

Benjamin Dale's Pianoforte Sonata in D

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the evil idea that it is not wise to leave anything to the judgment or initiative of the pupil if one will have it properly done. My object in writing this letter is simply to say how very beautiful were the works of Bach, both choral and for the organ, under Straube's hands. However exaggerated his language may be, his playing was never so in effect. His mistake has been in trying to convey in words the subtle and wonderful beauty which he finds and reproduces in the music. Surely the mistake in this country—nay, the very sin, which has made Bach hated and feared as only 'exercises' and 'dry, dull' technical preparatory work—has been that of looking upon exquisite passages as merely the 'pleasant sequences' referred to by Mr. Grace.

To those who have studied Bach in his own city, and heard him week after week for years interpreted in his own church by the artist Karl Straube, his music will always be more full of infinite shades of beauty and living emotions, human and divine, than any other music that exists. Straube's playing of the glorious 'Passacaglia' was a demonstration of how the most mighty iron and the most delicate ethereal

gossamers can both be finely handled by the same workman. Having once heard that, German or no German one cannot sit and hear him attacked without speaking a word in his defence, especially as many pupils have been won over to become Bach worshippers by being taught his music on the lines followed by Straube in his playing.—Yours truly,

(Miss) ENID PAYNE.

Mr. Harvey Grace writes :

I sympathise with Miss Payne's desire to defend her old teacher, but I must remind her that my article was concerned solely with Herr Straube's work as a Bach-editor. Miss Payne's defence consists chiefly of a panegyric on his playing, and therefore is hardly to the point. Is Bach's music 'hated' in England? Most of us in a position to know claim that he is a popular composer, and that he has become so without such editorial aids as gushing comments, far-fetched meanings read into simple or conventional passages, and alterations of the music in order to obtain greater sonority.

BENJAMIN DALE'S PIANOFORTE SONATA IN D.*

BY FREDERICK CORDER.

This remarkable work, which is by far the most ambitious contribution to the literature of the pianoforte yet produced in this country, has now been before the public for twelve years, and it is surely time to recognize its existence. Written in 1902, whilst its composer was yet a student, its merits were so evident to his fellow-musicians that they felt the imperative necessity of having it published. But how was this to be rendered possible? What publisher in his senses would dream of undertaking as a business proposition the production of a Sonata, let alone one of over sixty pages in length and of extreme difficulty, by a totally unknown writer? Several abortive attempts were made, and at last, owing to the fact that there happened to be quite a group of unusually talented young men just then with works of a similar tendency, the Society of British Composers was formed, with the intention of doing for England what Belaieff had done for Russia—undertaking the publication of high-class music of a non-commercial kind, recognizing the fact that the sale of such music could only prove remunerative after a long time, if at all. Of the difficulties of this enterprise it needs not here to speak; suffice it to point out that among the first publications were the Dale Sonata, Paul Corder's Nine Preludes, Swinstead's Prelude in D, Bowen's first Miniature Suite, and Bax's Celtic Songs—all works which were artistically far ahead of any pianoforte music hitherto produced in this country. With the limited resources of such a Society the advertising possibilities could never be adequate for the pushing of these works into the reluctant public mind. One could not pay great foreign performers to play them, or send lines of sandwich-men down Regent Street inviting people to

'support home industries and buy the Dale Sonata.' Apart from such methods there is little that one can do. From time to time ambitious young pianists of high attainments have played it, and the verdict has always been, 'A magnificent work, but far too long.' Too long for a critic who has to 'do' two concerts in one afternoon, or a member of the audience whose one idea is to get away from it. But how can a great work be too long? When his 'Mastersingers' was first produced Wagner felt that no audience could be expected to stand five hours of it, and provided cuts, which were thankfully accepted. But when it became well-known these cuts were gradually withdrawn, and now it is not uncommon to have the work performed entire. This is the supreme triumph, the true touchstone of success. There is no reason why excerpts from the Dale Sonata should not be separately performed, especially the Variations, which are practically distinct pieces, complete in themselves.

The work consists of a big *Allegro* first movement in D minor, and a Theme and seven Variations in the unrelated key of G sharp minor, the last of which is a continuous Fantasia melting in a singular manner into the *Finale*, which is a Rondo of ample dimensions in D major. The *Coda* of this re-introduces the theme of the Variations and ends *Adagio* in D minor. This scheme startles at once by its entire originality, the only work in the least similar in plan being Tchaikovsky's great Trio in A minor. In manner and matter, however, there is no resemblance between the two works.

The first movement starts off boldly with an impetuous subject :



the first eight bars of which are immediately repeated, gracefully modulating to F major. It will be noticed that the necessary expression-marks and other signs are written in with meticulous care throughout; indeed, they number

277 in the first page alone. Technical difficulties, such as abound throughout the work, begin with the twelfth bar, where groups of two, three, and four notes have to be played simultaneously :



* Avison Edition, 6s. 3d. net. Cary & Co.

