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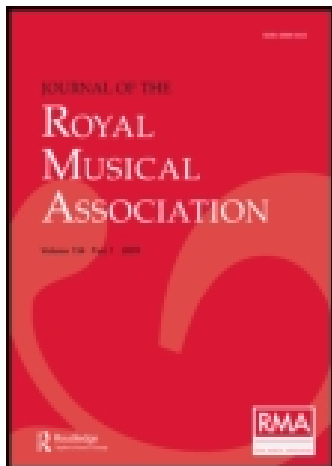
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The Vocal Art

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FEBRUARY 2, 1885.

W. H. CUMMINGS, Esq.,
IN THE CHAIR.

THE VOCAL ART.

By CHARLES SANTLEY, Esq.

ADAM, when he got into a scrape, endeavoured to excuse himself by laying the blame on the partner of his joys: I, a true son of Adam, having got into a scrape, will endeavour to excuse myself, by laying the blame on the partner, not of my joys, but on the partner, or rather the instigator, of my audacity.

Some months ago, Mr. Davenport, in the course of conversation, proposed to me that I should read a paper before the Musical Association. I, at first, was inclined to believe he meant it as a jest, but finding he meant it seriously, I tried to avoid it, pleading diffidence of my capability, and other pleas suggested by my innate modesty; I at last promised to think over the matter, hoping that time would prove my friend, and Mr. Davenport forget all about it; however, a month or two afterwards he spoke to me again, urging his request, and I then promised to consider it seriously, and if I could hit upon a subject which I felt I could treat respectably, I would accede to his desire. He took this for consent, fixed the day and hour, and—here I am.

Now, I fear, I have only very dry and meagre fare to offer you, so if it displease you I beg you will visit your displeasure on Mr. Davenport, the real culprit, and not on me, his innocent victim.

The subject I have chosen is, as you are already aware, singing, or the vocal art, and the influences on it of the singer, the school, and the public.

Singing is the art of declaiming poetry, through the medium of music or song, rendering it more emphatic by reason of the greater amount of deliberation with which it is uttered.

The first great requisite is a sonorous voice; but this, without elocution, would not be sufficient for perfect declamation; enunciation is requisite to make the sense of the poetry understood; and modulation, in order to adapt the voice to the expression of the different sentiments and passions.

In the course of my remarks I speak of the singer as the

person who devotes his time to the study of the vocal art, with the object of making it his profession. I speak of singing as the art, not as an amusement or source of income.

It is said that when Rossini was asked how many things were necessary to make a singer, he replied three. What were they? First, voice! Second, voice!! Third, voice!!! This has been repeated to me when I have taken the liberty of criticising a singer for lack of art, the person quoting it, evidently being under the impression that Rossini meant, to make a singer nothing more than voice was necessary; yet, judging from the music he wrote for singers to execute, that could surely not have been his meaning. Rossini was a very witty man, and rarely missed an opportunity of sharpening his wit, when he came across any substance apt for the purpose. I imagine some inquisitive person asked the question, and Rossini gave him, by way of reply, an enigma to puzzle over.

I have often thought over this reply, and I think the solution of it must be this. First, voice! Second, voice! cultivated so as to be capable of execution. Third, voice! cultivated so as to be capable of execution applied to the performance of a work.

The voice, the raw material so to speak, is naturally indispensable, as it would not be possible to produce any sound without a voice; and yet that voice could not produce any agreeable effect unless cultivated; and again, when cultivated, without the power of applying the cultivated voice to express the passion, sentiment, &c., in a work, although the performance might make an agreeable impression on a large portion of those who were listening to it, it could not be called the performance of a singer.

The influence of the singer on the vocal art is in proportion to the perfection of these three properties necessary to make a singer. Voice alone can have no real influence, although an extraordinarily sonorous organ, or an extensive compass, does excite admiration in hearers who have no artistic feeling themselves.

