THE ART OF MUSIC

CHAPTER I

PRELIMINARIES

THERE are probably but few people in the world so morose as to find no pleasure either in the exercise or the receipt of sympathy, and it is to be hoped there are very few so blind or perverse as to regard it as an undesirable and useless factor in the human psychological outfit. Whether it is the higher development of an original instinct which enabled mankind to rise above the rest of the animal world by co-operation and mutual helpfulness, or whether it is the outcome of the state of mutual dependence which is the lot of human beings, it is obviously a quality without which society could hardly continue to exist in the complicated state of organisation at which it has arrived. The jarring interests of hurrying, striving millions require something more than mere cold-blooded utilitarian motives to keep them properly balanced; and in matters of everyday life the impulses which tend to mutual helpfulness and forbearance are fed by the ordinary phases of this omnipresent instinct. But there are many kinds and infinitely variable degrees of sympathy, and some people love best to bestow it, and some there are who much prefer to receive it. And apart from the ordinary sympathetic consideration of every-day life on the one hand, and of the devoted sympathetic heroism which often rises to the pitch of entire sacrifice of self on the other, most people have some special lines and subjects which excite their sympathetic instincts, and make

them specially conscious of the delight of fellowship in tastes and interests, whether it be politics, science, literature, art, or sport; and in such circumstances the instinct, without passing the bounds of normal healthiness of tone, may rise to a degree of refined responsive sensitiveness, which is productive of a very high quality of happiness.

But of all types of humanity, those who are possessed with artistic dispositions are notoriously most liable to an absorbing thirst for sympathy, which is sometimes interpreted by those who are not artistic as a love of approbation or notoriety; and though a morbid development of the instinct may sometimes degenerate into that unhappy weakness, the almost universal prevalence of the characteristic cannot be summarily accounted for on such superficial grounds, but deserves more discriminating consideration. The reason that artistic and poetic human beings are generally characterised by such a conspicuous development of their sympathetic instincts appears to lie in the fact that they are peculiarly susceptible to beauty of some kind, whether it be the obvious external kind of beauty, or the beauty of thought and human circumstance; and that the keenness of their pleasure makes them long to enhance their own enjoyments by bringing their fellow-men sympathetically into touch with them. From this point of view the various arts of painting, sculpture, music, literature, and the rest, are the outcome of the instinctive desire to convey impressions and enjoyments to others, and to represent in the most attractive and permanent forms the ideas, thoughts, circumstances, scenes, or emotions which have powerfully stirred the artists' own natures. It is the intensity of the pleasure or interest the artist feels in what is actually seen or present to his imagination that drives him to utterance. The instinct of utterance makes it a necessity to find terms which will be understood by other beings in whom his appeal can strike a sympathetic chord; and the stronger the delight in the thought or feeling, the greater is the desire to make the form in which it is conveyed unmistakably clear and intelligible. But intelligibility depends to a great extent in all things upon principles of structure,

and structure implies design; hence the instinctive desire to make a thought or artistic conception unmistakably intelligible is a great incentive to the development of design.

Design has different aspects in different arts; but in all it is the equivalent of organisation in the ordinary affairs of life. It is the putting of the various factors of effect in the right places to make them tell. In some arts design seems the very essence and first necessity of existence, and though in music it is less easily understood by the uninitiated than in other arts, it is in reality of vital importance. Music indeed cannot exist till the definiteness of some kind of design is present in the succession of the sounds. The impression produced by vague sounds is vague, and soon passes away altogether. They take no permanent hold on the mind till they are made definite in relation to one another, and are disposed in some sort of order by the distribution of their up and down motion or by the regularity of their rhythmic recurrence. Then the impression becomes distinct, and its definiteness makes it permanent. In most arts it is the permanence of the enjoyment rather than that of the artistic object itself which is dependent on design. In sculpture, for instance, the very materials seem to ensure permanence; but undoubtedly a piece of sculpture which is seriously imperfect in design soon becomes intolerable, and is willingly abandoned by its possessor to the disintegrating powers of rain and frost, or to some corner where it can be conveniently forgotten. Painting does not seem, at first sight, to require so much skill in designing, because the subjects which move the artist to express himself are so obvious to all men; but nevertheless the most permanent works of the painting art are not those which are mere skilful imitations of nature, but those into which some fine scheme of design is introduced to enhance the beauty or inherent interest of the artist's thought.