A florid continuation of the subject leads to a subsidiary theme of striking rhythmic and harmonic character :

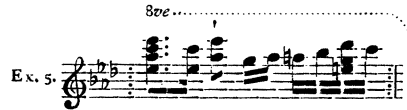


and this is pursued with great energy for no less than twenty-eight bars till we reach the second subject proper, thus :



To save space a mere sketch of the harmony is here given. This melody, of sixteen bars, is very fully developed, chiefly by sequences founded on bar 5, and extended to the remarkable length of fifty-three bars without any redundancy. This amplitude of statement is in order to avoid any necessity for a repetition of the first section ; no decided full close is made, and we pass on to the development, in which the composer shows us what stuff he is made of. It must be admitted that few modern Sonata-writers, from Schumann and Chopin onwards, have shown themselves capable of emulating Beethoven's triumphs in this branch of their art, mostly failing to endow their music with enhanced interest in the 'working-out.' Not so with Dale, who shows a fertility of resource and prodigality of invention truly

astounding in so young a composer. To the concluding phrase of his second subject a small new figure is presently added :



and out of these simple materials a wealth of surprise and beauty is sprung upon us. After a couple of pages of straightforward development one tiny fragment of No. 5 is made the germ of a haunting Mazurka-like theme which is dangled before us for a brief period (No. 6) and lightly discarded



in favour of a new melody founded on the first phrase of the second subject. This gives rise to a triplet figure, of which great use is made in combination with other scraps of material, and maintaining the interest amply till the very unconventional return to the first subject, which is contrived

with great adroitness. This initial theme having been repeated in full pomp with a pretty obvious canonic imitation at one crotchet's distance, the rest of the recapitulation goes as usual, except for great abbreviations and also for a novel and effective passage leading to the second subject in D major :



In the second subject the much-used figure of the 5th bar gives rise to yet new developments, including an effective semiquaver figure which forms the germ of the *Coda*, a singularly brilliant piece of work. After the executive passages have brought about an imposing climax, the composer appears to say, 'I could have done much more if I had wanted to !' producing yet another new development of the figure in No. 5 on his way to the final cadence, which triumphantly scorns conventionality by being merely the

first and second bars of the movement. A last surprise in a piece full of delightful surprises.

Particular attention should be called to the fact that in all this movement, teeming with invention and incessantly modulating, there is not the faintest tendency to extravagance, or what is called modernism—that foolish and offensive employment of discords as concords which the younger French writers affect. The youthful exuberance of the work is nowhere harsh or repellent, but always attractive.

Turning the page, we find that the theme for variations is laid out with great forethought, being for the most part unharmonized. It demands quotation almost in its entirety :

Ex. 8. *Molto adagio.*



Breaking off with a curious half-close and an inverted 'pedal,' this sombre subject goes at once to the first Variation, in which bars 5 and 6 are taken in semiquavers as an accompaniment figure for the first eight bars. Another figure :



the derivation of which may be left to the ingenuity of the reader, then performs a similar service for the refrain (8A). The closing cadence of this Variation is the first piece of harmonic extravagance indulged in by Mr. Dale, but it

certainly relieves the gloom of the situation, which is very intense.

Variation 2 brightens us up, however, by harmonizing the theme unexpectedly in the treble in B major, and furnishing it with a beautifully melodious continuation, expanding the original eight-bar theme to a rich melody of 18 bars, not to speak of the refrain, which is similarly idealised.

The original intention was to have a group of slow variations, followed by a group of *scherzando* variations ; but as several slow movements in succession were found to be depressing the scheme was slightly modified, and Variation 3 made a half-playful, half-serious *Intermezzo* of great elegance and charm. The modification of the subject is so extreme that the original quite disappears, and we thus get that relief which is too seldom granted in this type of work :



It will be observed that, all through, the composer takes an absolutely free hand as to the scope of his Variations. Each is a piece complete in itself, suggested indeed by the original theme, but by no means slavishly following its outline. This development of the Variation, initiated by Schumann and prosecuted with signal success by Elgar, Glazunov, and Dvorák, is one of the finest things in modern art.

In Variation 4 the composer appears to resume his original text, but only for the moment. The opening bars of the theme—in B major and in three-four time—now give rise to a slow movement of astonishing breadth and nobility ; the melody rises to a dignity which may really be called sublime. Quotation would only spoil its beauty, but one cadence in the middle must be given, as it reappears later in a different connection :



but even here we do injustice : the second time the last semiquaver is high G#. This Variation ends with a remarkable cadence, derived from the original, but dwelling upon the chord of 'subdominant seventh' in a highly novel fashion.