The mechanical skill acquired by cultivating the voice has a much greater influence, being the result of great perseverance and industry; the execution of rapid passages and difficult intervals possesses a great charm for the major part of an audience; but without the power of applying it to the delineation of passions or sentiment, it cannot satisfy the artistic ear and mind. Herein lies the charm of the "vocal art"; without this power, the singer cannot speak to the hearts of his hearers, and so his song does not fulfil its end.

The school has not so direct an influence on the art as the singer, the work of the school being done through the singer; yet, though indirect, its influence is powerful. The master ought to be able to decide the register of the voice to be trained; whether soprano, mezzo-soprano, or contralto;

whether tenor, baritone, or bass; but how often mistakes occur in this; simply, I believe, because the voice has been judged by its compass instead of its quality. The master ought to be capable of judging, but in the case of the slightest doubt, it would surely be better to obtain one or more opinions, rather than ruin a voice that, if trained in its proper register, might have been a treasure. It is often difficult to decide whether a voice possesses sufficient volume to be serviceable in the concert-room or theatre; some voices that in a small room seem not to possess any great volume, in a larger space, where they can vibrate more freely, are barely recognisable, whilst many voices which in a small room are overpowering, in the theatre or concert-room are next to inaudible, especially if accompanied by an orchestra. For this reason, where an individual's future is at stake, a hasty judgment ought not to suffice; a time of probation should be insisted on, during which the master can judge whether the voice is strong enough to bear the strain of necessary study, and whether the student has sufficient aptitude to make a singer. Six or even twelve months are not too long a period; the lessons ought to be daily, and sufficient time allowed for each lesson, that the young voice may rest at intervals, so that it may not become fatigued in any way; and, also, that the master may have time for necessary explanations without hurry, and for studying the idiosyncracies of his pupil. This last is most important, as the system of training must be varied accordingly; one pupil will sing with ease what in the same way would be impossible, or at any rate much more difficult, for another; though in a different way the latter might execute the passage with the same ease as the former did in *his* way.

Every strength or weakness of the pupil the master ought to know, so as to bring out the one, and bridge over the other. The first period of study ought to be entirely devoted to exercises, and not until the pupil has acquired a certain amount of facility of execution, and equality of tone throughout the entire register, should the application of the studies be made to the execution of a work.

When this period arrives, the master ought to have nothing further to do than direct the application of what the student has learned to the execution of a few good works of different character; beyond this he ought not to go. If the pupil still requires his master's aid at every step, either the teaching has been faulty, or the pupil has mistaken his vocation.

Except on very rare occasions the singer ought to be able to master his work alone, and yet it constantly happens that singers, even those who have been before the public for a considerable time, fly to their masters to have the breathing, marks of expression, &c., marked, and cadences arranged in

every new work they are called upon to perform. The result cannot be called singing, it is merely repeating, parrot fashion, another person's ideas. In studying the first work or so under the master's direction, such a thing might be allowed, so that the pupil may have the example at hand to refer to, or to impress it more deeply on his mind; but, once launched into the profession, I consider it a disgrace thus to reap the fruits of the labour of another person's brains.

The usual cry at present is for more teaching. I think people are too much taught; they go on leaning on others, until they have no power left of leaning on themselves. The only way to learn thoroughly is by making mistakes, and it is much better that a young singer should make a few mistakes, which will open his eyes, than that he should go on for ever never using his own eyes at all.

That a young singer should seek for advice on some difficult point is but natural and right; he would be a conceited coxcomb who would not; and to no one could he apply for advice with greater security than to the master under whose care he was trained, and who knew all his capabilities and defects; but it is one thing to carry the material for your brooms to a friend, to procure advice as to the tying of the last knots, and carrying off your friend's brooms ready made and palming them off as your own manufacture! The accommodation in the school or master's house has some influence on the pupil, and therefore indirectly on the vocal art, but as it is of minor importance I will not stay here to speak of it.

