

Confessions of a Critic. III. The Art of Hearing and of Judging (Continued)

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# The Musical Times

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

JANUARY 1, 1917.

## CONFESSIONS OF A CRITIC.

By HUGH ARTHUR SCOTT.

(Continued from November number, p. 489.)

### III.—THE ART OF HEARING AND OF JUDGING.

It is recorded of Bishop Wilberforce that he was once asked by a soulful feminine neighbour at a dinner party what in his experience had been the most difficult thing in life. Whereupon the Bishop, who had a keen sense of humour and a strong dislike of humbug, made answer, as he dived for the second or third time to retrieve his serviette, 'Oh, I haven't a doubt on that point, my dear lady; my greatest difficulty in life has always been to keep a table napkin on a silk apron.'

What in turn is the greatest difficulty of the critic? I don't know that I have available any answer as racy and epigrammatic as the bishop's, but I should be disposed to say that one at least of the critic's greatest difficulties is really to hear the music that is performed. The truth is that the art of listening with real intentness to music for any length of time involves powers of concentration which are not by any means universally possessed.

I remember on one occasion some years ago attending a concert with a not too musical friend when the 'Walkürenritt' was one of the pieces in the programme. Those were days when that stirring bit of musical scene-painting (as Wagner himself once described it) was less familiar than it is to-day, and the enthusiasm which it aroused was so great that it had to be played all over again. When the orchestra had finished for the second time my friend turned to me and inquired in all innocence if I knew what the second piece was. He had positively not recognised even the 'Walkürenritt' on its repetition—an achievement in the art of not hearing which might be thought almost impossible save for one absolutely devoid of any aural sense at all.

Yet it is astonishing what can be done in this way sometimes even by those quite well equipped—as a chance question to a neighbour will occasionally reveal. Was such a song, for instance, sung in French or Russian? Answer: 'Oh! really, upon my soul, I didn't notice.' Or perhaps the inquiry may have been as to whether a singer was a soprano or a contralto, or whether the first part of a movement was repeated, or whether the soloist introduced a cadenza, or whether something else was or was not done which it might be thought equally impossible to escape noticing. And yet it will constantly happen that the feat was none the less achieved, and that the circumstance did in fact pass unobserved.

The explanation is of course that unless one deliberately concentrates and makes a point of listening intently it is the easiest thing in the world to listen to music without really hearing it at all. 'To Newton and to Newton's dog Diamond,' said Ruskin, 'what a different pair of universes! Yet the image on the optical retina of each was probably the same.' So it is with listeners at a concert. So many have ears to hear but do not use them. A good way to realise the difference between merely hearing and hearing thoroughly is to listen to the comments of a

professional musician on the performances of a rival. Imagine De Pachmann, say, listening to Godowsky playing Chopin's G minor Ballade. What things he would notice with his ears preternaturally sharpened by the intense interest of a rival practitioner which would escape even the most attentive ordinary hearer!

Nor is it necessary to think only of De Pachmanns and Godowskys in this connection. Artists much less distinguished resemble even the greatest in this matter of listening intently and with quite exceptional results when the work of a fellow-professional is in question. I should be inclined to say indeed that there is no more useful experience for a youthful critic than to attend performances in company with other artists and to hear their comments. Nor do I mean this only in the cynical sense as implying that jealousy and malice will render them diabolically acute in detecting all the faults. On the contrary—and to the credit of human nature be it said—it is notorious that performers usually make the most generous of listeners; if they detect the faults they recognise the merits also, and having a keener appreciation than the layman of the difficulties involved are all the more ready to recognise what is praiseworthy. There are exceptions no doubt, but speaking generally I am glad to think that this is how things work out. But in any case the point I wish to make at present is the enormous difference between the work of the trained hearer, who in special circumstances is concentrating all his powers on the task, and that of the ordinary listener who is giving only half his attention to the matter.

Or as another example of the art of hearing raised, so to speak, to the  $n^{\text{th}}$  power, take the case of a skilled teacher listening to the performance of one of his pupils at, say, an important concert. What minutiae he will observe which will go for nothing as regards most of those about him. No doubt this will be due, in part at least, to the fact that he has cultivated to an exceptional degree this faculty of listening so that his ear has acquired the power of detecting details of execution which even with the best will in the world, and the most intense application, will be imperceptible to the ordinary hearer. But in part also it will be due to his greater powers of concentration—in other words, not only to his superior musical knowledge and experience, but also to his being a better listener.

