united. Amongst the best may be cited "Sing a Song of Sixpence," "The Thievish Mouse," "Little Bo-peep," "The Spider and the Fly,"—a composition of some importance, the oft repeated question "Will you, will you," especially, being so winningly set as to attract the most obstinate fly into the "parlour"—and "Mother Tabbyskins"—a dramatic little piece, which has the advantage of being treated throughout with the skill of an experienced musician. We could name many others which we are certain will find much favour at Christmas juvenile Concerts; but children are all the better pleased when they are not told what they are to admire, and we therefore leave them, out of the fifty-four Rhymes in the volume, to take their own choice. We can scarcely imagine a more welcome holiday gift; and only counsel the fortunate little possessors of this book to keep a careful watch over it, or it will constantly be stolen from the