The influence of the master lies in his judgment of the voice; in training the voice so that it shall be uniform in quality throughout its register, and capable of executing whatever may be required of it; and in directing the application of the result of such training to the performance of those works adapted to the singer's means.

The public I divide into two classes: the inside, by which I mean friends, acquaintances, and social relations; and the outside, by which I mean the frequenters of musical entertainments.

The influence of the first class is chiefly exerted on the singer before and whilst under tuition; as a rule it is bad, owing to its lack of judgment and readiness to judge. Only those who are placed in, I may say, the painful position of being called upon to give an opinion on the marvellous phenomena, which are constantly cropping up, can understand the harm done by the inside public. I need only speak from my own experience, although I know all my fellow artists suffer from these marvels of genius. Week after week I am requested to hear young aspirants, either by themselves or their admiring friends, and to give my opinion of their

prospects in the vocal profession. In nine cases out of ten it is shocking to hear the miserable attempts of these ill-advised young people; and yet, generally, so impressed are they with the idea of their own talents, and their friends' superior judgment, they do not attempt to conceal their dissatisfaction at hearing the truth. Of course, there is only one course to pursue. You have asked my opinion; I give it you, but as it is only the opinion of an individual, you can accept it or leave it as you please.

One instance I will cite to you, as it is a fair sample of what I have experienced in this line. A young man wrote to me, begging I would spare a few moments to hear him sing, and advise him, as his friends had all told him he had a remarkably fine baritone voice; and already, without tuition, sang with a certain amount of taste. He told me he was engaged in a Merchant's office in the City, at a salary of £120 or £150 per annum, with which he was not satisfied, so if my opinion were favourable with regard to his prospects as a singer, he would give it up and study singing. I replied, making an appointment with him, upon which he again wrote giving me a description of his personal appearance, and about six pages of closely written matter, which did not interest me much. He arrived at the appointed time; I found him a short thick-set young man with a lisp; he made a great many apologies for disturbing me which I cut short by telling him I had little time to spare, and must therefore proceed at once to business.

I tried his voice, to hear what sound he could produce; I found nothing much there. I tried him first with a single note, which he could not take from the piano, but only when I sounded it for him on my voice; a simple passage of three or four notes he could not repeat. I then asked him, as he was in the habit of singing for his friends, if he had brought a song to let me hear if he had any taste or style. He produced a song, and after many false starts, managed to get through a few bars; I found it was useless going any further, but I determined to be patient and try to find out if he had any qualification whatever. I asked him if he knew anything at all about music; he replied not much, but if I thought his voice sufficiently good, he would be able to learn enough music in three months, to carry him on. I said, do you know what key you are singing in? Yes, in A flat. The copy I played from was in B flat, so I asked him to let me see the one he was singing from, I found it was printed in A flat; so, hoping I had found a small oasis in the desert at last, I said, How do you know it is in A flat? He replied immediately, Oh, it's printed on the outside! I advised him to stick to the £120 or £150 per annum, and leave music to somebody else.

It appears to me strange that the world in general deems

itself competent to give an opinion on matters of art, poetry, music, or painting, without, having made any study of them; whilst at the same time it would hesitate to give an opinion on matters of science under the same circumstances, and yet a knowledge of the former is quite as necessary, in order to be capable of judging, as in the latter. This question, however, is foreign to my present subject; so I only mention it, inasmuch as it bears upon the instigation of young people, not possessed of the qualifications to make singers, to abandon their employments to run after shadows.

"A little learning is a dangerous thing," applies to no subject more than to that of music; an amateur who can get through a song or part in a glee, or play indifferently on an instrument, does not scruple to criticise the most eminent composers and artists, and decide on the qualifications of this individual or that for any branch of the musical profession. This influence is a very bad one as it only leads people into the field who do not possess the necessary qualifications, and therefore, even though they may succeed so far as to earn a living, can do no good service to the art.