It is the power of listening in this same intense and concentrated fashion which it should be the first aim of the critic to acquire. Yet in practice how difficult it is to do this! Indeed, I am afraid that to some extent critics tend to be even worse listeners than the ordinary hearer, for the simple reason that the constant hearing of music blunts rather than stimulates the faculties—especially in the case of those works which have been heard many times before. The amateur going to a concert only now and again, and then listening to everything with the greatest keenness, has a positive advantage over the professional concert-goer in this respect. But so much the more is it the duty of the latter to be constantly on his guard, and to remember that eternal vigilance is necessary if he is to discharge his functions satisfactorily. Unfortunately, moreover, he has not only the deadening effects of constant music-hearing to contend against, but also so many other adverse influences, not least among them the conversational efforts of neighbouring colleagues.

In other cases an invincible tendency to slumber is an enemy to be combated. This is one of the perils attendant on the practice of closing the eyes with a view to facilitating concentration. Certainly

it may have the latter result, but the risk referred to is decidedly not negligible. Yet there is an art even in sleeping at a concert without detection. The tip is to take a leaf out of the book of a certain famous judge, now deceased, who habitually slumbered on the Bench, but who managed things so skilfully that he was never caught napping—in the most literal sense of the term. For his practice was, when he woke up, not to betray the fact immediately, but to remain with his eyes closed while listening to what counsel was saying, and then to intervene with some apposite remark which beguiled the inexperienced into believing that, despite his apparent somnolence, he had in reality been following the argument with the closest attention all the time.

The old critical hand who finds himself troubled with what Bottom called 'an exposition of sleep,' adopts the same tactics, and by carefully refraining from giving any sign of life when he does return to consciousness, never allows it to be known whether he has or has not actually 'dropped off.' But this plan does not work, of course, if its practitioner should happen to be afflicted with a tendency to snore; and carrying my mind back into the past, I can recall at least one esteemed confrère of earlier days who would at times disturb an entire audience in this way, and who on one occasion at least had to be forcibly aroused from his slumbers on the conclusion of a concert 'whence all but him had fled.' But instances of this extreme kind are certainly exceptional.

All this, however, is treating a grave subject frivolously, and to come back to the main point—namely, the question of hearing aright—there is no doubt that this is a much more important matter than is sometimes supposed. It might indeed be said, in a somewhat transcendental sense, that the whole art of the musical critic consists in right hearing. When W. J. Davison penned his historic criticism of the 'Tannhäuser' Overture, for instance, the explanation was, in part at least, that he really had not heard the music as it actually was. He wrote, it will be remembered, that it did not contain a vestige of melody, whereas we all know to-day that it is full of melodies, some of them such as even an errand-boy could whistle. Those melodies were in the music no less prominently in Davison's time than now, but he simply did not hear them. And so it has been in countless other instances of the same kind in the past, as it will be so, and, we may be perfectly certain, always must be so, in the future. Wherefore, if one would avoid tripping in the same way, one cannot listen too carefully.

The troublesome thing is when, notwithstanding the most strenuous efforts to concentrate and the most resolute attempts to grasp what is presented, the music still eludes comprehension. But this is of course in the nature of things in the case of all new music of any originality and value. The process whereby music at the outset incomprehensible, and perhaps absolutely disagreeable, gradually becomes at first intelligible and ultimately pleasurable is a very familiar one to all music-lovers, though a complete explanation of it in terms of psychology has so far as I am aware never been provided.

Speaking broadly, however, it is evident that two entirely different factors are concerned in the matter. One does not enjoy a difficult unfamiliar work at first, partly because its actual contents are not immediately grasped—because one cannot take it all in at once—because its complexity is such that the mind is incapable of the necessary powers of co-ordination required to make an accurate mental concept of it; and secondly because, apart from its complexity, the music itself—its idiom, phraseology, melodic and

harmonic characteristics, and so forth—is too strange and new to give pleasure until the ear has become better acquainted with it. Sometimes the one and sometimes the other cause will operate the more powerfully, while sometimes both will be equally potent. Take the case of a work like Strauss's 'Ein Heldenleben,' for instance. Here the complexity of the score—the actual elaboration of the music—is such that it could not possibly be grasped completely by anyone at a first hearing, and secondly the novel character of the actual musical material presents an almost equally insuperable obstacle to its immediate assimilation by even the most attentive and best disposed listener.

