

GLUCK AND THE OPERA

INTRODUCTION

To make a plea in these days for the use of the comparative method in criticism would seem to be a work of supererogation. That method, so distinctive of our century in its purposes and results, has, through the labours of a number of men, raised the historical criticism of literature almost to the rank of a science. Apart from the question as to whether the comparative method covers the whole field of criticism ; apart, indeed, from the main question as to what the purpose and function of criticism really are ; it is indisputable that certain forms of literary criticism have, in our own day, attained to something like the certainty and the comprehensiveness of physical science ; and even in the minds of those who disclaim the method and deny its validity, there is an underlying conviction of its truth, and an unconscious application of its principles. While, however, the use of the historical method is thus at the present time practically universal in the criticism of literature and of art in general, there is one department which is as yet almost inno-

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cent of scientific treatment ; we look in vain for any attempt to bring the criticism of music within the scope of method.

Up to a comparatively recent epoch it was, indeed, scarcely possible for the scientific criticism of music to make even a beginning. It is a truism to say that in any art or any literature the epoch of criticism must be of late evolution ; it implies, as the very conditions upon which it can exist, a fairly complete and multi-form body of data to go upon—data furnished by preceding epochs of great and varied creative activity. It is only within quite recent times that music has become important enough in itself, and sufficiently rich in the material it presents, to render possible a comprehensive and penetrating criticism of it. Thus it is not surprising that, until now, music has known no other criticism than that of personal taste, unaided by reflection and lacking in basic principles. Even yet we are, for all practical purposes, in the lowest stages of musical culture. The appreciation of music is almost universal ; reflection on it is the greatest rarity. In the criticism of literature and art we have attained to some measure of civilisation ; in our judgments on music we are for the most part still untutored barbarians. While in other departments we have progressed beyond the static conditions of previous ages to the dynamic criticism of art and letters, in the musical world we are yet centuries behind the time ; we are still with the scholiast, the commentator, the expositor, the pedagogue. Nothing is more disappointing to the general student of culture than the dead stop that is given him as soon as he reaches

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music. He reads the culture-history of a given epoch, and learns not only what men thought and felt in those days, but why men so thought and so felt ; and when, after having surveyed the poetry, philosophy, social customs, art and literature of the epoch, he wishes to see what shape these ideas assumed in music, he finds his glass darkened. Not being, in all probability, a musician by training or in technical knowledge, it is impossible for him to get more than the barest idea of what the music of such an epoch was, and his culture suffers correspondingly ; for no help is afforded him by the works on musical history or biography he may consult. The complaint is common among liberal-minded men of letters that there is no rational criticism of music, considered as an expression of what men have thought and felt ; our criticism, such as it is, exerts itself for the most part on technical matters alone. This, of course, has its value, and perhaps a greater psychological value than its very exponents are aware of ; but it goes for comparatively little in a survey of human history. Out of the whole library of English writings on music it would be impossible to name ten works, to make an extremely liberal estimate, that could bear comparison for one moment with good contemporary literary criticism. Almost the only help the student gets is from the writings of scientists or philosophers who are treating of the arts, and who do indeed apply a scientific method to the phenomena of music. But from the very nature of the case the knowledge of these men cannot be extensive enough to cover the whole field of music ; so that the art finds itself in some such

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dilemma as this : the men who can look at musical creations in the same way as at other products of the human mind—which is the indispensable basis of rational criticism—have not a sufficient knowledge of music at first hand to assist them in the application of the comparative method in anything more than a suggestive way ; while the men who have this knowledge, whose whole lives have been spent in the attainment of it, are quite devoid of any critical faculty, and ignore, with monotonous consistency, every opportunity for applying to their own art the methods that have alone given coherence to, and thrown light upon, the being and growth of other arts.*

Part of the general inefficiency of musical criticism is undoubtedly due to that peculiarity which music shares with none of the other arts ; the peculiarity that, owing to its greater indefiniteness of utterance, it has to seek a greater and more conventional definiteness of form. This depends upon a psychological necessity

* The imperfect musical culture of even eminent literary men in England is seen in Mr. John Morley's painfully inadequate treatment of music in his volumes on Rousseau and Diderot, and in his omission from his translation of *Le Neveu de Rameau* of "the technical points of the musical discussion," on the ground that these cannot interest now. On the other hand, the haphazard and inconclusive method of professed musical æstheticians is typified in Professor Knight, who in his "Philosophy of the Beautiful" not only omits any discussion of the late Edmund Gurney's brilliant book on "The Power of Sound"—the ablest of all works on music—but even fails to mention Gurney's name.