The last influence of which I propose speaking now, is that of the outside public; the public which remunerates the singer for his industry and perseverance, and therefore that which he is bound to amuse; it has a right to demand whatever will amuse it; and its influence on the vocal art will be according to the quality of the amusement it requires. I cannot enter into the question of public taste here; being public property I have no right. I can only say, supply waits on demand, and if the public wants artists it can have them, if it is satisfied with voice and mechanical dexterity, it can have them, and in greater quantity.

In concluding, I beg you to understand that in the foregoing remarks there is no allusion intended to any individual or institution; they are the result of my personal experience, and I simply mention them to you as I have turned them over in my mind; if there is but a grain or two of anything worthy of your attention, I shall be very glad, as I only promised you dry and meagre fare; if I have wearied you, I can only express my regret, ask you to pardon me, and refer you for redress to Mr. Davenport.

DISCUSSION.

The CHAIRMAN.—Ladies and gentlemen, our first duty is a very pleasing one indeed, and that is to return our hearty thanks to Mr. Santley for the very terse and admirable paper he has given us. I am sorry it has been so terse, because I am quite sure he could have added much more on this very

interesting subject, on which no one is more able to speak with authority than himself.

(The vote of thanks having been carried unanimously)

The CHAIRMAN said, I have listened to the paper with a great deal of attention myself. I confess I am delighted with the words which have fallen from Mr. Santley, and I only hope by-and-bye, when they get before a larger public by being printed in our proceedings, they will come under the notice of all people who have to do with singers, whether professional musicians or those amateur friends of the inside public Mr. Santley has spoken of. It would be of good service to both if they are fairly read and carefully considered. It seems to me that there is a great deal of enlightenment necessary in bringing forward aspirants for vocal honours. About a year ago a very curious circumstance of this kind occurred to myself. A gentleman was brought to me at Dulwich, who had been studying singing in Milan for three years; he was brought to me by his father with a request that I would hear him sing; he thought he was quite ready to begin singing at the Albert Hall, the Sacred Harmonic, or the Crystal Palace. He sang fearfully out of tune to begin with; I, of course, was as kind as I possibly could be, and suggested was he quite well. That was a capital excuse for the young man. He said he was not, he had not been well for some time. I said, he had better let me hear him again—I was hoping it would be some very distant time—when he was thoroughly well. However, in about a month's time I had a letter again from the father, saying his son was very well, and accordingly he came again. I again found he sang fearfully out of tune, and I said, "Well, my opinion is that your son has either not got the capability, or he has not been properly trained; I do not think it would be wise for him to take to singing"; but his father said, "Cannot it be put right?" I said, "Possibly it might be, but it is a very doubtful thing; when people sing out of tune it is a very difficult thing to cure." He begged me to take him as a pupil. I objected strongly. I said, "I have a great objection to such a thing, because I have given you a very decided opinion, and it would be better for you to go to somebody else." However, it was no use, he pressed me so strongly that I consented eventually to take this young man for six months, to try what was to be done. He came to me three times a week, to Dulwich, and at the end of that time I reported to his father that he was even worse than when he began. His father came to see me, and looked very serious indeed; of course, it was a very serious matter for him, as he had spent a deal of money for his son's studying in Italy, for three years, and he had a heavy bill to pay to me also. He said to me after we had conversed over this matter, "what is to be done?" I said,

"Well, I have not any suggestion to make, but had you not better put your son into business, find him something or other in the City, you can find him something to do there." "Oh, no," he said, "he is not capable of business. No, art is the thing for him, he has always had artistic tastes." I said, "Yes"—what could one say more? Then he said, "What do you think; if he will not succeed as a singer, shall I put him to learn composition?" And thereupon I suggested he had better take him to Sir George Macfarren and get his opinion. That is the sort of thing that one meets with in the inner public, and I do feel that an honest paper, such as our friend Mr. Santley has given us, may be of very great service when it comes to be read in other quarters. I now invite any remarks, from members or friends, on the paper we have just heard. I will ask Signor Randegger if he has anything to say.