In music, form and design are most obviously necessary, not only because without them the impression conveyed is indefinite and fugitive, but also because the very source and origin of its influence on human beings is so obscure. To some people beauty of form in melody or structure seems the chief excuse for the

art's existence; and even to more patient observers it seems to be on a different footing from all the other arts in respect of its meaning and intention. Even the most unsophisticated dullard can see what inspired the painter or the sculptor to express himself, but he cannot understand what music means, nor what it is intended to express; and many practical people look upon it as altogether inferior to other arts, because it seems to have no obviously useful application. Painting naturally appears to the average mind to be an imitative art; and, drawing a conclusion from two premises which are both equally false, some people have gone on to suppose that the only possible basis of all arts, including music, is imitation, and to invent the childish theory that the latter began by imitating birds' songs. There is no objection to such a theory if considered as a pretty poetical myth, and instances of people imitating birds in music can of course be substantiated; but as a serious explanation of the origin of music it is both too trivial and too incompatible with fact to be worth discussing. In reality, both arts are much on the same footing, for painting is no more a purely imitative art than music. People deliberately copy nature chiefly to develop the technique which is necessary to enable them in higher flights to idealise it, and to present their imaginings in the terms of design which are their highest sanction. It is just when a painter deliberately sets himself to imitate what he sees that he least deserves the name of an artist. The devices for imitating nature and throwing the unsophisticated into ecstasies, because the results are so like what they themselves have seen, are the tricks of the trade, and, till they are put to their proper uses, are on no other footing than the work of a good joiner or a good ploughman. It is only when they are used to convey the concentrated ideals of the mind of the artist in terms of beautiful or characteristic design that they become worthy of the name of art. Music is really much on the same footing, for the history of both arts is equally that of the development of mastery of design and of the technique of expression. The only real difference is that the artist formulates impressions received through the eyes, and the musician formulates the direct expression of man's inner-

most feelings and sensibilities. In fact, the arts of painting and sculpture and their kindred are the expression of the outer surroundings of man, and music of what is within him; and consequently the former began with imitation, and the latter with direct expression.

The story of music has been that of a slow building up and extension of artistic means of formulating in terms of design utterances and counterparts of utterances which in their raw state are direct expressions of feeling and sensibility. Utterances and actions which illustrate the raw material of music are common to all sentient beings, even to those which the complacency of man describes as dumb. A dog reiterating short barks of joy on a single note at the sight of a beloved friend or master is as near making music as the small human baby vigorously banging a rattle or drum and crowing with exuberant happiness. The impulse to make a noise as an expression of feeling is universally admitted, and it may also be noticed that it has a tendency to arouse sympathy in an auditor of any kind, and an excitement analogous to that felt by the maker of the noise. A hound that has picked up the scent soon starts the responsive sympathy of the chorus of the pack; a cow wailing the loss of her calf often attracts the attention and response of her sisters in neighbouring fields; and the uproarious meetings of cats at night afford familiar instances of the effect such incipient music is capable of exerting upon the feline disposition.

Human beings are quite equally sensitive to all forms of expression. Even tricks of manner, and nervous gestures, and facial distortions are infectious; and very sensitive and sympathetic people are particularly liable to imitate unintentional grimaces and fidgets. But sounds which are uttered with genuine feeling are particularly exciting to human creatures. The excitement of a mob grows under the influence of the shouts its members utter; and takes up with equal readiness the tone of joy, rage, and defiance. Boys in the street drive one another to extravagances by like means; and, as Cicero long ago observed, the power of a great speaker often depends not so much on what he says, as upon the skill with

