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## THE RELATIONS OF MUSIC AND POETRY.

BY ARTHUR L. SALMON.

It is often necessary for composers to consider 'words for music,' to examine lyrics with a view to their musical setting; but it may be questioned whether they often seriously think about poetry in its true relation to their own art. Without offence it may be said that they are seldom fully qualified to do so. Music and poetry, though closely allied at times in the emotion that prompts them, have in reality a very definite distinction; and if we speak of them as sister-arts, they are quite as dissimilar as any two sisters can be. To music, probably, we may grant the earlier birth; if we claim a priority on all other grounds for the art of verbal utterances, there will undoubtedly be much dissent from those to whom music appears the more entirely satisfying. Leaving that thorny question of preference, we may yet say that poetry at its height has nothing to do with actual music at all—it needs no 'setting'; it brings its own music with it; it satisfies the soul and the inward ear with no need of help from external sound. This is really incontrovertible; the musician who has any just understanding of literature will at once admit it. What explicitly follows is that the truest, the most profound and complete poetry is not fit for music at all, and composers make a mistake when they turn their attention to it. The basis of true poetry is thought, permeated and transfigured by emotion; the basis of music is emotion. The sphere of music, and it is a very noble sphere, is that of the inarticulate; it does for us what, at times, no words can do. In a sense it utters, or at least suggests and partially conveys, the unutterable. It is really as absurd to speak of metaphysical or philosophic or ethical music, as it would be to speak of historical; music cannot convey record or incident, neither can it embody a process of thinking or reasoning, except simply as concerns its own formal structure. Music appeals to that part of the soul for which words are not enough; it appeals to the mood that is reverie rather than thought, dream and vision rather than definite expression. This being so, it is at its highest independent of words; but also, this being so, when it takes to itself words, they should be words of emotion rather than of deep thought.

Though it may sound heretical to say so, those composers who have been very careless as to the merit of the verses or libretti they have chosen have not really been very wide of the mark. If the right emotion was suggested, the words did not matter essentially. When we listen to a beautiful song, though we pay due heed to the lyric as well as to its setting, we do not listen critically, we do not ponder the words and draw profound spiritual meanings from them, or note their perfection (or the reverse) of verbal phrase. It is the emotion that moves us; the verse has actually done its work when that emotion has been suggested to us and its response won. This does not excuse those

who select lyrics that are absolutely poor or defective from the literary standpoint; but it does explain why a judicious composer will often turn from the finest poetry to something of slighter literary value. He cannot cumber his music with words that listeners have to think about; thought and feeling are very distinct, and, as has been said, music is concerned mainly with the latter. A good lyric for music may be perfect of its kind, but its kind cannot be the highest as estimated by the most exacting literary criticism. A song of Heine's may be a perfection of exquisite graceful utterance, but we do not place it on the same level as a page from Dante or Milton at their noblest. It is enough if verses chosen for music be simply successful in their superficial expression of human feeling. Or, perhaps, as the word 'superficial' sounds depreciatory—but is not here intended so,—it may be better to say that their meaning should lie at the surface, phrased intelligibly, so that the emotion is at once grasped, and the appeal made, without the intervention of thought, the words being lucidly at one with that which they would express. Occult meanings, deep philosophic truth, can have no place in musical utterance. The best poetry, as Raff once said, may be too 'thought-heavy' for setting. Music cannot be didactic or propagandist; it cannot convey a theory. It is not a criticism of life, but an utterance of life's emotion. Do we really listen to the words of an opera or oratorio? Are we not rather caught up and borne on by the emotion that those words have suggested, so that we pass beyond the articulate to the undefined limitless region of the things that have no verbal language? As poetry at its highest has no need whatever of musical accompaniment, so does music itself, at its own highest, transcend entirely the spoken or written word, passing to that domain of pure spirit where the 'songs unheard' are sweetest.

The wise musician, therefore, goes to poetry for his emotion, but with the emotion his connection with them ends. They form the starting-point from which he rises; his music must say more than they do, or it has failed in its mission. His sphere is the sphere in which words fail—that mood of sheer emotion which becomes like trance, in which we thrill with ecstasy that no language can define, or quiver with a poignancy of sadness for which also any verbal utterance would be inadequate. Great poetry is not merely song, it is literature. Music is the perfection of song, but it must fail if it try to become literary.

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We are glad to record that the great Midland Competition Festival at Birmingham, which has been in abeyance since 1915, is to be held again on May 8 to 15 next year. Judging from the syllabus, it promises to be the most complete and thoroughly-organized event of its kind. It is particularly worthy of note that all the 158 test-pieces (of which a full list is printed in the *School Music Review* for October) are British, and that they make a most attractive bill of fare.