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of our nature, by which we attempt to gather from certain structural devices the completeness and the symmetry that will bind the abstract musical tones into a consistent whole. Thus ever since the birth of modern music, composers have been unconsciously reaching out to certain structural forms with the object of getting the maximum of expression possible to music unaided by poetry.* These forms have gradually become crystallised and rigid, and their very excellence as modes of musical expression under certain conditions has led to their being regarded as unalterable laws which no future composer must disobey. Some such state of affairs as this has existed in every epoch in which an art has attained to great efficiency of expression. The Greeks of the Periclean age probably argued that the current form of drama was the one inherent in the nature of things, just as our modern pedants affirm that Beethoven has said the last word in the symphony, and that "all we can ask of those who follow him is not to come too far short of that inimitable model."† In the case not only of the symphony but of all other art-forms, there is as

* On the development of the sonata-structure, the reader may consult the excellent article of Dr. Hubert Parry in Grove's Dictionary. I may also refer to an article of my own on "Women and Music" in the *Free Review* for April 1895, in which the psychological meaning of the evolution of musical form is correlated with the general logical movement of the mind in other departments.

† See M. Arthur Coquard, "La musique en France depuis Rameau," p. 175.

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yet apparently not the slightest perception of their relativity, and of the peculiar historical conditions under which each of them grew up. And unfortunately the evil does not end here. Not only have we to submit to the ignorance of pedantry in the literature of music, but the imperfect condition of our criticism reacts upon musical culture in general. Music has been at all times an art in which it was possible to produce a pleasing effect by mere imitation, and to the mistaken idea of the absolutism of certain musical forms we owe not only a vast quantity of third-rate music written in imitation of the masters, but the much more serious evil of a hindrance to our future development along more natural and more contemporary lines.

The method of procedure thus followed in the criticism of the more abstract forms of music may be taken as typical of the whole tenor of our criticism at present. It is perfectly futile to go on discussing the æsthetic of music *in abstracto*, without reference to the historical conditions under which the art has lived and by which it has been moulded from century to century. And it must be sorrowfully confessed that the loftiest musical genius of our own day has contributed more than any other man to darken our counsels and to lead us into the wrong path. An examination of his theoretical writings, had we the space to attempt it here, would furnish the most convincing proof of the inefficacy of any other method than the historical in the criticism and æsthetic of music. Wagner was typically German in his metaphysical bias and his *à priori* manner of treating history; and just as we

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need hardly look to Germany to say the last word in philosophy or in sociology, we need not expect from it a scientific treatment of music—the most abstract of all forms of human expression, and therefore the one that lends itself most to bastard analysis and spurious generalisation. The method followed by Wagner in his æsthetic writings is typical of the labour that begins in assumption and ends in futility ; and if we can further lay to his charge all that has been perpetrated by disciples such as M. Edouard Schuré, his guilt is heavy indeed.* The Wagnerian method is just that which has been proved time after time to be utterly inefficacious in all other fields of thought ; it is the metaphysical method that first erects spurious entities, and then proceeds to deduce from these entities precisely what has already been put into them ; in opposition to the genuinely scientific method that traces results to causes, and comprehends the whole sphere of human thought and action as a perpetually mobile system of interacting forces. The Wagnerian method is the counterpart of the method we are just beginning to surrender in history and sociology generally, whereby we used to discover the causes of

