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THE PRINCIPLES OF MUSICAL CRITICISM

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JANUARY 3, 1881.

EBENEZER PROUT, Esq., B.A.,

IN THE CHAIR.

THE PRINCIPLES OF MUSICAL CRITICISM.

By JOHN STAINER, Esq., M.A., Mus. Doc.

THE subject on which I am to address you to-day is so wide that it would be impossible to do more than to give a very brief sketch of the whole, or to enter with some minuteness into the details of a special branch. I propose to take the latter course, and, in order to clear the ground before us, I will begin by stating what I do *not* propose to touch upon.

I shall say nothing about the criticism of performers or performances; and I must, I am sorry to say, entirely ignore the principles of criticising the primary uses of the constituent parts of music—sounds shaped into outline, welded into chords, successively arranged into rhythms, or of sentences grouped into definite forms. Nothing could be of greater interest than these subjects; but I feel bound to take advantage of the status of my hearers, and therefore I shall ask you to allow me to try and, if possible, formulate those deep-seated principles on which is founded the true criticism of a musical work of art—a composition. Either consciously or unconsciously every educated person forms his opinion of the merits of a composition on some well-defined grounds. But this process is so often gone through unconsciously, or, at all events, unreflectively, that I think an analysis of it cannot but be useful. I fear I cannot also say that it will be interesting. I am aware that papers and discussions on this subject are generally accounted of great interest, but chiefly, as far as I can discover, because, instead of digging down to first principles, they are allowed to drift away to a discursive eulogy on the glories of some particular schools or authors, brought out into a bright prominence in the foreground by a dark background of disparagement or abuse of their rivals or inferiors. No such keen sport awaits you this afternoon. I am going to ask you to trace back to their source the laws by which you are

every day producing your judgments; I ask you to analyse your own mental processes.

The earliest stage of art-criticism consists in a judgment couched in the following form: "This gives me pleasure." There is also a suppressed judgment to the effect that the object of art is to give pleasure—hence any work of art producing this result is pronounced to be good. But this conclusion, founded, as it really is, on the simple sensation, fails to form a standard of merit, simply because it turns out to be so variable. What is pleasant to one is often unpleasant to another; so that the function of criticism is not to say how much pleasure A., B., or C. has derived from a composition, but,—in which case may the pleasure be taken as real proof of merit in the work. No doubt a street boy derives just as much pleasure from a cornet and harp duet at a street corner as the *habitué* of the Crystal Palace Concerts does from the symphony of the day. I ask your special attention to this view of the case because there is rapidly springing up a school of critics who are about to call upon all musical enthusiasts to emancipate themselves from the so-called scholastic criticism, and to return once more to the only natural criterion—namely, that the pleasant is good; also that the opinion of the untechnical hearer of a musical work is not only equal, but superior, to that of the critic who is also an expert, because the untechnical hearer will give an unbiassed opinion as to the natural effect of the music on his emotions, whereas, the expert will be tempted to refer a work to this or that category, or to measure it by some conventional standard, both of which are purely arbitrary. These reformers also say that the mere *fact* that a composition happens to belong to a particular style or category does not give pleasure, therefore this fact and all arguments drawn from it as to the merit of the work are absurd. This sounds delightfully simple, but it hides an egregious fallacy. The only way to expose it is to admit that "the amount of pleasure it is capable of giving" is the true test of a work of art, but to ask, "*Whose pleasure* is the test?" It is clear that at this point musical criticism begins to emerge from a mere statement of greater or less intensely pleasurable sensations into the sphere of a set of principles to which, in the main, the most educated and appreciated have given their assent. Just as good grammar remains good grammar although the educated who speak it may happen to be a very small minority; and just as justice, truthfulness, and self-sacrifice remain duties eternally binding on humanity, notwithstanding the small proportion of men who actually and unreservedly practise them, so also the principles of art-criticism are nothing more nor less than the *consensus* of the fittest on the true characteristics of that which gives the highest order of pleasure in the best possible way. Of course

there are times when conventional criticism becomes at once so weak and so overbearing that a healthy resistance overthrows it. With such a movement as this I could heartily sympathise; but, on the other hand, it is quite possible to be a reformer without being a nihilist. Musical criticism is at the present moment oscillating dangerously between the two extremes of dogmatic conventionalism and unblushing nihilism. I think it is the duty of us all to try and steady it.

