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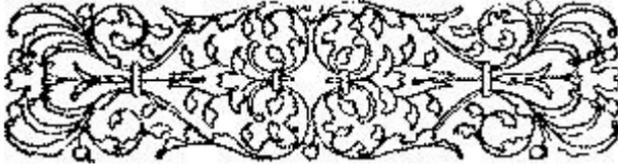
W.J. HENDERSON

WHO HAS HELPED ME TO RESPECT MUSI-
CAL CRITICISM

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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SOME MUSICAL BOOKS

FOOTNOTES

How to Listen to Music



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I

Introduction

The book's appeal.

T his book has a purpose, which is as simple as it is plain; and an unpretentious scope. It does not aim to edify either the musical professor or the musical scholar. It comes into the presence of the musical student with all becoming modesty. Its business is with those who love music and present themselves for its gracious ministrations in Concert-Room and Opera House, but have not studied it as professors and scholars are supposed to study. It is not for the careless unless they be willing to inquire whether it might not be well to yield the common conception of entertainment in favor of the higher enjoyment which springs from serious contemplation of beautiful things; but if they are willing so to inquire, they [Pg 4] shall be accounted the class that the author is most anxious to reach. The reasons which prompted its writing and the laying out of its plan will presently appear. For the frankness of his disclosure the author might be willing to apologize were his reverence for music less and his consideration for popular affectations more; but because he is convinced that a love for music carries with it that which, so it be but awakened, shall speedily grow into an honest desire to know more about the beloved object, he is willing to seem unamiable to the amateur while arguing the need of even so mild a stimulant as his book, and ingenuous, mayhap even childish, to the professional musician while trying to point a way in which better appreciation may be sought.

Talent in listening.

The capacity properly to listen to music is better proof of musical talent in the listener than skill to play upon an instrument or ability to sing acceptably when unaccompanied by that capacity. It makes more for that gentleness and refinement of emotion, thought, and action which, in the highest sense [Pg 5] of the term, it is the province of music to promote. And it is a much rarer accomplishment. I cannot conceive anything more pitiful than the spectacle of men and women perched on a fair observation point exclaiming rapturously at the loveliness of mead and valley, their eyes melting involuntarily in tenderness at the sight of moss-carpeted slopes and rocks and peaceful wood, or dilating in reverent wonder at mountain magnificence, and then learning from their exclamations that, as a matter of fact, they are unable to distinguish between rock and tree, field and forest, earth and sky; between the dark-browns of the storm-scarred rock, the greens of the foliage, and the blues of the sky.

Ill equipped listeners.

Yet in the realm of another sense, in the contemplation of beauties more ethereal and evanescent than those of nature, such is the experience which in my capacity as a writer for newspapers I have made for many years. A party of people blind to form and color cannot be said to be well equipped for a Swiss journey, though loaded down [Pg 6] with alpenstocks and Baedekers; yet the spectacle of such a party on the top of the Rigi is no more pitiful and anomalous than that presented by the majority of the hearers in our concert-rooms. They are there to adventure a journey into a realm whose beauties do not disclose themselves to the senses alone, but whose perception requires a co-operation of all the finer faculties; yet of this they seem to know nothing, and even of that sense to which the first appeal is made it may be said with profound truth that "hearing they hear not, neither do they understand."

Popular ignorance of music.

Of all the arts, music is practised most and thought about least. Why this should be the case may be explained on several grounds. A sweet mystery enshrouds the nature of music. Its material part is subtle and elusive. To master it on its technical side alone costs a vast expenditure of time, patience, and industry. But since it is, in one manifestation or another, the most popular of the arts, and one

the enjoyment of which is conditioned in a peculiar degree on love, it remains passing [Pg 7] strange that the indifference touching its nature and elements, and the character of the phenomena which produce it, or are produced by it, is so general. I do not recall that anybody has ever tried to ground this popular ignorance touching an art of which, by right of birth, everybody is a critic. The unamiable nature of the task, of which I am keenly conscious, has probably been a bar to such an undertaking. But a frank diagnosis must precede the discovery of a cure for every disease, and I have undertaken to point out a way in which this grievous ailment in the social body may at least be lessened.

Paucity of intelligent comment.

Want of a model.

It is not an exaggeration to say that one might listen for a lifetime to the polite conversation of our drawing-rooms (and I do not mean by this to refer to the United States alone) without hearing a symphony talked about in terms indicative of more than the most superficial knowledge of the outward form, that is, the dimensions and apparatus, of such a composition. No other art provides an exact analogy for this phenomenon. Everybody can say something containing [Pg 8] ing a degree of appositeness about a poem, novel, painting, statue, or building. If he can do no more he can go as far as Landseer's rural critic who objected to one of the artist's paintings on the ground that not one of the three pigs eating from a trough had a foot in it. It is the absence of the standard of judgment employed in this criticism which makes significant talk about music so difficult. Nature failed to provide a model for this ethereal art. There is nothing in the natural world with which the simple man may compare it.

Simple terms confounded.

It is not alone a knowledge of the constituent factors of a symphony, or the difference between a sonata and a suite, a march and a mazurka, that is rare. Unless you chance to be listening to the conversation of musicians (in which term I wish to include amateurs who are what the word amateur implies, and whose knowledge stands in some respectable relation to their love), you

will find, so frequently that I have not the heart to attempt an estimate of the proportion, that the most common words [Pg 9] in the terminology of the art are misapplied. Such familiar things as harmony and melody, time and tune, are continually confounded. Let us call a distinguished witness into the box; the instance is not new, but it will serve. What does Tennyson mean when he says:

"All night have the roses heard
The flute, violin, bassoon;
All night has the casement jessamine stirr'd
To the dancers dancing in tune?"

Tune and time.

Unless the dancers who wearied Maud were provided with even a more extraordinary instrumental outfit than the Old Lady of Banbury Cross, how could they have danced "in tune?"

Blunders of poets and essayists.

Musical study of a sort being almost as general as study of the "three Rs," it must be said that the gross forms of ignorance are utterly inexcusable. But if this is obvious, it is even more obvious that there is something radically wrong with the prevalent systems of musical instruction. It is because of a plentiful lack of knowledge that so much that is written on music is with [Pg 10] out meaning, and that the most foolish kind of rhapsody, so it show a collocation of fine words, is permitted to masquerade as musical criticism and even analysis. People like to read about music, and the books of a certain English clergyman have had a sale of stupendous magnitude notwithstanding they are full of absurdities. The clergyman has a multitudinous companionship, moreover, among novelists, essayists, and poets whose safety lies in more or less fantastic generalization when they come to talk about music. How they flounder when they come to detail! It was Charles Lamb who said, in his "Chapter on Ears," that in voices he could not distinguish a soprano from a tenor, and could only contrive to guess at the thorough-bass from its being "supereminently harsh and disagreeable;" yet dear old Elia may be forgiven, since his confounding the bass voice with a system