

Review: Programme Music

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Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 48, No. 770 (Apr. 1, 1907), pp. 227-228

Published by: Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/903539>

Accessed: 09-05-2016 13:18 UTC

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the pavement of the Sanctuary, which consists of beautiful mosaic work from Rome, its materials including serpentine, porphyry, touchstone, jasper, Lydian and alabaster, laid down in 1268 by skilled Italian workmen who were brought to England by Abbot Ware for that purpose. The black and white pavement of the choir was presented by the famous headmaster of Westminster School, Dr. Busby, who died in 1695 and is buried beneath it. At the west end of the church is the abbot's pew, built by Abbot Islip early in the 16th century, from which members of the Royal Family have on various occasions watched processions pass up the nave.

Not the least attractive of the externals of the Abbey are the Cloisters, especially the huge buttresses which, strideline, stretch themselves over the north cloister walk of the 13th century (see the view on p. 223). Leading out of the east cloister walk is the stately Chapter House, with one exception (Lincoln) the largest in England. Entered by a fine double-doorway, it is a most beautiful feature of the sacred pile of buildings. The vaulting springs from a single shaft of Purbeck marble 35 feet high, and the paintings round the walls, though much mutilated, are of great interest. The original tiles of the floor of this fair structure are no less varied than quaint in their several designs. The Chamber of the Pyx, formerly the monastic treasury, and beyond the Chapter House, is the only remaining portion of the Norman buildings of Edward the Confessor, except the dark passage which leads to the Little Cloisters in which are the residences of the canons, minor canons and organist, a pleasant spot, with its centre fountain, and so quiet even in the midst of the roar of London. The College garden adjacent to the Little Cloisters is, on the authority of Canon Duckworth, one of the oldest gardens in England.

The Deanery forms part of the old abbot's house. (For a photograph of the courtyard, see p. 221.) Its most famous apartment is the Jerusalem Chamber built by Abbot Litlington, which is entered through the Jericho Parlour. It has been the scene of many interesting historical events, beginning with the death of King Henry IV. on March 20, 1413. In this connection we read in Shakespeare :

King Henry. Doth any name particular belong unto the lodgings where I first did swoon?

Warwick. 'Tis call'd Jerusalem, my noble lord.

King Henry. Laud be to God!—even there my life must end,

It hath been prophesied to me many years

I should not die but in Jerusalem;

Which vainly I supposed the Holy Land;

But bear me to that chamber; there I'll lie;

In that Jerusalem shall Harry die.

(HENRY IV. Part II., iv., 4.)

It was in the Jerusalem Chamber that the Westminster Assembly of Divines met in 1643, and the Revisers of the Old and New Testaments in recent years.

DOTTED CROCHET.

(To be continued.)

PROGRAMME MUSIC.*

In this industriously compiled and absorbingly interesting volume of 548 pages, Professor Niecks lucidly surveys the history of one of the most important problems of musical æsthetics. The book appears at a most opportune time. Programme music of the most aggressive kind is now constantly challenging our understanding. At symphony concerts, listeners are perplexed and bewildered by the extraordinary demands made upon their powers to associate sounds—we forbear to use the word music—with definite mundane ideas, and they are often left dubious as to whether the art is drifting helplessly to chaos, or whether perchance it is being steered to new worlds of beauty by master minds whose methods are beyond the ken of the common folk. Professor Niecks does not pretend to solve this knotty problem, although he adopts a pessimistic view of the present situation. What he does do is to give an account of the aims and achievements in the direction of programme music of four centuries of composers. That music can associate itself with ideas and emotions, and is indeed born of ideas and emotions, is so much a matter of common experience as to call for no demonstration. Opera and vocal music are familiar instances of this marriage of feeling and musical expression. But the doubt begins when we consider how far in purely instrumental music it is possible and permissible to suggest a definite programme. The desire of composers of all schools and periods thus to find vent for their moods is unmistakable. The works with a programme basis of between three and four hundred composers are commented on by Professor Niecks. In his introductory chapter he says :

The prejudices as to programmes are many. That absolute music—by which we are to understand pure music, music with none but æsthetical qualities, music unconnected with anything definite in thought or nature, according to some a mere formal play with tones—is the only legitimate instrumental music, was long the orthodox and all but universal doctrine, and even now has not become a wholly extinct belief. Then, we find people who approve of a title, but object to a poem or a prose narrative prefixed to a piece of music. And yet, a title may imply a great deal more than a poem or a prose narrative. What vast subjects, for instance, are indicated by single words such as Faust, Hamlet, Manfred, Hebrides, Eroica, Hungaria, &c. !

The author divides his history into six periods, beginning with vocal programme music of the 16th century. The sixth period is made to begin about the fourth decade of the 19th century, and therefore embraces the works of Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner. No account of programme music could omit reference to Kuhnau (1660-1722) and his Bible Sonatas, which Professor Niecks says 'are interesting and powerful attempts rather than altogether satisfactory achievements.'