It is quite certain that every composition professes to *be something*, or to have a purpose. A piece of music is rarely without a definite title, and, even when this is wanting, the very manner in which it is written, and the performers for whom it is written, throw it immediately into some known category. In short, before we attempt to give an opinion of the merits of a work, we unconsciously ask, To what class of works does it claim to belong? or, For what purpose was it intended? This, I take it, is a mere truism. The answer to this question will be found to separate between the sacred and the secular, the sonata and the romance, the dance-tune and the chamber-classic; in fact, to break up the mass of works which exist or may exist into groups. In solving this question we are really probing the "intention of the composer."

It may be asked, Why not criticise a work regardless of the objects or purpose which its author had in view?—it may also be urged that the composer's intention is not a *portion of the work*, and therefore cannot come within the legitimate scope of criticism. The answer to this is, that a work of art absolutely without a purpose, or destined for some special object, is an inconceivable thing. Do not misunderstand me: I have no intention of stating that a work of art is brought into existence for some *use*, but only for some purpose. In short, the author's intention is, as it were, the protoplasm from which develops, bit by bit, the art-work, and out of which it goes on developing in particular directions, according to the purpose for which it is intended. It will now, I think, be clear that we cannot be said to *criticise* really the composer's intentions; we require certainly to know them, and why?—in order that we may see how far he has succeeded in moulding his work in accordance with his design. In short, we do not criticise "intentions," but the relation between the purpose and the work; and this choice of purpose, or the direction it takes, throws a work of art into some distinct class; hence we began by saying that the class of compositions to which a piece claims to belong must be known.

But assuming that the work presented to us *does* belong legitimately to the class to which it lays claim to belong, the next question is, How shall we measure its merit as a representative of that class?

Its position in that class must evidently be determined—

(a) By the point of time in which it was composed, with relation to the actual development of that class at that time ; and—

(b) Its merit when compared with contemporary efforts of the same kind.

I think this position can hardly be attacked. As an illustration, let me say that if you found a book of "Songs without Words," without date, I assert that it would be impossible to gauge their merits without finding out whether they were written before 1800 or after 1850. In the one case the author would have struck out a new line ; in the latter he might perhaps be a mere plagiarist. Similarly, the composer of a symphony at the present moment has to be judged by a totally different standard to that which would be enforced if he had been writing before the year 1800. The real principle which lies at the root of this apparently shifting standard of merit is merely this : we feel that all thought should be accumulative ; we demand that the true artist should always be in the front of humanity, watching and sharing the bold dashes of its self-sacrificing pioneers, not wasting his time amongst the lazy or cowardly in the rear ; he must be a hero, not a camp-follower ; he possesses, moreover, a noble inheritance from the hoarded thought and experience of his art-ancestors ; we expect him to "improve his property" ; he is indeed "the heir of the ages." What a glorious birthright ! but, alas, how many, without remorse, sell it for a mess of pottage !

We have now reached the point at which, the surrounding conditions of a work of art being known, we are capable of forming an opinion on its merits. But what constitutes merit in a work of art ? I think it is of two kinds :—

(a) Merit of conception (or initial design) ;

(b) Merit of treatment (or fulfilment).

It is evident that merit of conception springs from the natural gifts of an author, and also that merit of treatment to a great extent grows out of his artistic education.

This, I imagine, will not be denied. For we are all familiar with the outpouring of untutored talent, with its suggestiveness, its want of finish, its masterly strength for short flights, its failure in any attempt to produce continuous unity. We are also equally familiar with the polished manipulation and perfect finish of works produced by the highly cultivated musician who lacks genius. Of course he who is both original in conception and artistic in finish rises high above all competitors. But of those who cannot claim both these qualifications, which do we value most,—the genius who is not a real artist, or the artist who possesses no real genius ? The fact is, we cannot blame an artist for his lack of genius, whereas a genius certainly deserves blame for not having made himself an artist. It thus happens that we respect the artist without

genius, while we cannot but admire untutored genius. The balance of our opinion may in such cases be very even, but the two sides of the scales are filled with very different stuff. On the one hand, every spark of genius is attractive, its influence is marvellous, it calls forth warm emotion. On the other hand, artistic treatment, taken by itself, never calls up more than cold compliment; our enthusiasm remains unstirred. Sometimes, indeed, the problem is reduced to the simple question as to the relative value of spontaneity and conventionality,—who then can doubt for one moment as to his choice? Let the tutored expert praise the conventional, the human heart will always sympathise with the spontaneous. The intellect may revel in the artistic, but genius is embraced by the very soul. Having thus distinguished between merit of conception and merit of treatment, it is natural to ask how we can apply a test to “merit of conception.”