which he uses the expressive tones of his voice. All such utterances are music in the rough, and out of such elements the art of music has grown, just as the elaborate arts of human speech must have grown out of the grunts and whinings of primeval savages. But neither art nor speech begins till something definite appears in the texture of its material. Some intellectual process must be brought to bear upon both to make them capable of being retained in the mind; and the early steps of both are very similar. Just as among the early ancestors of our species, speech would begin when the indefinite noises which they first used to communicate with one another, like animals, passed into some definite sound which conveyed to the savage ear some definite and constant meaning; so the indefinite cries and shouts which expressed their feelings began to pass into music when a few definite notes were made to take the place of vague, irregular shouting. And as speech grows more copious in resources when the delicate muscles of the mouth and throat are trained to obedience in the utterance of more and more varied inflections, and the ear is trained to distinguish niceties which have distinct varieties of meaning; so the resources of music increased as the relations of more and more definite notes were established, in obedience to the development of musical instinct, and as the ear learnt to appreciate the intervals and the mind to retain the simple fragments of tune which resulted.

The examination of the music of savages shows that they hardly ever succeed in making orderly and well-balanced tunes, but either express themselves in a kind of vague wail or howl, which is on the borderland between music and informal expression of feeling, or else contrive little fragmentary figures of two or three notes which they reiterate incessantly over and over again. Sometimes a single figure suffices. When they are clever enough to devise two, they alternate them, but without much sense of orderliness; and it takes a long period of human development before the irregular haphazard alternation of a few figures becomes systematic enough to have the aspect of any sort of artistic unity. Through such crude attempts at music, scales began to grow; but they developed

extremely slowly, and it was not till special races had arrived at an advanced state of intellectuality that men began to pay any attention to the relations of notes to one another, or to notice that such abstractions could exist apart from the music. And it has even sometimes happened that races who have developed up to an advanced standard of intellectuality have not succeeded in systematising more than a very limited range of sounds.

But complete musical art has to be made definite in other respects besides mere melodic up and down motion. The successive moments had to be regulated as well as mere changes of pitch, and this was first made possible by the element of rhythm.

All musical expression may be broadly distributed into two great orders. On the one hand, there is the rhythmic part, which represents action of the nature of dance motions; and on the other, all that melodic part which represents some kind of singing or vocal utterance. Rhythm and vocal expression are by nature distinct, and in very primitive states of music are often found independent of one another. The rhythmic music is then defined only by the pulses, and has no change of pitch; while purely melodic music has change of pitch, but no definition or regularity of impulse. The latter is frequently met with among savage races, and even as near the homes of highest art as the out-of-the-way corners of the British Isles. Pure, unalloyed rhythmic music is found in most parts of the uncivilised globe; and the degree of excitement to which it can give rise, when the mere beating of a drum or tom-tom is accompanied by dancing, is well known to all the world. It is also a familiar fact that dancing originates under almost the same conditions as song or any other kind of vocal utterance; and therefore the rhythmic elements and the melodic elements are only different forms in which the same class of feelings and emotions are expressed.

All dancing is ultimately derived from expressive gestures which have become rhythmic through the balanced arrangement of the human body, which makes it difficult for similar actions to be frequently repeated irregularly. The evidence

of careful observers from all parts of the globe agrees in describing barbarous dances as being obvious in their intention in proportion to the low standard of intelligence of the dancers. Savages of the lowest class almost always express clearly in their dance gestures the states of mind or the circumstances of their lives which rouse them to excitement. The exact gestures of fighting and love-making are reproduced, not only so as to make clear to the spectator what is meant by the rhythmic pantomime, but even in certain cases so as to produce a frenzy in the mind of both spectators and performers, which drives them to deeds of wildness and ferocity fully on a par with what they would do in the real circumstances of which the dancing is merely an expressive reminiscence.