Yet to the experienced musician there is a pleasure in itself in hearing a work of this kind for the first time, and in being frankly baffled at the outset while knowing none the less that in all probability only time and study are required to make everything clear. The experience is somewhat analogous to that of watching a magic-lantern picture which has been thrown on the screen all blurred and unintelligible, gradually assuming form and meaning; and it is one which has an interest and fascination all its own. To the old hand there is a thrill of pleasure in the very fact that the music does *not* conform to anticipation, that it seems as it were at times to go deliberately wrong and unexpectedly, for one knows in that case that it means a promise of something really new and valuable when it has been assimilated—although, unfortunately, it does not necessarily follow that the unexpected and apparently unpalatable will always prove attractive.

This is the delusion indeed which seems to inspire so many composers of the present day. Because most really great music usually sounds more or less strange and unattractive at first, therefore they seem to go on the principle that by being deliberately odd and ugly in their turn their productions also will eventually prove great and beautiful. It is a pathetic fallacy of which too often our concert-rooms give proof. And yet it is next to impossible to define in terms the difference between the two things—to say what actually distinguishes the initial difficulties and apparent uglinesses of really fine music from the same sort of thing when it occurs in the imitation article. Whoever could do this would in fact solve one of the greatest mysteries of music; for it must be remembered that these imitation works, so to call them, whose uglinesses do not eventually develop into beauties, are very often in technical respects the equal in every way of the genuine masterpieces. They differ from them only in that they do not improve on closer acquaintance, whereas the others do. And that is really all there is to be said on the subject.

At the same time every sensible music-lover must always hope in such cases for the more fortunate issue, although I should hesitate to say that this is the attitude invariably adopted, in point of fact, either by the critics or the public at large. On the contrary, I fear that in reality an attitude of suspicion and hostility is much more common on the part of both. Instead of the regret which one might suppose would naturally be experienced, there is almost joy in being able to proclaim the fact that another new work is no good, and the unlucky composer is treated, not as one who has at any rate tried to be a benefactor of his species, but as a personage whose conduct has rendered him liable to the gravest suspicion and who cannot be too ruthlessly dealt with accordingly. To the dispassionate student of human nature there is indeed nothing more curious in its way than the temper and ill-feeling which are imported at times into a matter where by rights there seems not the slightest

justification for any such emotional manifestations at all. Because a composer has not succeeded in writing good music, why should it excite anger and indignation? Why should it be imputed to him, not merely that he has failed, but also that he is a discredited and contemptible person, if not actually a rogue and a charlatan?

The explanation is, I suppose, in part at least, the incurable tendency of mankind to take sides, to espouse opposing causes, to range itself in camps. When confronted with new music which he can't understand, but which finds favour with others, the tendency of the average man, is not to say to himself 'I am losing something here—my possibilities of musical enjoyment would manifestly be increased if I could appreciate this composer's music also,' but rather to take it as a grievance and a cause of offence that such music exists, to denounce it as worthless, vile, contemptible, and to fight tooth and nail against its recognition. Considered in cold blood and as an abstract proposition, nothing could seem much more ridiculous or absurd. Yet is it any exaggeration to say that this and nothing else is precisely what occurs,—if not always, at any rate at times,—in actual practice?

Take the case of the Brahmsites and the Wagnerites a generation ago. So far from trying to understand one another, and lamenting their inability to do this, they positively hugged their differences and developed an antagonism into which they imported all the fervour and passion usually reserved—equally irrationally—for politics and religion. You had Joachim solemnly breaking off all relations with Liszt because he had gone over to the enemy, Madame Schumann declining to play at a concert because the 'Feuerzauber' was in the same programme, and so on all round. And all this because of differences of opinion over two composers, as to the merits of both of whom there is practically universal agreement nowadays. That the composers themselves indulge in these antagonisms and animosities is not so difficult to understand; but that the public at large should adopt their prejudices and espouse their quarrels is surely the height of folly.