Is “originality” the *only* merit of a conception? Is it not a merit that one conception should be more sharply defined or better expressed than another? I fully anticipate that there will be some difference of opinion on this subject, but I am inclined to say that there are two kinds of merit of conception:—

- (a) Originality of matter;
- (b) Excellence of form.

It may be, or rather, it often has happened, that many thoughtful men have had a hazy, undefined reaching after some new phase of beauty or of truth, which has eluded their grasp until such time as a master-mind has stepped in, and, by co-ordination or formulating, has snatched up the nearly lost threads, and exhibited to mankind its own longings woven into an objective reality. Similarly, merit of treatment may, I think, be considered as two-fold:—

- (a) As to originality of matter;
- (b) As to excellence as an example of accepted method.

Here it must be distinctly understood that these and similar divisions are not mutually exclusive, and that the highest composers excel in both.

This division, both of merit of conception and merit of treatment, into two branches each, may be at first sight pronounced cumbersome and unnecessary. But, since committing it to paper, I have come across a strong proof of its necessity. You are no doubt all of you familiar with the most interesting letter from Mendelssohn to Hiller (on p. 82 of Hiller's “*Recollections of Mendelssohn*”), in which is given an account of the performance of Hiller's Overture in D minor at Leipsic, in January, 1837. After praising most warmly the originality and beauty of the themes of the overture, Mendelssohn says: “I dislike nothing more than finding fault with a man's nature or talent; it only depresses and worries, and does no good;

one cannot add a cubit to one's stature; all striving and struggling are useless there, so one has to be silent about it, and let the responsibility rest with God. But in a case like the present, with your work, where all the themes, everything which is talent or inspiration (call it what you will), is good and beautiful and impressive, *and the development alone not good*, then I think it may not be passed over; there, I think blame can never be misplaced,—that is the point where one can improve one's-self and one's work. . . . Don't go and tell me . . . that your treatment is always as good as your invention; I don't think it is. . . . The two overtures are certainly your best things, but *the more clearly you express yourself* the more one feels what is wanting, and what, in my opinion, you ought to remedy." Hiller's remarks on this "affectionate lecture" are not so much a defence of his own workmanship as a counter-thrust at Mendelssohn's principles of criticism. Hiller says: "It seems to me to be a mistake to consider the after-development to be less dependent on original genius than the first discovery; for if this development rests only on what has been learned and studied, if the qualities of poetical creation do not come into play in the same degree in both cases, if it is not fresh, living, and original, it cannot make any impression." He adds: "I find the proof of this opinion in the masterpieces which adorn our art. In the best works of the five great masters, Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, it is impossible to point out any separation between invention and treatment." The skill of this counter-thrust is apparent, but all that it goes to prove is this, that composers can only produce true *masterpieces* when they *combine* these varied qualities of natural gifts and artistic treatment; when they exhibit an originality of conception, and a power of presenting the matter of that conception in the best possible form; and when the method of their thematic treatment is both original in design and polished in execution. In all the beautiful letter of Mendelssohn from which I have quoted there runs the purest stream of true art-criticism, shaded by that mixture of playfulness and affection which makes all he writes so natural and so sympathetic. I therefore leave my two-fold division of conception, and also of treatment, as I wrote them, although I still feel that much may be said against this course.

But I have been using a word which calls at once for definition. I have spoken of originality—what is it?

I should define it as "the stamp of individuality left by a composer on his work." I know that all idealists will challenge this definition, they would almost wish us to believe that originality is a sort of spiritual possession; a direct inspiration vouchsafed from the eternal fount of all that is very good, impelling the selected prophet to shun the beaten tracks of social

intercourse, and in solitude, and with thought abstracted from the external and turned inwards, to catch a glimpse of truth and beauty, even if he be able to touch no more than the mere fringe of the robe of the passing deity. You will find ranging below this idealistic view all kinds of definitions, until you reach the lowest ebb of materialism, which has no compunction in describing original genius simply as "a superior perceptive faculty, arising from abnormal excitability and elasticity in the nervous centres." Fortunately, I think we are not called upon to enter this old and well-trodden arena of controversy. It is enough for us, I think, to agree that an artist can after all only turn into his art-work that sense and power of beauty which is *in him*; as to the question whence comes his special gift, we can let others fight about it. That original genius either is, or is seen through, intense individuality, must I think be admitted, when we consider that the greater art-giants men grow, the more distinctive and separated from each other do they become in their works. The musical composition of the highest writer can be unhesitatingly pronounced to be his, and his alone; the mediocre work might be by anybody.

