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## THE MUSICAL TIMES

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

FEBRUARY I, 1889.

## NIECKS'S "CHOPIN."\*

THIS new and valuable biography of Chopin has been compiled with characteristic Teutonic patience and exhaustiveness. The author tells us that the work of gathering together his materials, sifting them, and placing them in order, occupied all the available hours of ten years. We can well believe it, but not a moment of that time has been wasted. The result is a two-fold satisfaction. In the first place, we now know all there is to know about the Polish musician, and next, the author has done that which loudly called for doing. We have no desire to disparage unduly other works on the same subject. Liszt's rhapsodical production is of value to a certain extent, beyond the revelation it makes of the writer's own individuality, and Karasowski's "Life," with all its faults and shortcomings, will ever be entitled to a place in the bibliography of its theme. But both Liszt and Karasowski lived too near their hero, and lacked the comprehensiveness of view which takes in all, and sees things in their true proportion. Mr. Niecks has had the advantage of writing from a better standpoint, while not so distant as that he was unable to search for facts in a clear and favourable light. The author gives us particulars of the sources whence his information has been gathered. These are not limited to books, pamphlets, and newspapers, but extend to Chopin's pupils, friends, and acquaintances, many of whom are mentioned by name. Mr. Niecks consulted eight pupils, including Brinley Richards and Lindsay Sloper, while of the master's friends he obtained information from fifteen—Liszt, Hiller, Heller, Hallé, Jenny Lind, and others of equal authority. We thus have Chopin as he exists in written history and as his acquaintances remember him—a happy combination not always possible when a biography has to be written. There remains to state, with regard to the initial advantages of the work, that Mr. Niecks obviously entered upon his task in an impartial spirit. He does not shrink from giving his opinion, or from expressing it with emphasis; but we cannot fail to see that the conclusions stated are the result of a judicial inquiry, and transparently honest in their origin and object. We have here, in fact, a standard work entitled to the respect which an authority commands. Saying this, we do not pledge ourselves to every statement of fact and opinion. Our meaning simply is that the character of the biography entitles it to the highest consideration.

For the purpose of the present article, we shall confine our attention to a few salient points, and, in the first place, passing over a readable introductory chapter on "Poland and the Poles," also that on Chopin's ancestry, birth, and childhood, pause at our author's remarks upon the social, literary, and artistic influences which worked upon the future composer during his most impressionable years. Naturally sensitive, Chopin must have been affected in an unusual degree by the conditions of his youth, and Mr. Niecks would, in our opinion, have done better had he devoted more space to this very important part of his subject. As it is, however, we get glimpses of the sympathies and tendencies of Polish society during the early decades of the century. We find the vivacious and imaginative Sarmatian nature

developing, under the stimulus of quickening life, in the direction of romanticism—elegant, refined, aristocratic, but none the less vigorous, while all the more fascinating to a constitution like that of Chopin. It was this change that largely moulded the composer into the likeness by which we recognise him, and made him, cradled in the arms of a literary and artistic nationalism, a perfect embodiment of his country's genius and sympathies.

What more natural, under the circumstances just indicated, than that Chopin's inborn musical feeling should incline him towards one particular form of national life. Patriotism and romance alike found satisfaction in his country's music, which he drank at its very source. "Chopin," writes Mr. Niecks, "was fond of listening to the singing and fiddling of the country people. . . His wonder always was who could have composed the quaint and beautiful strains of those mazurkas, polonaises, and krakowiaks, and who had taught these simple men and women to play and sing so truly in tune." Our author goes on to show that circumstances were very favourable to the process then moulding Chopin's artistic nature. "Art-music had not yet corrupted folk-music; indeed, it could hardly be said that civilisation had affected the lower strata of society at all. . . But the peasants, although steeped in superstition and ignorance, and too much addicted to brandy-drinking with its consequences—quarrelsomeness and revengefulness—had not altogether lost the happier features of their original character—hospitality, patriotism, good-naturedness, and, above all, cheerfulness and love of song and dance. It has been said that a Slavonic peasant can be enticed by his national songs from one end of the world to the other." It is not too much to add that Chopin was, in all musical respects, the Polish peasant refined and sublimated to the last degree. No man was ever more strictly a representative of his own musical people, and it is interesting to see him at an early age going to the fountain head of national art for his inspiration.