SIGNOR RANDEGGER.—I was here on a former occasion when the senior professor of singing in London, and a much respected one, Mr. Garcia, was present; he was called upon to offer some remarks, and I think I can do no better than do what he did on that occasion—viz., say that I came here to learn and not to preach. I am sure we are all much obliged to Mr. Santley, but really I could not add a word to what he has said, I can only echo sincerely the hearty thanks which have been already expressed.

MR. PRAEGER.—If you will kindly allow me, I should like to say a word or two. I observe that Mr. Santley said the demand should regulate the supply. Now, I have a very strong feeling on that point, it is not the public that is to judge, but the artist. It is the duty of the artist to elevate the public, not to encourage a vitiated taste. If what I say touches any one's interests I should be sorry, I fear I have always had the good lot to put my foot into it, to use a humble phrase. I would allude especially to the vile ballads that are being sung every day; the "pot-boilers," as they are called by the music-sellers, especially, should be weeded out of the programmes. But then the singer says, "I want to get my living, I want to make the most money I can, and I get a royalty out of them." It may be so, but whether honest art is not more important than the twopence or threepence a copy is a serious question. Whether people live only to get money, or whether they live for something beyond that. I have myself never understood money-making in art, though I have always been anxious to gain the little that one needs when one has a family to keep. One should always avoid those things which are pernicious to art. I know the first thing a music-seller tells you is this, "It is a beautiful song, but it would not sell." Yet we hear bad songs that are a disgrace to the composer, and the composer chuckles over the simplicity of the public, not to say stupidity (which

would be impolite), and gets for them £600 (in a late instance £1,000 I know was offered for a song that I should be extremely sorry to put my name to), the question is whether singers have under all circumstances done what they should do, whether they have not neglected their duty to teach the public. I have been amongst the public, and, as a critic, have noticed these things applauded in derision; the people have applauded, but it was as if they said—What rubbish after all! The applauding seems to be a physical excitement which must have a vent somewhere, and the people have the satisfaction of showing that they have paid for their places. I strongly urge that musicians should elevate the taste of the public, and should guide it. They can do it, and they have a moral duty to do so, especially those who are not obliged to work for the penny that brings the bread, and who can afford to refuse the bait; I think it would be, under all circumstances, a help to true art. I must say I have found more of that money-getting here than elsewhere. I will not say that there is less greed of gain anywhere else, but in art I must confess that abroad the money-getting has always been relegated to an inferior race of artists. Unfortunately, here I have found that the highest and most respected and most capable have indulged in this money-getting. There is not the slightest doubt that an immense deal can be done in elevating the taste. I would now point to some facts that might be pleasant to hear. For instance, I consider that the English singer ranks high above most of the foreign singers, for this reason, they have all execution, which is often lacking abroad, except among the born Italians, who have by nature's decree very little need to study. But all the English have studied, and, as they have in manufacturing, and, indeed, in everything, a genius and capability of imitating up to a high degree, they sing with a perfection of execution that astonishes foreigners. No one was more astonished (and, I think, he is an authority) than Richard Wagner, whom I took, when he was here, to the principal theatres. He was very much amazed at a little theatre, even like the Adelphi, where he heard Mrs. Albert Smith and others sing arias. He said "Our best singers do not sing shakes nor make runs like that." He was perfectly amazed at the skill of the vocalists. But the thing lacking is that deep feeling which is found with those singers who do not sing to the public but sing for themselves. Then they sing as though they were in confession. They are before their divinity, and then only they produce the best effect on the public as well, because that feeling is the genuine art requirement. In execution, and even voice, English singers stand very high. The enormous number of fine voices here is perfectly astonishing. I have lived here fifty

years, and I have had the opportunity of testing it, but what I have more often found lacking is that outpouring of one's emotional feelings, and this, I think, to a great extent, can be traced to the general character of the English, who always keep their feelings somewhat under control, and think it by no means right to cry at the grave of a father, because it is not quite proper to cry in public. I think the keynote lies in this, but there is a time coming when the artistic feeling will overcome this fear of expressing one's feeling too much. I should say that in all respects but that of emotional feeling I rate English singers as far more advanced than they are generally credited with being.