As I have described originality as "the stamp of individuality left by a composer on his work," I may be asked to say in what artistic individuality consists. I should be inclined to define it as "the special emotional bias and intellectual bearing of a creative genius." I suppose no one will deny that it is *creativity* which differentiates genius from mere refinement or knowledge, and I think it is equally clear that it is the peculiar grasp of the mental powers, combined with a special impressibility of the feelings in certain directions, which helps to make up our concept of that unthinkable whole—a genius.

Is the sphere or scope of originality limited? Yes, certainly. Its progress this way or that is determined by the state of contemporary feeling or knowledge; it can only reach forward and lay hold on some truth or form of beauty lying just outside the ordinary circle of thought. In other words, though a genius is always in advance of his age, and in this way secures the appreciation and praise of his posterity, yet he is only, after all, a growth from the soil (so to speak) of his surroundings, albeit he may exhibit a remarkable and unexpected development. There is one principle of criticism which naturally falls into this part of my subject, and evokes a thought which ought to make critics both cautious and humble. It is this: The deepest writer is really writing only for the deepest thinker. The most polished creative genius calls into existence his works of art for the appreciation and pleasure only of the most highly cultivated. It is therefore a simple truth, though it sounds somewhat paradoxical, to say, that the more a composer is taking pains to excel in refinement and truthfulness of

expression, the more he is actually narrowing the circle of possible interpreters and admirers. If a critic is listening to a work which he feels he does not understand, the question he must ask is, Does it fail to impress me because it is from the standpoint of an intellectual and emotional training far above my head, or is it unintelligible because it is not a true exponent of art? That such an important and plain question could ever be wrongly answered seems absolutely incredible. But the history of musical criticism during the last century shows scores of such blunders. I am afraid we can hardly hope that some erudite modern critic will be persuaded to give us an account of these sayings of former unjust judges and false prophets in art. It would be an interesting chapter of history, and might teach a useful lesson to poor humanity, which, like a silly believer in dreams, loves to make a careful record of those foretellings which have come to pass, but somehow or other has always forgotten to keep a list of those which have never had any counterpart in fact. When it was really a difficult thing to say whether a new work of musical art was above contemporary critical faculties or below them, it was fashionable, fifty years ago, to pronounce it at once—beneath criticism. Like all fashions, this has been followed by a reaction, which is showing itself in these days; for society, determined now to be on the safe side, seems ready to “gush” over every novelty which is presented to it with becoming credentials. Perhaps, on the whole, this latter is the healthier state of the two; posterity can easily take care to nurture and adopt what calm reflection shows to be good, whilst committing with a smile the falsely praised to the waste-paper basket, rolled up in its own compliments.

Having now discovered that we must first criticise the connection between the composer's initial conception and its fulfilment, then the matter and form of his conception, and lastly, the matter and form of his treatment of his conception, it seems to me that the next principle on which we shall venture to attach a label of value to his work will be by discovering whether he has entered into a high walk of art or not. You can see at once that the few principles already laid down may be applied to a work even of the smallest pretensions; we must, therefore, test further the value of a work, assuming that it satisfies the demands to which it has already been subjected.

On what principle can one walk of the art of music be considered higher than another? We must, without doubt, say that the branch of the art which gives the greatest scope for the free use of the most varied material is the highest, and offers the most severe test to the composer. This surely requires no justification; the most talented and successful composer of drawing-room ballads could hardly ask to have his

name bracketed with that of Beethoven on the ground that he had reached the highest point of excellence in his own particular branch, and that no greater praise than this could be awarded to Beethoven, although he happened to compose symphonies. The claim of the ballad-writer would, of course, be laughed at; but if we seek to give the reason why, it will turn out to be that he has not chosen the highest walk of his art, and therefore cannot ask to be placed among the greatest artists. This is, of course, an extreme case, but the principle holds good in all intermediate stages.

It is however sometimes necessary to compare the relative merits of two compositions, one of which excels in a lower class, whilst the other, aiming at a higher level, falls short of its intent. I think most people are inclined to answer this question in a rough and ready way; they will say, "a good loaf is better than a bad sovereign," so a good ballad is better than a bad symphony. But the comparison is not always so easy as this. If A. has produced say three first-rate ballads, and B. three symphonies which are pronounced to be "not bad," which of the two is to be placed uppermost in the roll of fame? To answer this fairly we must find out whether B. is young, whether his three symphonies are the probable forerunners of three much better works, or whether they represent the highest flight he is likely to make. Such qualifications as these should always be stated in criticising the ambitious efforts of new authors; although the critic who has to write hurriedly and supperless after a late evening concert, is often tempted to neglect such nice discriminations.