Mr. Niecks has something to say on the question of Chopin's health when a young man. Hitherto, we have had to choose between Liszt, with his portrait of the master as a fragile and delicate being, and Karasowski, who represents him as, if not robust, fairly strong and well. Mr. Niecks inclines, in colloquial phrase, to "split the difference." He says: "The delicate build of Chopin's body, his early death, preceded by many years of ill-health, and the character of his music, have led people into the belief that he was always sickly in body, and for the most part, also, melancholy in disposition. But as the poverty and melancholy, so also disappears on closer investigation the sickliness of the child and youth. To jump, however, from this to the other extreme, and assert that he enjoyed vigorous health, would be as great a mistake." Our author plainly inclines rather to the weakness than the strength, and gives several reasons in support of the first theory. Some of these amount to very little. A lad is not necessarily delicate because affectionate female relatives wrap him up well, or because he likes to stretch out on the grass under trees and dream away the shining hours, or because he does not care for tobacco. Nor does the existence of pulmonary and heart disease in the family go far as direct evidence. On the other hand, Mr. Niecks is able to quote Stephen Heller, who saw Chopin at Warsaw, in 1830, and described him as "in delicate health, thin, and with sunken cheeks, and that the people of Warsaw said that he could not live long, but would, like so many geniuses, die young." This is all the new evidence brought to bear upon a subject which Chopin's biographer thus sums up: "Although Chopin, in his youth, was at no time

\*"Frederick Chopin, as a Man and Musician." By Frederick Niecks. Two Vols. London and New York Novello, Ewer and Co.

troubled with any serious illness, he enjoyed but fragile health, and if his frame did not already contain the seeds of the disease to which he later fell a prey, it was a favourable soil for their reception." "Fragile" is, perhaps, too emphatic a word, but, taking it in a modified sense, we are disposed to accept Mr. Niecks's conclusions as correct.

From Chopin as a youth to Chopin as a lover is not only an easy but a graceful transition, and Mr. Niecks has given proper attention to his hero under the tender passion. A biographer, especially when he writes of an artist, cannot well do otherwise; but in this case the full significance of the situation is recognised. Here is a passage in proof: "Who could recount all the happy and hapless loves that have made poets? Countless is the number of those recorded in histories, biographies, and anecdotes; greater still the number of those buried in literature and art, the graves whence they rise again as flowers, matchless in beauty, unfading, and of sweetest perfume. Love is, indeed, the sun that by its warmth unfolds the multitudinous possibilities that lie hidden, often unsuspected, in the depths of the human soul." This language may be florid, but the ideas it expresses are philosophical, and we are glad to find Mr. Niecks recognising and acting upon them. The love of Chopin's youth, as everybody knows, was a pupil at the Warsaw Conservatorium, by name Constantia Gladkowska, whom, it appears, the composer first met in April, 1829. His passion for this lady was strong. "This is proved," writes our author, "by his frequent allusions to her whom he never names, and by those words of restless yearning and heart-rending despair that cannot be read without a pitiful sympathy." How his passion kept him near its object in Warsaw, to the derangement of his artistic plans, is matter of common knowledge, as is Chopin's departure at last, and Constantia's marriage, three years later, to another man. Mr. Niecks calls it a "sad fact" that "inconstant Constantia Gladkowska married a merchant of the name of Joseph Grabowski, at Warsaw," and goes on to say: "As the circumstances of the case and the motives of the parties are unknown to me, and as a biographer ought not to take the same liberties as a novelist, I shall neither expatiate on the fickleness and mercenariness of woman nor attempt to describe the feelings of our unfortunate hero robbed of his ideal, but leave the reader to make his own reflections and draw his own moral." We cannot, let us say in passing, entirely subscribe to the view of a biographer's duties contained in the foregoing sentence. He who simply records the facts of a career can scarcely be called a biographer at all, since he neglects the far higher duty, discharged by combined reason and imagination, of exposing the inner life of his subject. The biographer needs imagination almost as much as the novelist, not, it is true, to invent characters and circumstances, but, under the guidance of reflection, to penetrate below the surface and reveal hidden things. That which Washington Irving called the "divine attribute" is sometimes, in its exercise, akin to inspiration. But to return. It is highly probable that Constantia had a much more practical nature than her lover. The merchant was, so to speak, "in the hand," Chopin was very much "in the bush," and the worldly-wise maiden drew the proverbial conclusion. It may be, on the other hand, that the musician himself was not an ideal lover. Mr. Niecks tells us that "the tender passion was necessary to his existence," but he transferred his affections from one fair object to another with singular ease. According to George Sand, he would have five or six affections in one evening, then go away and forget them all. "In short," as Mr. Niecks puts it, "Chopin was of a very

impressionable nature; beauty and grace, nay, even a mere smile, kindled his enthusiasm at first sight, and an awkward word or equivocal glance was enough to disconcert him. But although he was not at all exclusive in his own affections, he was so in a high degree with regard to those which he demanded from others." Mr. Niecks here quotes George Sand's story of Chopin and a young lady whom he thought of asking in marriage, but whom he discarded and forgot, simply because she invited another male visitor to take a seat before extending a like hospitality to himself. Constantia Gladkowska may have known more of Chopin than is suspected, and we are not going to blame her for accepting the Warsaw merchant, honest and faithful man as we hope he was.