* I hasten to appease the anger of any Wagnerian who may feel aggrieved at this attack on the master's prose writings, by assuring him of my profound admiration for Wagner as a musician. I think it possible to demonstrate, however, that while his music at its best is unmatched, a good three-fourths of his theoretical æsthetic is the merest Teutonic speculation, with no historical validity whatever, and simply holding the attention, as does the dialectic of Hegel, by its factitious air of symmetry and conclusiveness,

certain historical changes in the “national character” of this or that people, and endow abstract terms with the qualities of concrete forces, and generally explain everything most learnedly in terms of itself. In the Wagnerian dialectic we still have the metaphysical method in all its pristine glory and all its primitive irresponsibility. The problem for Wagner is, how to unite poetry and music in such a way as to procure the maximum of expression with the minimum of friction between the two specialised arts. To see most plainly the futility of any but the historical method in the treatment of such a problem as this, we have only to look at a parallel case in sociology. Copying the æsthetic formula, it may be said that the industrial problem of the present age is how to strike a balance between socialism and individualism, so as to maintain all the desirable advantages of each, and at the same time to increase the total sum of the efficiency of labour. We are not likely to come to any valuable conclusion on such a question as this by taking one entity called “individualism” and another called “socialism,” and arguing downward from these to the concrete conditions of life, in the Hegelian style, painting a fancy picture of the mortal combat between these two principles throughout the ages, and their final reconciliation in some form that includes them both, as “unity in diversity.” What we shall have to do is to take each country by itself to begin with, trace the historical and other conditions that have led to its present structure being precisely what it is, estimate the relative value of the various internal and external forces that shape its industrial constitution at

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present, attempt to forecast the relative values of these forces in the immediate future, and then make our provisional alterations accordingly. Any other method than this may be interesting as an essay in the Hegelian manner, but is likely to throw very little light upon the past and still less upon the future.

It is practically the Hegelian method that Wagner and his disciples have followed. One entity is called “poetry,” the other “music,” and history, by a process of ingenious eclecticism, is re-written to suit the supposed gyrations of these two entities about a common centre. They begin by being united; then the earth-spirit, in the plenitude of his wisdom, sees fit to separate them for many a century, but solely with an eye to their ultimate reunion. You have your thesis, antithesis and reconciliation; and all you have to do is to take so much history as suits your purpose and quietly ignore the rest, reading, of course, your own preconceived meaning into everything. Ever since poetry and music became separated, thinks Wagner, each has been yearning in secret for the other; and though each has gone a-holidaying at times and come to mishap, still on the whole their paths have been gradually converging, and now, of course, have met. It is a curiosity of the metaphysical method that though it deals so manfully with the past, it seems to take little or no account of the future; it generally appears to imagine that after the threads have once been tied in a particular manner they will remain so tied to all eternity. But inefficient as the method is with regard to the future, it is not less so with regard to the past. There never has been such an

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entity as “poetry,” nor such an entity as “music,” nor have these two been turning each an eye on the other throughout the ages. Art has not developed on any preconceived plan, nor has the evolution from form to form been according to the logical necessities of a dialectic. How painfully inadequate the metaphysical method is to explain the vicissitudes of music may be seen by any one who takes the trouble to compare the Wagnerian history of poetry and music with the actual history of those arts. To take Gluck or Rossini, for example, and treat them as stages in the evolution of a dialectical idea, is simply to ignore the actual social and æsthetic conditions that went to shape their music and their relations to poetry. To call the symphonic form “absolute” music, and to write of it as an inevitable stage in the development of music, is to ignore the peculiar conditions under which that form grew up and rose to such perfection. There has been no musical expression that has not owed its origin to the historical circumstances of the time. The internalism of the music of Bach, for instance, was mainly due to the shrinking-in of the German intellect after the political troubles of the seventeenth century, and its religious preoccupation with itself, thus generating in music a psychological state similar to that which underlay the contemporary mysticism in philosophy; while the later internalism of the symphonic forms, as I shall attempt to show, is due to the comparative exclusion of the composer from the outer world, the consequent atrophy of his dramatic sense, and his disposition to construct musical thought on purely inward lines. The climax of metaphysical