Variation 5 is a brilliant and very difficult *Scherzo*, the material for which is taken solely from the refrain, which we have marked 8A. To be more precise, the *Scherzo* proper is developed from the last three semiquavers of this phrase and

the *Trio* from the remainder. From this slender material a delightfully humorous piece is constructed, the relationship of which to the original theme is as subtle as that of Schumann's *Carneval* pieces to the 'Sphinxes' on which they are founded.

Equally remarkable and ingenious is Variation 6, in which the same fragment is turned into an exceedingly graceful Mazurka :



The middle subject of this appears to be as spontaneous as any melody in the whole work, but it was really suggested by the opening phrase of the original Theme, faint as is the resemblance between them. The return to the subject in this Mazurka from the key of B flat to that of E is managed by a very humorous use of the 'Tonal scale,' and altogether this piece is as fresh as a daisy.

We now discard frivolity and come to serious matters. Variation 7 might be thought to be yet another *Scherzo*, but only because of its rapidity. It is a *prestissimo* torrent of little chattering chords, between alternate hands, somewhat bewildering at first until the pattern is discerned. Here chromaticism runs riot, and these four pages must almost constitute a record in the matter of accidentals. The turmoil goes on without an instant's cessation until, quite suddenly, there is waked from its slumber the very opening bar of the whole Sonata. It seems to ask 'What is this unholy row

about?' The clatter stops in surprise, then goes on again, when a renewed demand has an unexpected result. The phrase pauses in doubt and then melts, in the most singular manner, into the Variation theme. Quite discomfited, the powers of darkness disappear and the theme becomes a fresh, beautiful *Adagio*, with an entirely new suit of clothes. (I fear my similes are somewhat incongruous.) Presently the fine cadence, No. 11, re-appears and leads to a section which defies analysis. It wanders from key to key, picking flowers as it goes, so to speak, pouring out one beautiful passage after another and indeed squandering beauties in the most reckless fashion. But when the sentimental mood has exhausted itself the third bar of the Theme seems to attract the composer's attention. He examines it, speeds it up, and in a trice we find ourselves dashing along in a *Rondo* with this triumphant brace of subjects:



The first is with difficulty discerned to be yet another version of the opening bar of the Variation theme. Quickly an episodic phrase is added to these, and there is many a change of key as they are buffeted about until No. 13 again takes the upper hand, after which 13A undergoes the strangest and most extensive development by way of second episode and a new subject appears, very cunningly and to all appearance casually introduced:



You have to be well acquainted with it before you realise that it is a transformation of the beautiful *Adagio* which occurs just before the *Finale*. After this has been well-digested an entirely new and melodious version of 13A turns up, and, for fear of being thought frivolous, presently merges into another reminiscence of the *Adagio* which led into the *Finale*. The whole air of this remarkable *Rondo* is that the composer has so many brilliant things to say that he is 'intoxicated with the exuberance of his verbosity,' and simply cannot leave off. There is far less actual repetition and far more material in this movement than in any *Rondo* hitherto written, and the effect of inexhaustibility is maintained by building up a mighty climax upon a chord of the seventh (or augmented sixth) on B flat, and then breaking off with a pause. The passage leading up to this point is then discovered to have been a cleverly-disguised form of the Variation theme, which returns in D minor, in its original form, but with gorgeous harmonies supplied first above and then below it. So, lingeringly, as if loth to part from its manifold beauties, this unique series of musical developments comes to an end.

I am aware that in the above, as in all attempts at analytical description of a really continuous composition, the quotation of mere phrases is painfully like exhibiting a few bricks as samples of a house, but I can only hope that those who have made themselves acquainted with this intricate work, or who are desirous of becoming so, will find assistance in these pages. If my appreciative words appear to place the Dale Sonata upon a plane hitherto reserved for foreign—and dead—composers, they represent my attitude towards it. In this work—and in but few others that have been allowed to see the light—we have a

noble example of a new and sane English art, which owes as little as may be to that of the turgid modern German, the meretricious modern French, and the flimsy modern Russian. If I were asked to name other works of this School, I should point to Alexander Mackenzie and J. B. McEwen as its founders, and to quite a number of younger men who would willingly follow in their wake if circumstances did not peremptorily forbid. For the edification of those publishers who firmly believe that there is no money in good music, I should like to point to the fact that although the Dale Sonata is not yet widely known—how can it be, when only a few can play it?—its sale is continuous, and has steadily increased during the twelve years that it has been before the public. But it stands as a living rebuke to those who, when taunted with neglecting native art, declare, firstly, that there is none; secondly, that whatever is good is always welcomed; and, finally, that they haven't got time to wade through all the rubbish that comes along.

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