The CHAIRMAN.—If no other lady or gentleman would like to say anything, I will call on Mr. Santley for a few words in reply. With reference to the particular point put by Mr. Praeger, I do not want to enter on the large subject he has touched upon, but I would say that I feel very strongly with him; however, the question of royalties is not a modern one at all. It does not follow that because you have a royalty you have a bad song. Haydn, when he lived in London, published his music on the royalty system, that is ascertainable from the fact that you will find many of his songs have his signature. Other composers, such as Hummel, did the same. It is not a new thing by any means, and it does not follow because there is a royalty attached to a song that the music should necessarily be bad. I think the evil system Mr. Praeger refers to will have to be traced out in a different form, and it is very largely a publisher's question, and not an artist's question.

Mr. SANTLEY.—Mr. Chairman, I just want to reply to a few words of Mr. Praeger, who is mistaken in what he says. I perfectly agree to some extent with his remarks, but he was not answering what I had stated. I was merely speaking of the vocal art, not of the songs that people sing. If the public want good singers they must listen when they have good singing brought before them. I am not speaking about the music they sing; that is a matter between themselves and the public. I am a singer myself, and I accept royalties on certain songs, but, as a rule, I do not think they are the class to be despised; but that is not the question. Mr. Praeger referred to one thing, and my statement referred to another; I merely spoke of the vocal art, not of music. Another thing he said refers to a matter which I intended to have mentioned, but could not very well bring it into the paper; but as he has started it I will make a remark now—that is on the reason why you find a greater amount of good execution in an English singer than you do in any other; and I say it, although I am an English singer, that you will find in no country in the world as good, clean execution as

you do in England. The reason of that I think is this (I do not say I am right, but I have always thought so); our singers have to execute the highest style of music, that is the oratorio, and to sing an oratorio you must have a greater amount of execution, especially when you come to Handel, which requires the most perfect execution of all. There is none like it. It is very easy to get through it, but to execute it is quite a different thing. I think our training in that school is the great reason why in England you find much cleaner execution than you do in other places.

Mr. SEDLEY TAYLOR.—I should like to ask one question on a point which seems to me exceedingly interesting. I should like to ask whether, in the opinion of those present who have experience in the matter, if a child shows a defect of intonation, I mean in pitch, and sings out of tune, whether that is to be regarded as a disqualification for his pursuing the vocal art, or whether there is a good hope of curing it. I do not speak of an exceedingly exaggerated case, where a child is unable to distinguish between two notes at all, but whether it is the opinion of those present from their experience that a defective ear admits of being tuned up, as it were, with a certain amount of practice.

The CHAIRMAN.—I can answer that question practically. I have had several cases, particularly of blind pupils at the Normal College, Norwood, where it is essential we should train their mental faculties. I have frequently had children brought there who cannot distinguish one note from another, and, as money is no object, and time is no object, we depend simply on kindness and patience, these children are taken in hand, and in four instances I could mention such children are now able to sing scales, chromatic and otherwise, perfectly well. Of course, I should never dream of recommending that those children should be trained as artists. The training is to qualify them to appreciate good music when they hear it, and to take some pleasure in it. That is essential. If you had a child a cripple surely you would not leave that child a cripple all its life, but you would adopt the best means possible for strengthening its limbs; and, in the same way, if it has a defective ear your business is to put that right, and I may speak plainly that it can be done, and has been done, over and over again.

Mr. BARRY then moved a vote of thanks to the Chairman, which was seconded by Mr. Santley and carried unanimously.