Mr. Niecks examines carefully the various accounts of Chopin's subsequent love affair with Maria Wodzinski, whom the composer seems to have regarded quite *au sérieux*. He accepts the version of Count Wodzinski in his "Les Trois Romans de Frédéric Chopin," from which it appears that Chopin's love lasted a year, and was strong enough to bring about a proposal, rejected by the girl on account of the opposition of her family. Chopin's third love romance was, of course, the affair with George Sand (Madame Dudevant). Into that we may not enter here for want of space, and must refer the curious to Mr. Niecks himself, who tells the story in much detail, and arrives at a conclusion extremely unfavourable to the lady. We cannot see exactly eye to eye with Mr. Niecks in this matter. George Sand was neither an angel of purity nor a model of veracity, but there is no reason to believe that she acted as she did without some provocation on Chopin's part—a provocation to be easily conceived by those who have studied the whole question with some experience of life and character. On the whole, Chopin, in his relations with women, does not come out well.

Our author has a scarcely nobler theme when he goes on to discuss Chopin's social position, and his weak, effeminate predilection for a butterfly life in the gilded *salons* of aristocracy. We are glad to find Mr. Niecks expressing an opinion that the atmosphere of such places is not favourable to an artist. "Without going so far as to say, with a great contemporary of Chopin, Stephen Heller, that the higher you go in society, the greater is the ignorance you find, I think that little, if any, good for either heart or mind can come from intercourse with that section of people which proudly styles itself 'society' (*le monde*). Many individuals that belong to it possess, no doubt, true nobility, wisdom, and learning, nay, even the majority may possess one, or the other, or all of them in some degree, but these qualities are so out of keeping with the prevailing frivolity that few have the moral courage to show their better nature." Well and bravely said. We get also an opinion from Mr. Niecks, based on the observation of Liszt and Heller, that Chopin was appreciated among the *crème de la crème* simply for his virtuosity, his elegance, and his delicacy. These qualities *le monde* could perceive and value, but his higher attributes were beyond them. In the degree of the master's preference for Society (with a capital "S") was, naturally, his distaste for the company of fellow artists. Mr. Niecks is very plain on this point. "Chopin's predilection for the fashionable *salon* society led him to neglect the society of artists. That he carried this *odi profanum vulgus, et arceo* too far, cannot for a moment be doubted. For many of those who sought to have intercourse with him were men of no less nobility of sentiment and striving than himself. Chopin offended even Ary Scheffer, the great painter, who admired and loved him, by promising to spend an evening with him, and again and again disappointing him.

Musicians, with a few exceptions, Chopin seems always to have been careful to keep at a distance, at least after the first years of his arrival in Paris. This is regrettable, especially in the case of the young men who looked up to him with veneration and enthusiasm, and whose feelings were cruelly hurt by the polite but unsympathetic reception he gave them." Instances are not wanting, among them that of Schulhoff, who first met Chopin at a party. On his introducer begging Chopin to allow the young Bohemian to play something to him, "the renowned master, who was much bothered by *dilletante* tormentors, signified, somewhat displeased, his consent by a slight nod of the head. Schulhoff seated himself at the pianoforte, while Chopin, with his back turned to him, was leaning against it." Mr. Niecks very properly adds: "The ungracious manner in which he granted the young musician permission to play to him, and especially his turning his back to Schulhoff when the latter began to play, are not excused by the fact that he was often bothered by *dilletante* tormentors." Excuses have been made for the Polish master's indifferent behaviour to his own class, on the ground of his physical condition, but Mr. Niecks will have none of them. He writes: "Would it not have been possible to live in retirement without drawing upon himself the accusation of supercilious *hauteur*? Moreover, as Chopin was strong enough to frequent fashionable *salons*, he cannot have been altogether unable to hold intercourse with his brother artists." Our author sums up thus: "Fastidious by nature and education, he became more so, partly in consequence of his growing physical weakness, and still more through the influence of the society with which, in the exercise of his profession and otherwise, he was in constant contact. His pupils, and many of his other admirers, mostly of the female sex and the aristocratic class, accustomed him to adulation and adoration to such an extent as to make these to be regarded by him as necessities of life."