I have just now said that the highest walk of musical art is "that which gives the greatest scope for the free use of the most varied material." What form of composition answers to this? You are, of course, aware that there will here be much division of opinion. Some would answer unhesitatingly, the Symphony; others would say, with equal confidence, the Opera. The battle over this question is even now raging; it would be impossible for us to take part in it to-night, but it may be interesting to try and find out the *casus belli*. It may, I think, be roughly stated thus: If music be looked upon as a language in itself, capable of expressing the deepest thoughts and rousing the highest emotions, it may claim to be a higher form of speech—"where speech ends, music begins." To set words to music—that is, to incorporate vocal music with instrumental—is therefore, from this point of view, to descend from the higher to the lower; to drag down a heavenly communing to an earthly story; to give up that which is necessarily indefinite, because it is a breath from the infinite, for that which chains us irrevocably to the finite. If, on the other hand, music is merely a branch of poetry, made up of beauty of wave-form (quality of tone), beauty of outline in pitch

(melody), beauty of combinations and successions, and so on, then it falls below the poetry of speech in its want of *definiteness*, and it certainly must bow down before what have been called "the eternal rights of poetry."

Those who take the former view say practically that it is a condescension on the part of music to throw its beauteous light on to the pages of poetry; that poetry has everything to gain by the betrothal, music much to lose. They will also say that Beethoven's "Choral Symphony" has only one blemish, and that is that it is choral at all. Not so, says the other side; Beethoven, finding that the force and meaning of instrumental music could go no further, was constrained to incorporate "speech in song." I will leave this pretty dispute in your hands to settle according to your individual fancies. I ought, however, to add that round this central seat of war there are lots of groups of combatants fighting about collateral questions, each of whom would probably declare that I have stated the case quite wrongly.

Up to this point we have been assuming that a composer, whose works we might be asked to criticise, has been abreast of the latest contemporary efforts, but of course it often happens that a composer professes to produce an example of some form of composition associated with a bygone period. How are we then to estimate the value of his work? The following considerations are, I think, useful.

A style or school of composition may become obsolete from one of two causes: first, because of its legitimate expansion into some higher type, of which it was only a rudimentary growth; or secondly, because the highest form of the style or school having been reached in it, and it having been found incapable of further development, composers have turned aside to find some entirely new channel for their thoughts. A familiar example of this last-named cause of obsolescence will be found in the history of the madrigal, that fresh and beautiful growth of polyphony and counterpoint, when freed from the trammels of *canti fermi* and ancient modes. It blossomed, expanded, and, in the course of about a century, died. Its history is the complete life of a species. Examples of the actual completion of a musical form can be seen even in our own times. Those who have an ambition to compose oratorios are looking about in vain for some direction in which it can be legitimately expanded. As an example of a style of music which became obsolete because its outgrowth had a brighter future than the parent stock, I might point to the instrumental music which immediately preceded the rise of the sonata form or symphonic form. As you are all aware, in this early stage of modern form, second themes were often introduced in the key of the sub-dominant, a practice generally condemned now; also they were not always heard a second

time, and even when thus heard were not restored to the key of the tonic; moreover, bravura passages and rapid figures frequently filled up that portion of the movements now universally set apart for thematic development. I think we should hardly be justified in praising a composer were he to produce at this time a sonata or symphony in what was palpably a partially developed state of the now perfected form; whereas we should give unqualified praise to the author who turned out a genuine madrigal, pure both in style and construction.

But here I must return to the very point from which I started, for I can imagine a specimen of our new style of critic becoming furious, and exclaiming, "You are overlooking the real power of music, and checking its highest flights with your fetters of styles, and schools, and forms; for goodness' sake let us return to what are really first principles, and ask plainly that the only test of music shall be—Does it go straight to the heart?"

Here again, I must in the most unromantic way stop our critic by saying, that I admit at once that he has discovered the true test of beauty in music; there is only one little question to be answered, and that is, "*whose* heart is to be the test?" Here our new critic becomes highly rhetorical, and pleads that "the human heart is one; its highest and purest emotions are as readily attuned for sympathy in the heart of the peasant as of the prince." There is, I admit, a deep truth at the bottom of this, but that our music stands on a peculiar basis I can easily put to a very practical proof. At the next Monday Popular Concert let us send the audience from the upper hall down into the lower room, and fetch up the crowded audience of Christy's Minstrels to hear the classical performance upstairs. I need hardly point out how completely the magnificent appeal to nature would break down under such a test. If the new principle of criticism were correct, and if intellect and education are no longer to be factors in musical criticism, then our two audiences would be just as happy in their transferred position as before—is not the human heart one? But, as a matter of fact, the major part of the Minstrels' audience would be bored to death by the classical quartet; and as to the highly educated audience, compelled to listen to the nigger-melodies—well, they might perhaps both laugh and cry; but I think it would be discovered that they were laughing at the sentimentality, and crying at the jokes.

