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HALF A CENTURY OF MUSIC IN ENGLAND.

1837-1887.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY—GENERAL MUSIC DURING THE QUEEN'S REIGN IN ENGLAND.

IT is no exaggeration to say that with the exception perhaps of natural science, both in the applied and the philosophic sense, there is no branch of human knowledge, or of human art, in which the change that the half-century of the Queen's reign has wrought, is so marked as it is in the spirit of music. I advisedly say the spirit of music, for with the practice and the productiveness of the art I shall have to deal later on. By the spirit of music is here understood the spirit in which music is regarded both by the artists who practise it, and by the amateurs who enjoy it in a more or less active manner. Fifty years ago, music in the higher sense was, to the majority of the people, an all but unknown quantity. The existing concert

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societies in London were few in number, and appealed almost exclusively to their own members, drawn from what then would have been called "the nobility and gentry," and what in modern parlance we may describe as "the classes;" the masses being left out in the cold. Still more was this true of the Italian Opera, from the aristocratic precincts of which rigorous restrictions of dress and prohibitive prices excluded the vulgar. The general attitude of society towards the art was essentially that of Lord Chesterfield when he warned his son against a tendency towards being a "fiddler," even in the amateur sense, as wholly unworthy of an English gentleman; or of the poet Byron when he declined to acknowledge the difference "'twixt Tweedledum and Tweedledee" in the famous epigram generally but erroneously attributed to Swift.

That attitude, one is happy to say, if not altogether extinct, is at least rapidly becoming so. There are still gentlemen of the old school who have a certain pride in confessing their inability to distinguish "God save the Queen" from "Yankee Doodle;" and I remember that at the meeting convened for the discussion of the Royal College of Music, and graciously presided over by the Prince of Wales at St. James's Palace, the speakers, including such men as Mr. Gladstone, the late Lord Iddesleigh, Lord Rosebery, and the late Archbishop of Canterbury, almost without exception prefaced their remarks upon music by

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saying that they knew nothing whatever about music. But this contemptuous treatment of the art is essentially confined nowadays to official persons, such as provincial mayors, Church and law dignitaries, and the members of the British Government, which, whether Whig or Tory, wastes every year a huge sum of public money on teaching little Board School children to sing "by ear," while it declines to give any support to the higher development of the art, with the exception of a trumpery sum of £500 per annum grudgingly doled out to the Royal Academy.

This stolid obtuseness, formerly so common, can no longer be laid to the charge of intelligent Englishmen; and that this is so, and that musicians are no longer separated from the rest of society by the barrier which of old at fashionable parties took the tangible shape of a cord dividing the professionals from the rest of the company, is in no small measure due to the enlightened encouragement of art and artists by the reigning sovereign. Sir George Macfarren, differing in this from other historians, has more than once expressed an opinion that the decline and fall of English music was not in reality caused by the intolerance of the Puritans and their modern successors, but by the accession of the House of Hanover —a race of aliens with no sympathy for the national development of the art; as if such sympathy could have been expected from the Stuarts, who in their tastes and habits were quite as much foreigners as

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George I. and George II. Charles II. had not been many months on the throne when he went out of his way to affront English music. One of the earliest entries in "Pepys's Diary" (October 14, 1660) refers to a visit of Mr. Pepys to Whitehall Chapel, "where one Dr. Croft made an indifferent sermon, and after it an anthem, ill-sung, which made the King laugh." Neither did profane music of English growth find favour with the merry monarch; for, a little more than a month after the last entry (November 20), we find that "at a play the King did put a great affront upon Singleton's musique in bidding them stop, and made the French musique play, which my Lord Sandwich says, do much outdo all ours." On the other hand, when George I. came over to this country he had quarrelled with the great Handel and refused to see him, and it was by no means an easy matter to reconcile the King with his runaway *Kapellmeister*, who had by that time become the darling of the English aristocracy.