Mr. Niecks brings against Chopin a much more serious charge than weakness for aristocratic society. He makes us doubt whether the master had either a heart or sincerity. Chopin is described as "more loved than loving." "But he knew how to conceal his deficiencies in this respect under the blandness of his manners and the coaxing affectionateness of his language. There is something really tragic, and comic too, in the fact that every friend of Chopin thought that he had more of the composer's love and confidence than any other friend. . . . Of Chopin's procedures in friendship much may be learned from his letters, in them is to be seen something of his insinuating cajoling ways, of his endeavours to make the person addressed believe himself a privileged favourite, and of his habit of speaking not only ungenerously and unlovingly, but even unjustly of other persons with whom he was apparently on cordial terms. In fact, it is only too clear that Chopin spoke differently before the faces and behind the backs of people. You remember how, in his letters to Fontana, he abuses Camille Pleyel in a manner irreconcilable with genuine love and esteem. . . . And again, how atrociously he reviles, in the same letters, the banker Leo, who lends him money, often takes charge of his manuscripts, procures payment for them, and in whose house he has been for years a frequent visitor. . . . Taking a general view of the letters written by him during the last twelve years of his life, one is struck by the absence of generous judgments, and the extreme rareness of sympathetic sentiments concerning third persons."

Upon a related subject—namely, the quarrel which separated Chopin and Liszt—Mr. Niecks makes some

interesting statements. It would appear that the men themselves rather evaded explanations. Once, when interrogated on the matter, Chopin replied: "We are friends; we were comrades." Answering a similar question, Liszt said: "Our lady-loves had quarrelled, and, as good cavaliers, we were in duty bound to side with them." Now let us hear our author: "When the comradeship came to an end I do not know, but I think I do know how it came to an end. . . . Franchomme explained the mystery to me, and his explanation was confirmed by what I learned from Madame Rubio. The circumstances are of too delicate a nature to be set forth in detail. But the long and short of the affair is that Liszt, accompanied by another person, invaded Chopin's lodgings during his absence, and made himself quite at home there. The discovery of traces of the use to which his rooms had been put justly enraged Chopin. One day, I do not know how long after the occurrence, Liszt asked Madame Rubio to tell her master that he hoped the past would be forgotten and the young man's trick wiped out. Chopin then said that he could not forget, and was much better as he was, and, further, that Liszt was not open enough, having always secrets and intrigues, and had written in some newspapers notices unfavourable to him." It is not unlikely that Liszt's great success as a concert-pianist tended to keep the two men apart. To this an expression—"He will give me a little kingdom in his empire"—once made use of by Chopin, certainly points.

We have reached the limit of our space, but a hundred subjects in these most interesting volumes have as great a right to notice as those touched upon above. The index bristles with them, as, for example, "The chief influences that helped to form his (Chopin's) style of composition"; "Chopin's aims as an artist"; "What influences had Liszt on Chopin's development?" "Chopin as a public performer"; "His musical sympathies and antipathies"; "Polish national music and its influence on Chopin." All these matters are of interest, and upon all Mr. Niecks has something to say that is worthy of note and study. Our readers will have observed strong indications of the author's impartiality and zeal for truth. These qualities, in combination with industrious and patient research, have given the new "Life of Chopin" the salt which will preserve it for many years to come, sustaining it in its proper place as a standard authority upon the subject of which it treats.

## THE GREAT MUSICAL REFORMERS.

By W. S. ROCKSTRO.

II.—GUIDO D'AREZZO.

HUCBALD's bold attempt to reform the vague system of musical notation peculiar to the ninth and tenth centuries was forgotten within a very few years after his death, and nearly a century elapsed before any farther endeavour to remedy its self-evident defects was made by his learned successors, who seem, for the most part, to have been quite content to leave the subject in the condition in which they found it.

The next courageous reformer was Guido d'Arezzo—the Guido Aretinus of the monkish historians—of whose so-called inventions so many fabulous stories have been told that it is now no easy matter to separate the truth from fiction. That he really did propose some very valuable improvements upon the system he found in general use is certain; and, for these, his name became justly celebrated in every country in Europe. But the misfortune was, that the fame of his discoveries led his admiring successors to credit him, not only with inventions of later date,