No, the real truth, from which it is impossible to escape, is this; the emotions and feelings are just as capable of education and training as the intellect itself; and criticism of art, and of the art of music especially, cannot possibly exist unless there is a healthy balance of the two. The critic who can appreciate only the intellectual side of music—its form, its devices, and workmanship—is just as bad a critic as the man who

boasts that he does not know the difference between a fiddle and a trombone, and never knew what was meant by key, and yet claims to label a symphony good or bad, according to his likings or dislikings. I think it must be admitted that we professed critics are sorely tempted to lean too much to the scholastic side of our art; and by doing so we blunt our emotional receptivity. You all know how beautifully this thought is expressed by George Eliot,—“In our eagerness to explain impressions, we often lose our hold of the sympathy that comprehends them.”

The standard of merit in music is, and ever will be, determined by the *consensus* of that body of educated listeners and thinkers whose intellect and emotions are equally trained and refined, and who are silently elected to a sort of “board of taste.” There must ever be in art, just as in morals, a right and a wrong, a good and a bad, absolutely separated and distinct from the mere pleasurable or unpleasurable.

You will see that of all this gathering of educated thinkers and feelers, the professed musical critic ought to be the most thoughtful, the most sympathetic; where others know much, he should know more; where others feel much, he should feel more. I daresay you are picturing to yourselves the poor musical critic of one of our newspapers sitting in despair, crushed by the weight of his responsibilities, lifting his hands, and muttering to himself, “Who then is equal to these things?” Cast aside this sad picture, please, at once; the proprietors of newspapers, with one or two honourable exceptions, have long ago settled this question. All that they require is pointed, epigrammatic writing, nothing more. The newspaper code of morality is of the simplest kind; it has one cardinal virtue—smart writing; it has one mortal sin—dulness. Any contributor to one of our second-rate papers who should “weight” his articles by a judicial summing-up or a reason why, would inevitably die in a workhouse. Society is the real sinner in this respect, not the poor scribbler who has to support a family. Society demands excitement in its daily-newspaper food. Naturally enough, it is supplied; hence on the subject of art we read the most ludicrous travesties of criticism; we find for contemporary history, outrageous hints of spiteful scandal. It is rather a curious fact that some of the most notorious periodicals of this stamp should be known as “society papers.” I hope “society” appreciates the compliment. There can be no doubt that we are steering through a very dangerous current of musical criticism, and it behoves everybody who is a well-wisher to the art to lend a helping hand at the wheel.

DISCUSSION.

The CHAIRMAN.—Ladies and Gentlemen, I am quite sure you will agree with me in offering our very best thanks to Dr. Stainer, for his most admirable remarks on a very difficult and somewhat abstruse subject. When he announced that he was not going into any question with regard to the criticism of performers and performances, but going down to the basis of the matter of what constituted good music, and on what a critic should found his opinions, I felt at once that we had need to listen with all our ears if we wanted to follow the thread of his argument, for it would probably be rather close reasoning. I am sure we have all found it perfectly easy to follow, because Dr. Stainer has expressed himself in the most lucid manner; and while there are certainly questions on which there may be differences of opinion, we shall most of us be inclined to agree in general with the conclusions at which he has arrived. I did not come here this evening with the slightest intention of making a speech, which I am not fond of doing, and therefore you will excuse me if I say but very few words. I think, with regard to the very important question which Dr. Stainer raised as to the difference between talent and genius, there can be no doubt as to his definition of genius consisting in individuality of idea; but it is very difficult indeed—at least I speak for myself, as one of the critical profession—to tell exactly where talent ends and where genius begins, or to define any border-line between the two. Let me take the works of such a composer as Mendelssohn. I think very few would deny him the possession of genius—I certainly should not for a moment think of denying it myself—but yet there are certain of his works in which that genius is very much more fully developed than in others, and there are others comparatively so weak that, judging him merely by them, one would hardly be disposed to credit him with the possession of that faculty in the same way as we should Beethoven or Schubert, to speak of an entirely different man. I think the distinction between the two is very difficult to draw with anything like accuracy. There was another point on which Dr. Stainer spoke, and on which I shall be very much inclined to agree with him—with regard to the appreciation of new works, and the necessity of taking into consideration the years and the experience of a composer in estimating the value, say of a new symphony, or oratorio, or whatever else it may be. Some little time ago I was talking with one of my professional brethren after a concert at St. James's Hall, where some new work had just been performed, and he said to me, "What do you think of such and such a composition?" I said, "I think it shows a great deal