Our present Queen has from the first acted upon the wise principle of encouraging the art quite independently of the narrow prejudices of nationality. Every foreign musician of distinction, from Mendelssohn down to Liszt, has met with a gracious reception at Windsor and Buckingham Palace; and before her bereavement withdrew her to a great extent from public amusements, the Queen was a constant frequenter of the Italian Opera. On the other hand,

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the honour of knighthood has recently been showered upon English musicians with an almost too lavish hand. With the Queen, love of music was an hereditary instinct, further developed by the encouragement and sympathy of her husband, himself an ardent worshipper of the art and a composer of merit. The important part which music played in the home life of this exalted couple is charmingly illustrated in the letters of Mendelssohn, whose genius was acknowledged by them even before the professional critics and the public at large had made up their minds as to his merits. Mendelssohn happened to be present in London at the time of the coronation, and gives a glowing description of that impressive ceremony. He writes, June 28, 1838:

I have just seen the fair young girl step forth from this gate [the letter contains a sketch of Westminster Abbey as a vignette], and as she, in her mediæval costume, passed down the line of halberdiers, dressed in red, against the venerable grey walls, I could have imagined myself back in the middle ages. It was a very pretty picture, with just a touch of sunlight. May it be a good omen for her reign!"

And again:

Nothing more brilliant, by the way, could be seen than all the beautiful horses with their rich harness, the carriages and grooms covered with gold embroideries, and the splendidly dressed people inside. All this, too, was encircled by the venerable grey buildings and the crowds of common people under the dull sky, which was only now and then pierced by sunbeams; at first, indeed, it rained. But when the golden, fairy-like carriage—supported by tritons with

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their tridents, and surmounted by the great crown of England—drove up, and the graceful girl was seen bowing right and left; when at that instant the mass of people were completely hidden by their waving handkerchiefs and raised hats, while one roar of cheering almost drowned the peal of the bells, the blare of the trumpets, and thundering of the guns, one had to pinch oneself to make sure that it was not all a dream out of the "Arabian Nights." Then fell a sudden silence, the silence of a church, after the Queen had entered the cathedral.

It was not till four years later that Mendelssohn made the acquaintance of the lady whom he had thus admired at a distance. The passage in which he describes to his mother what one may call a morning's music at Buckingham Palace, is so charming and so pertinent to the subject, that, although long, and quoted before, it deserves insertion here:

Prince Albert had asked me to go to him on Saturday at two o'clock, so that I might try his organ before I left England. I found him alone: and as we were talking away the Queen came in, also alone, in a simple morning dress. She said she was obliged to leave for Claremont in an hour, and then, suddenly interrupting herself, exclaimed, "But goodness! what a confusion!" for the wind had littered the whole room, and even the pedals of the organ (which, by the way, made a very pretty feature in the room), with leaves of music from a large portfolio that lay open. As she spoke, she knelt down and began picking up the music; Prince Albert helped, and I, too, was not idle. Then Prince Albert proceeded to explain the stops to me, and she said that she would meanwhile put things straight. I begged that the Prince would play me something, so that, as I said, I might boast about it in Germany; and he played a chorale by heart, with the pedals, so charmingly and clearly and correctly, that it would have done credit to any professional; and the Queen, having finished her work, came and sat by him and listened, and looked pleased. . . .

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Then the young Prince of Gotha came in, and there was more chatting, and the Queen asked if I had written any new songs, and she said she was very fond of singing my published ones. "You should sing one to him," said Prince Albert, and after a little begging she said she would try the "Frühlingslied" in B flat, "if it is still here," she added, "for all my music is packed up for Claremont." Prince Albert went to look for it, but came back saying it was already packed. "But one might perhaps unpack it," said I. "We must send for Lady ——," she said (I did not catch the name). So the bell was rung and the servants were sent after it, but without success; and at last the Queen went herself, and whilst she was gone Prince Albert said to me, "She begs you will accept this present as a remembrance," and gave me a case with a beautiful ring, on which is engraved "V.R., 1842." . . . The Duchess of Kent came in too, and while they were all talking I rummaged about amongst the music, and soon discovered my first set of songs. So of course I begged her to sing one of these, to which she very kindly consented; and which did she choose?—"Schöner und söchner schmückt sich"—sang it quite charmingly, in strict time and tune, and with very good execution. Only in the line "Der Prosa Last und Müh," where it goes down to D and up again by semitones, she sang D sharp each time; and as I gave her the note the first two times, the last time she sang D where it ought to have been D sharp. But with the exception of this little mistake it was really charming, and the last long G, I have never heard better or purer or more natural from any amateur. Then I was obliged to confess that Fanny had written the song (which I found very hard, but pride must have a fall), and to beg her to sing one of my own also. If I would give her plenty of help she would gladly try, she said, and then she sang the Pilgerspruch, "Lass dich nur," really quite faultlessly, and with charming feeling and expression.

