

Liszt's Seventieth Birthday, October 22

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THE MUSICAL TIMES

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

NOVEMBER 1, 1881.

LISZT'S SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY,

OCTOBER 22.

"AND is that enough to be considered a life's vocation?" once exclaimed the head-master of a grammar-school when, upon his inquiry why Liszt had been induced to take holy orders, he was told that such a step was necessary to enable him to become *maestro di cappella* to the Pope, and thus to fulfil, from out the Sistine Chapel, his own life's mission—the regeneration of Catholic Church music. The answer elicited by the above fresh query: "Certainly, and especially at the present moment, perhaps, a more important one than the regeneration of the school," caused the pedagogue to spin round on his heel and take his departure. Without wishing to enter here upon the field of polemics, we are of opinion that the conversation just recorded characterises very forcibly the indifference towards the question at issue exhibited, even at the present day, by a large body of our cultured men who moreover exercise a directing influence upon the progress of this "culture" itself.

How, we may ask, is it possible for any thinking man, albeit professedly an outsider, to entertain any doubt as to the fact that the only binding influence which—apart from the common instincts operating at moments of all-compelling necessity—holds together and shapes the masses of the people is to be looked for in their ideal conceptions which, in however crippled a form, are still embodied most intensely and convincingly in religion; and that, therefore, the Church, as long as it exists, will be to the vastly preponderating majority of men the only fountain from whence they can derive such ideal conceptions which will lift them above the narrow sphere of their material self and cause them to believe in the community of mankind and the duty of every individual towards it? Where exists the substitute for such an absolutely indispensable institution which, founded upon an ideal basis accepted by all, could attract and elevate the masses who, without this cementing influence, would dissolve into atoms? That it is to be found in the State or in modern culture, however highly developed both may be, can only be asserted by the most shortsighted of observers; and it was a similar conviction which, after the craze of "enlightenment" of the past century, and still more after the terrible period of revolution and war which followed it, sweeping away all the existing landmarks, had directed again all the more seriously reflecting minds upon the sole representative institution of things ideal, viz., upon religion, upon the Church. "La religion est le véritable ciment des édifices sociaux. Plus les pierres sont nombreuses et menues, plus le ciment doit être fort pour les unir," wrote George Sand in the fourth decade of our century in the "Lettres d'un Voyageur." It is needless here to add that any excesses committed by the Catholic Church against the authority of the State are as little to be approved of as was the whilom arrogant self-assertion of Protestant orthodoxy in opposition to the general mental strivings and culture of the time. To the truly educated mind, the Church—i.e., the religious worship of both Catholic and Protestant—remains still intact; and the highest aim can only be to develop this worship according to the spirit of our religious profession, and to secure thereby its continued ideal influence. Church and State, from this point of view, would be in the position of *Mime* and

Alberich contending for the possession of the ring, "which signifies the world's inheritance and power," while *Siegfried* holds it in his hand. And as in the Protestant Church it is most rightly sought to infuse into the service more and more such depth of meaning as would attract and satisfy the ideal requirements of the generality, so also there are not wanting in the Catholic community—as far as an outsider may be able to judge—strivings, earnest and enthusiastic, far removed from the war-tumult of the ruling powers and factions of the Church, aiming at the restitution to the latter of its old universality of influence by reviving something of the grand spirit of former ages, by which modern mankind has been moulded. And as it is by no means a mere accident if from the same spirit of modern mankind there has likewise proceeded that art which has enabled it to express in a new language the infinity of that spirit, the depth and the intensity of its emotions—so it is also by no accident that *music* must, in the first place, be called a daughter of the Church and its service; so there have been voices raised of old and to this present day in favour of the readmission into the Church of this daughter, who has meanwhile become so unspeakably rich and, above all, so independent, so that she might occupy her rightful place there with all her newly developed attributes.

The great difficulty as regards the Protestant form of worship lies in the fact of its not easily admitting our art to a full share in the service itself, thereby rendering its introduction liable to assume the character of a sacred concert, rather than of an integral part of the worship—a difficulty which, however real, is not by any means an insurmountable one. In the Catholic Church, on the other hand, music forms an essential element—in a certain sense, indeed, the most potent element of the service. For the "Transubstantiation," which is merely indicated by the priest in the elevation of the Host, attains its ideal consummation in the musical strains which at this period of the High Mass, no matter how insignificant the church at which it be performed, fills the hearts of the devoutly kneeling congregation with holy reverence and awe. And if it may be said that without this redirection of the individual upon the eternal foundations of existence, as represented in the Transubstantiation, we should most certainly not possess that art whose most essential qualities have rendered it the exponent of this cosmogony; so it may be asserted, with equal truth, that the Catholic worship, culminating as it does in the Mass, will not for any length of time maintain its vital power intact without the aid of its daughter, Music, who in turn had become its foster-mother, or at all events may be called upon in this capacity at any time.

How infinitely, therefore, was it to be regretted when, with the predominant influence of a party, which has increased immoderately the glittering pomp of the Church, not disdaining to admit into it even theatrical elements, these latter—i.e., the theatrical and superficial excrescences—had found their way also into the music of the service. There is a *Jesuitical style* recognisable in music; and he whose taste has been formed upon the eternally true and classical in our art will discern even in Beethoven's Grand Mass, as well as in Mozart's Requiem, the fact that since the seventeenth century opera has invaded the Church, and that the strangely fastidious impersonifications of the saints of that time are likewise reflected in the character of the Church music. Such was the case as much in Germany as in the countries inhabited by Latin races, and it is well known to any one who has ever visited Italy that one may hear the latest operatic airs resounding from the organ even in the majestic dome of St. Peter's,

in Rome. From Mozart to Mendelssohn there has been but one voice of complaint among musicians as to this incongruity; and great has been the number of gifted authors, Goethe at their head, who have returned from Italy full of regret at the existing state of things, which they looked upon as a reproach to the Church, and a matter of sorrow as affecting a people standing so much in need of religious elevation.