In these respects, dancing, in its earlier stages, is an exact counterpart of song. Both express emotions in their respective ways, and both convey the excitement of the performers to sympathetic listeners; and both lose the obvious traces of their origin in the development of artistic devices. As the ruder kinds of rhythmic dancing advance and take more of the forms of an art, the significance of the gestures ceases to be so obvious, and the excitement accompanying the performance tones down. An acute observer still can trace the gestures and actions to their sources when the conventions that have grown up have obscured their expressive meaning, and when the performers have often lost sight of them; and the tendency of more refined dancing is obviously to disguise the original meaning of the performance more and more, and merely to indulge in the pleasure of various forms of rhythmic motion and graceful gesture. But even in modern times occasional reversions to animalism in depraved states of society revive the grosser forms of dancing, and forcibly recall the primitive source of the art.

In melodic or vocal music the process has been exactly analogous. The expressive cries soon began to lose their direct significance when they were formalised into distinct musical intervals. It is still possible to find among lowly organised savages examples of a kind of music which is so

little defined in detail that the impulsive cry or howl of expression is hardly disguised at all by anything which could be described as a definite interval. But the establishment of a definite interval of any sort puts the performer under restrictions, and every step that is made in advance hides the original meaning of the utterance more and more away under the necessities of artistic convention. And when little fragments of melody become stereotyped, as they do in every savage community sufficiently advanced to perceive and remember, attempts are made to alternate and contrast them in some way; and the excitement of sympathy with an expressive cry is merged in a crudely artistic pleasure derived from the contemplation of something of the nature of a pattern.

It is obvious that the rhythmic principle and the melodic principle begin very early to react upon one another. Savages all over the world combine their singing and their dancing; and they not only sing rhythmically when regular set dances are going on, but when they are walking, reaping, sowing, rowing, or doing any other of their daily labours and exercises which admit of such accompaniment. By such means the rhythmic and the melodic were combined, and it is no reckless inference that from some such form of combination sprung the original rhythmic organisation of poetry.

But the tendency to revert to primitive conditions is frequently to be met with even in the most advanced stages of art; and an antagonism, which it is one of the problems of the art to overcome, is persistent throughout its history. In very quick music the rhythmic principle has an inevitable tendency to predominate, and in very slow music the melodic principle most frequently becomes prominent. But it must be remembered that the principle which represents vocal expression applies equally to instrumental and to vocal music, and that rhythmic dance music can be sung. The difference of principle between melodic quality and rhythmic quality runs through the whole art from polka to symphony; and, paradoxical as it may seem, the fascination which some modern sensuous dance-tunes exercise is derived from a distinctly canta-

bile treatment of the tune, which appeals to the dance instinct through the languorous, sensuous, and self-indulgent side of people's natures.

The antagonism shows itself as much in men as in the art itself. Dreamers and sentimentalists tend to lose their hold upon rhythmic energy; while men of energetic and vigorous habits of mind set little store by expressive cantabile. Composers of a reflective and romantic turn of mind like Schumann excel most in music which demands cantabile expression; and men like Scarlatti, in rhythmic effect. This rule applies even to nations. Certain branches of the Latin race have had a very exceptional ability for singing, and have often shown themselves very negligent of rhythmic definiteness; while the Hungarians manifest a truly marvellous instinct for what is rhythmic; and the French, being a nation particularly given to expressing themselves by gesticulation, have shown a most singular predilection for dance rhythm in all branches of art. In the very highest natures the mastery of both forms of expression is equally combined; and it is under such conditions, with musicians who have both methods of expression well under command, that music rises to its highest perfection; as the use of the two principles supplies the basis of the widest contrast of which the art is capable.

In this respect the two contrasting principles of expression are types of a system of contrasts which is the basis of all mature musical design; and when the ultimate origin of all music, as direct expression of feeling and an appeal to sympathetic feeling in others, is considered, it is easy to see that the nature of the human creature makes contrast universally inevitable. Fatigue and lassitude are just as certain to follow from the exercise of mental and emotional faculties as from the exercise of the muscles; and fatigue puts an end to the full enjoyment of the thing which causes it. It is absolutely indispensable in art to provide against it, and it is the instinct of the artist who gauges human sensibilities most justly in such respects that enables him to reach the highest artistic perfection in subtlety as well as scope of design. The mind first wearies and then suffers pain from over-much reiteration of a