In her public encouragement of the art, the Queen has essentially followed that principle of a constitutional sovereign which says, "Le roi ne gouverne pas." She has governed neither concert-room nor

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theatre, and apart from the expenses of the private band, ably directed by Mr. Cusins, the Royal exchequer has not been drawn upon for any of those contributions which Continental Kings and Kaisers bestow upon their Court theatres. In judging of this fact we should remember, however, that this is the country of self-help, in which art has to take its chance along with other unprotected industries. That it has upon the whole thriven well upon that principle—although a little material support from high quarters might at times have appeared desirable enough—the following remarks will show.

In these remarks, even the briefest summary of the musical events which have happened during the last fifty years will not be attempted. Such a summary would by far exceed the limits of space here at disposal, and would, moreover, only tend to encumber the reader's memory with an endless enumeration of names, and dates, and facts. It will be more to the purpose to sketch in a few words the state of English music in the year 1837, and to indicate in what direction, and by what means, the great change previously alluded to has been effected. The anonymous author of a volume of "Musical Recollections of the Last Half-Century," published in 1872, who, whatever may be thought of his critical faculties, has at least the authority of an eye-witness, speaks of this particular year in a manner which reminds one of the famous Chapter on Snakes in

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Iceland. "The concert season of 1837," he writes, "may be dismissed without the slightest reference;" and a little further on he states: "Equally dull and dreary was the operatic season." As regards concerts, however, one important exception should be made—the first performance in London of Mendelssohn's "St. Paul," which was given by the Sacred Harmonic Society, then recently removed to Exeter Hall, on March 7, after having been heard for the first time in England at the Liverpool Festival in the previous October, Sir George Smart acting as conductor. On that occasion the work had been the subject of very divergent comments. One of Mr. Davison's predecessors in the office of musical critic of *The Times* speaks of "St. Paul" as a purely ecclesiastical work, without "fervid bursts of genius or witching graces of melody," and he complains that "Braham had only a single air, or rather he accompanied Linley in a solo," having reference to the famous "Be thou faithful unto death," and its accompaniment for the violoncello obbligato. That nothing else worth mentioning happened in London during the first year of the Queen's reign cannot, of course, be accepted in its literal sense; at the same time, the chances of anything happening were then, comparatively, very limited. The spirit of modern enterprise and competition had not yet entered the quiet realms of music — or at least of orchestral music — for virtuosi were as ambitious,

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although not quite as numerous, then as they are now.

Virtually, the only stronghold of that form of music was in those days the Philharmonic Society, which still survives. Only a few years before this, it was in so flourishing a condition that, as Spohr writes in his autobiography: "Notwithstanding the high price of admission, the number of subscribers was so great, that many hundreds who had inscribed their names could not obtain seats." New and important works by contemporary musicians were in those days frequently included in the programmes, and in the year 1837 it produced, amongst other things, a symphony by Onslow, and the overture "The Naiads," by Sterndale Bennett—then a young and rising musician, who subsequently became the conductor of the society.

The Antient Concerts were already in a very attenuated condition, although they lingered on for many years afterwards. Their programmes consisted mainly of detached choruses and airs from Handel's oratorios, varied now and then by a song from Purcell or from Cimorosa, or the English Bach, or an overture by Mozart. Even for a complete performance of one of Handel's works this venerable society, founded as early as 1776, had not strength enough left. Its performances were directed (not, of course, conducted) in turns by the Archbishop of York, Royal and other Dukes, and various members

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