He to whom this inner consciousness of a much-wanted reform, on a modern basis, had become a second nature, unpremeditated and yet deliberately aimed at in all his doings, is the subject of this article—Franz Liszt. In the capacity in which we have thus described him, the artist was in fact merely carrying out the fundamental principles of his life. Fortunately, sufficient authentic information exists on this point, and there is no need to regard either as a miracle or as a mere accident the appearance of Liszt as a reformer of the musical art of his Church: it was a matter which touched the very foundations of his life, and he threw his heart and soul into it accordingly. "From early youth Franz had a natural bias for religious contemplation, and his intense love for his art was pervaded by a piety which had all the sincerity of his age." These words occur in the diary of the father, who died when Liszt had but reached his sixteenth year. The latter himself writes in 1857 about the "humble little church" of his Hungarian home "where as a child I have prayed with so much fervent devotion." Then already he believed himself to be called into the service of the Church, but the earnest persuasions of both his parents prevailed upon him in following entirely the paths of his art. Yet, the source from which we have derived these early notes on Liszt's character, viz., the *Gazette Musicale de Paris* of 1834, adds significantly: "His piety was, however, perfectly rational, admitting of a certain freedom of ideas and conduct; it was not, as with the majority of fanatics, rigid, uncompromising, dogmatic, and brutal; but perfectly sincere instead, far more reasonable, and at the same time proceeding from the Catholic point of view." In the same manner, even the frivolous poet Heine writes of him from Paris, about the year 1840, that he had great aptitude for religious speculation, mentioning more particularly his "unquenchable thirst after light and Godhead, which bears witness to his sense for the divine and the religious." The foregoing allusions sufficiently establish the basis for all that followed. The biographical sketch of our composer's youth, however, tells us further that he had determined to write religious music, "but whereas the music bearing that name in our time appeared to him out of keeping with the character generally attributed to it by the feelings of men, the idea forced itself upon his mind to *create* a religious music." When, therefore, after his prolonged wanderings, he at last settled down in order to compose in reality—for, as our French report justly says, Liszt's pianoforte-playing was "no mechanical exercise, but essentially a composition, a veritable creation of art"—when he concentrated his soul upon these creations of his entire inner experience (as these his former reproductions may well be called), in order to fix them as artistic productions, then the idea of his youthful days soon became a reality, and already at a time which would seem almost a generation removed from ours, an important part of his compositions for the Church had sprung into existence.

The "festlich hohe Gruss" of the "Hungarian Coronation Mass," or the solemn stateliness of the music written for the consecration of the cathedral at Gran, bear witness to the fact that here we have not merely

another repetition of an oft-repeated theme of which the surface has been touched only, but a return to the very heart of the subject. It was a case of offering the daily bread, so to speak, where, alas! the hungering multitude had hitherto but too frequently been tendered a stone. Even a minor work like the "Missa Choralis" would show that the desire of his youth had been realised, and that a truly religious music for the Catholic worship of our time had been created. This Mass was first produced in 1877, at Vienna, by the Cæcilienverein. In it, all that may be called traditionally mass-like in regard to the Church music of the last centuries has disappeared; and if this unadorned song of human voices can be likened to the style of a Palestrina, it contains, nevertheless, no reminiscence of that master, but all is original, new, modern, *i.e.*, in accordance with our own nearest feelings. The most profane listener must feel that an art such as this would not only embellish and enliven the religious service, but *reform* it after the spirit which is latent in it: just as Palestrina had idealised and preserved to us the grand religious aspirations of a former epoch.

But Liszt did not rest satisfied with having done so much; he also directed his efforts practically towards the purification and renovation of the music of his Church. The same impulse which prompted him to resign his highly beneficial artistic activity at Weimar—foreshadowing the days of Munich and Bayreuth—likewise determined him to take up his residence in Rome. To enable him to exercise his influence in the cause he had at heart it was imperative that he should become musical director to the Pope. As such he had, according to ancient law, first of all to abandon the worldly state—Palestrina having been the last of the musical directors at the Sistine Chapel not in priestly orders, he being married, and his inimitable art alone sustaining him in the position he occupied. Thus Liszt became a priest. But why did he not remain in Rome? it will be asked. "I was disappointed in consequence of the want of education amongst the cardinals," he tells us himself regarding this point, and referring more especially to the musical tastes of an ecclesiastical body the great majority of whose members are Italians. Liszt, moreover, felt that the desired regeneration of music could, after all, only proceed from its heart's centre, from Germany. He thus returned there and founded, first at Regensburg and then at Eichstädt, model seminaries for the propagation of high-class and truly religious Church music. May they flourish, even though generations should have to pass away before their efforts can be fully appreciated! They are furnishing anew an elementary food for the soul for which there is no real substitute, and which from year to year we stand in greater need of. As regards Liszt's share in bringing about these results, we recognise that here, as in all his doings and strivings, the man and the artist are identical, forming a complete personality, compact and firmly established inwardly, and therefore truly noble and royally munificent in its outward manifestations.

LUDWIG NOHL.

CRITICAL EXCURSIONS.

By FR. NIECKS.

SCHUMANN (*continued from page 501.*)

JOSEPH RUBINSTEIN has also many unpleasant things to say about Schumann's pianoforte style. To be sure it is not a model style, but it does not deserve all the abuse it gets. Our critic as usual exaggerates, and applies to the whole of the master's works what only can be said of a