of promise." He said, "That is exactly the phrase I object to: you critics are always talking about a thing having a great deal of promise; what I want to see is some performance; there are a great many promises that never come to anything." That is undoubtedly the fact, but I think we should be very harsh and unjust to discourage young composers; if we see there are indications of promise, it is much better to try to encourage it, although they may never come to anything worth considering. With regard to the difference between vocal and instrumental music, and the comparative merits of the two, I think Dr. Stainer had more especial reference to the views of the Wagnerites, amongst whom many people count me one, in giving the palm to vocal music as compared with instrumental. I do not think, on the whole, one can possibly call vocal music a higher class; my own preference would certainly be in favour of instrumental as the highest abstract music—as being higher in merit, because it is entirely independent of any extraneous ideas. I am very glad he said a few words with regard to newspaper criticism, especially with regard to the attempt at smart criticism, which I am sorry to say is the bane of so much of it nowadays. If we could only get critics to criticise musical works, and talk of the music itself, rather than to speak of how Mr. A. or Mr. B. sang or played, or how badly one man conducted, or how well another conducted, I think it would be much more useful, and would do far more towards educating the public. The only real test for music must be the impression it produces, as Dr. Stainer correctly remarked, on educated people, not on the general outside public. Therefore the first duty of a critic is to endeavour to educate the public itself by dwelling more on the compositions themselves than merely on the personal merits or defects of the performers. I hope some other gentleman in the room will have something to say, for the paper has been most suggestive.

Professor MACFARREN.—I agree most cordially in any vote of thanks to the reader of the paper this evening, which I think highly intelligent, highly instructive, and most desirable for emulation. Everyone who has heard it must feel how clearly the speaker has placed many points of his subject. But it would of all things ill become a person who offers himself on all possible occasions to public criticism to state his views as to the principles by which he should be judged. He could only in such a case remind one of the story current previous to the French Revolution, when the censorship of the press prevented any expression of opinion but what first of all met the approval of the authorities; and in newspaper utterances those who wished to make their thoughts known were obliged to have recourse to caricature drawings. At that time there was a meeting summoned of the notables to decide as to the

form of taxation which should be levied on the provinces; and thereupon there was issued a caricature showing an assembly of poultry in a farm-yard, and the farmer addressing the turkeys and fowls of all descriptions, asking them to give an opinion as to the sauce with which they would prefer to be eaten. Then there was a very fine game-cock standing on a dung-hill, who said, "We do not wish to be eaten at all"; to which the farmer replied, "That is entirely beside the question." In such a case as this, namely, of any one who challenges the critics, it would be very unbecoming to state any views of his own as to how the critics should act. Most certainly his is a difficult and delicate task. Most certainly it is impossible for him to divest his judgment of prejudgment. He must feel more interested in certain personalities than others. He must go to the first hearing of a previously unknown work of a great master with a different sense and a different extent of deference from that with which he hears the composition of an entire stranger. He cannot be indifferent to the production of his own friend, and if he is peculiarly anxious to do this friend full justice with the public, he will be either more disposed to expose or else to screen his faults, if not to speak falsely about him. A sound criticism, I believe, can only be formed posthumously to the production of the work criticised. We are so completely at the mercy of all surrounding circumstances in forming a judgment on a first hearing,—nay, on a first reading—on any form of acquaintance other than mature intimacy, that I believe it is out of human power to pronounce truthfully on the merits of an unfamiliar work; and the province of the critic in this case should surely be, where faults are not overwhelming, to give a hand of encouragement, and, as Mr. Prout has told us, to look for promise. Let us have our performances when we can get them, but where there is promise let us do everything that can be done by kindly words, and by a pleasant reception, to help the composer to attain to all he hopes and strives for, and all he intends. The demarcation of genius and artistry is as impossible as to make a line between daylight and darkness. There must be twilight, and that twilight exists in the productions of the greatest masters as much as it does in the differences between one master and another. We find the dark moments in the best of writers. One may say, in this work or that work there is not the evidence of inspiration, and, not only that, there is not the evidence of workmanship which is manifest in the other works from the same source. The man who wrote, for instance, the Triple Concerto of Beethoven cannot be accused of want of genius, or want of artistry, but he cannot be admired with the same enthusiasm as he is in those brighter moments when he produced greater works. It is obvious that there are many men who do their single great work, and their many

weak ones, and if they are to be readily condemned for their weaknesses they may fail in creating the one great achievement of a long career.