* 'Programme Music in the last four Centuries, a Contribution to the history of Musical Expression,' by Frederick Niecks, Mus.D., Reid Professor of Music in the University of Edinburgh. London: Novello & Co., Ltd.

Of Handel in his purely instrumental music it is said that 'it would be difficult to discover one less open to suspicion of being a writer of programme music.' But in his accompaniments to vocal music he demonstrated power to paint tone-colour vividly. Haydn in 'The Creation,' 'The Seasons' and other works is claimed as a programmer, and it is stated that even in composing his sonatas and symphonies he was dominated by unrevealed romances and programmes. A curious case of what may be termed programitis is that of Dittersdorf (1739-1799), who in twelve symphonies endeavoured to illustrate subjects from Ovid's 'Metamorphoses.' Professor Niecks says that these symphonies 'are full of beauties and points of interest,' and that 'they well deserve to be read and played.' After dealing rather fully with the powerful efforts of Beethoven to express ideas and moods, the Professor concludes 'that the time cannot be far off when he will be regarded as the chief founder and the greatest cultivator of programme music.' Nineteen pages are devoted to Mendelssohn, whose remark that 'since Beethoven had taken the step he took in the Pastoral symphony, it was impossible for composers to keep clear of programme music,' is quoted. Testimony to Mendelssohn's genius as a descriptive composer is given from a quarter not supposed to be biased in his favour. Wagner said to Dannreuther:

'Mendelssohn was a landscape painter of the first order, and *The Hebrides* overture is his masterpiece. Wonderful imagination and delicate feeling are here presented with consummate art. Note the extraordinary beauty of the passage where the oboes rise above the other instruments with a plaintive wail like sea winds over the sea. *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* also is beautiful; but I am fond of the first movement of the *Scotch Symphony*.'

The attitude of Schumann was ambiguous and suspicious, yet he seemed ultimately to give way. Professor Niecks is epigrammatic over Chopin:

Subjectivity is the beginning and end of Chopin. Happily he not only subjectivates the objective, but also objectivates the subjective. With Chopin music was a passioscope. To fit the art for this function, its materials had to be subtilized and sensitized.

The tremendous influence of Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner is dealt with in 128 pages of masterly analysis. Full justice is done to the brilliant genius of Berlioz, but so far as definite programme music is concerned, Liszt is considered to be of greater importance. Our author says:

His importance lies chiefly and mainly in the impulses he gave—in the vistas he opened, the new problems he proposed, the solutions of old problems he attempted, in short, in the new ideas, methods, procedures, and means he suggested. Unlike Berlioz, Liszt had a system, and set it forth in unequivocal language. While in the quantity of his programme music and in the scope and variety of his programmes Liszt surpasses Berlioz, the latter must, I think, be allowed the possession of a larger amount of originality and creativeness.

Wagner denounced programme music, and yet his music was inconsistent with his theoretical attitude. Professor Niecks aptly remarks:

After examining his case as we have done, it is impossible to evade the conclusion that if Wagner is not one of the band of composers of programme music, he bears an extraordinary resemblance to them.

The French school as represented by David, Saint-Saëns, César Franck, Debussy and others is dealt with briefly, and the English school as represented by Bennett, Macfarren, Parry, Mackenzie, Stanford, Cowen, Corder, Bantock and Elgar is discussed. Tchaikovsky naturally has considerable attention. Of Brahms, Professor Niecks observes that he

is generally put forward as the model of a composer of absolute music, in fact, as the most perfect representative of the antipodes of the composers of programme music. Well, I claim him as a composer of programme music. Of course so extraordinary a statement, which to many cannot fail to be shocking and seem absurd, ought not only to be proved by reasoning, but also to be supported by facts.

Then the arch-programmist Richard Strauss is examined. The Professor recognises two periods so far in his career, and says:

We look upon him with hope and great expectations, and implore him not to throw away his pen, not to return to earlier methods, but to proceed onward in a soberer spirit and a more single-hearted manner, in short, to commence his third period, where will be manifested the natural Strauss, purified from the dross that still clung to the gold in the second period.

In the last chapter of his book, the Professor thus summarises his views:

A thoughtful survey of music cannot fail to lead us to the conclusion that bad programme music is bad because it has too little of the qualities of good absolute music, and bad absolute music is bad because it has too little of the qualities of good programme music. At least this is what we mostly find. But programme music may also be bad because it meddles with matters uncongenial and even foreign to music. Programme and artistic form do not exclude each other. Rightly understood we may then say that programme music is the only high-class music.

As to modern music in general, it is stated that

we are getting poorer and poorer and are face to face with imminent bankruptcy. The road on which we are travelling offers no prospect—the increase of complexity and sensationalism cannot go on for ever. We must strike out in a different direction. There was a great revolution in music about 1600. We may therefore without unreasonableness expect another—the present age is ripe for it and longing for it. And what do we want? Simplicity, sanity, spontaneity, and, above all and including all, beauty—natural, gracious, persuasive beauty.

And so concludes a book that no earnest musical student can afford to neglect. The stream of tendency is examined from its source, but the mists ahead prevent our daring to say with confidence whither it is carrying us.

M.