Yet who shall say that the tendency is any less strong to-day than ever? If just at present it is not quite so much in evidence as has sometimes been the case, I fancy this is mainly because there do not happen to be such commanding figures on the musical stage at the present time to call it into action. It is indeed one of the most curious features of contemporary music that so little feeling of any kind—either of enthusiasm on the one hand or dislike on the other—seems to be aroused by the productions of even the biggest men. Their works are produced and listened to, are mildly praised or mildly condemned, but it would be difficult to name a single composer before the public to-day whose music excites any really deep and widespread enthusiasm. Certainly it would be impossible to name a single one—whether Strauss, Debussy, Stravinsky, or any other—who can be said to occupy any such position in this respect as was occupied by Wagner and Brahms, or Mendelssohn and Schumann, in days gone by. If therefore the excesses of partisanship are less pronounced to-day than then, this is, I suspect, the cause rather than any general development of the spirit of charity and sweet reasonableness.

Here, then, is yet another peril against which the critic cannot guard against too sedulously, for however it may be with others, he at least should be free from the smallest suspicion of bias or temper in delivering his judgments. Otherwise, one may say, the last remaining justification for his existence disappears. It may not be possible for him to avoid being (as his

enemies affirm) ignorant and dull, wanting in perception, devoid of sympathy, and so on; but at least it should not be beyond his power to be scrupulously just, and to avoid being influenced in the smallest degree by prejudice and partisanship.

Yet, whatever may be the case to-day, I am afraid it would be impossible to affirm that this ideal has always been realised in the past. On the contrary, when one recalls the names of the few who have so far left behind them any sort of permanent reputation in this particular field, such as Hanslick and Davison and Chorley, one thinks of them chiefly in connection with the exhibition of bias and partisanship, of temper and passion and prejudice, in the extremest form, and in the case of one of the most notable of their successors, who has more recently passed from the scene,—to wit, the late J. F. Runciman,—I am afraid, no less applies. It might almost seem, indeed, that only in this way—by recourse to extravagance of opinion and violence of language—is it possible to make any sort of impression in musical criticism.

Happily, however, in our own day the writings of such men as Newman, Hadow, Huneker, and Romain Rolland, have brilliantly demonstrated that in reality this is not the case at all, and that even poor, despised musical criticism may in the best of circumstances be everything that criticism should be—scientific in method, impartial in temper, penetrating, luminous, persuasive, and yet in no way lacking in force and vigour, and in addition fulfilling, along with its special critical functions, all the requirements of fine literature. Doubtless it is not given to most of us to attain these heights; but here at least are exemplars who may serve as an inspiration to us all.

#### THE 'ORGELBÜCHLEIN': ANOTHER BACH PROBLEM.

BY C. SANFORD TERRY.

In the April and June numbers of the *Musical Times* Mr. Ernest Newman and Mr. Ivor Atkins discussed 'A little Bach problem,' namely, the particular season to which Bach intended to attach the hymn 'Heut' triumphiret Gottes Sohn' in the 'Orgelbüchlein.' The point is a detail in a much larger problem which so far has remained unplumbed. What general scheme, if any exists, inspired Bach in compiling the 'Orgelbüchlein'? Or are its contents haphazard, a collection of tunes that captured his admiration, but otherwise lacking plan or unity, religious or poetic?

Since 1846, when Griepenkerl edited the 'Orgelbüchlein,' German scholarship either has ignored the problem or has done its best, with characteristically obtuse cleverness, to make it unsoluble by reshuffling Bach's materials. The Bachgesellschaft edition merely reproduces the Autograph. Even Schweitzer's analysis is incomplete, and is directed upon only a fraction, and that the most easily interpreted, of the work. The new Novello Edition meticulously follows his guidance, but does not explore the larger section that remains unriddled, in regard to which Mr. Newman merely asks whether it, too, has a religious or poetic design. I venture a comprehensive answer.

It is a matter of general knowledge that during his residence at Weimar, and approaching his thirtieth year, Bach sketched and partly completed a set of Organ movements upon hymn melodies and entitled the collection 'Orgelbüchlein.' He planned it to contain 164 movements upon the melodies of 161 hymns, three hymns being introduced twice over. Of the projected 164 movements only forty-six actually