Dr. CHAMPNEYS.—It is with great diffidence, Mr. Chairman, that I rise to say anything, not being a professional musician, and still less a professional critic; but the paper has suggested certain ideas to me, which I, with much humility, would wish to put before you. I think it is impossible, when reading contemporary criticism, to avoid seeing that error lies on two sides; on the one hand, on the side of those who draw up arbitrary rules, and apply them to compositions, especially to compositions which are, so to speak, rather in front of the age; and, on the other hand, on the side of those who apply everything to the test of the ear, and say this pleases, and that pleases. If we remember, with regard to such a simple thing as our ordinary senses, it is very difficult to arrive at any reason for them: for instance, tastes, sounds, and scents, are all of them either pleasant or unpleasant, partly according to our associations with them. We all remember, for instance, various nice things which we should have liked all our days if we had not had them mixed up with medicines; I do not think it would be right to say that apricot jam is nasty because we cannot bear to take it ever since we have been given powders in it. Then there are scents: we are fond of a scent which recalls a pleasant association, and we like it; it might have recalled an unpleasant association, and we should then dislike it. Leaving that on one side, we must always remember that real criticism ought to be founded on analysis and on deduction. What we really should do, I think, is this. We should take our models, and when our models have been selected, we should study the models. We should, if possible, try to find out *why* they are fine. From their common elements of beauty we should be led towards the recognition of the various facts which underlie the beautiful in music. Then contemporary criticism itself is much more difficult than dealings with the music of the past, for this reason, that we do not know in what direction music is going to develop; and the definition of fine music will eventually be something of this sort, I think,—music which will eventually appeal to those who have been brought up to admire the best models. Therefore, a critic is not only a critic of the present, but a prophet of the future. We can all remember excellent musicians who were quite unable to appreciate contemporary works—works, we will say, of the modern school, simply because they applied a Procrustean method of criticism: they say this, that, or the other is fine; these things do not conform to the model, and therefore they are bad. What they should say is this: although people, even the generally educated musicians of the present day, do not admire this, I can see,

from the progress of the history of art, the time will come when they will be appreciated, and therefore such works deserve commendation.

Major CRAWFORD.—I will only say one word to indicate one of the difficulties of criticism in music. It differs from criticism in the other arts in there being no tangible type in nature to refer it to, and that should always be taken into account. We are thrown completely on our own resources, and our own feelings and prejudices, it may be, in dealing with the matter. In sculpture and in painting you can do as Sir Joshua Reynolds tells you—you can go to nature; in music you cannot, therefore that increases the difficulties of musical criticism very considerably, and makes it far more a personal matter on the part of the critic than it otherwise would be.

Dr. STAINER.—I have very little to say in reply, because you have spoken so much more kindly of my humble efforts than I deserve. I should like to point out, however, that I purposely left out all allusions to the other arts, because I find that it leads people into such very serious difficulties and false analogies. The greater part of all books that you see now on the subject of musical criticism, or æsthetics, or whatever you choose to call it, all start off by giving you smiles from sculpture and painting, and countless other things; and they lead to the opinion that the life of music is destined to be like the life of some other arts; that it will reach or has reached a very high point, and that it will have to go down hill again. That, I think you will all call to mind, was the view which kept music seriously back some time ago. The great believer in that doctrine was Dr. Crotch, who, having made up his mind that music was going to be exactly like painting, set to work to discover where music was at its very highest point; and, having done that, he settled that everything different from that was going down hill. That points very much to the valuable remarks Dr. Champneys made just now. He is evidently looking out for the ideal critic—a man who will appreciate all the present, and foresee all its relations to the future. He suggested that such a man would be a prophet, and I am very much afraid that he would come to the same untimely end as all prophets. There can be no doubt about it that the question of taking models is one of the very highest importance, so long as people will always remember that music has not gone, as far as we can judge, through any golden age, and I am not sure it will ever come to a standstill. It seems to be capable of advancement and improvement in every direction. Wherever it is produced to the end of a branch it will leave behind it a real standpoint of beauty, which will remain amongst the classics in different types and forms, as far as we know, to all time, because whatever is excellent and beautiful of its kind, whatever be the walk of

art, will, as far as we can judge, remain. I must apologise for the paper being so very short, but you all see how very large the subject is, which rendered it impossible to take up the whole of it in one paper.

The Rev. T. HELMORE proposed a vote of thanks to the Chairman, which concluded the proceedings.