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H. R. Haweis
Excerpt
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First Book.

PHILOSOPHICAL.



MUSIC, EMOTION, AND MORALS.

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MUSIC, EMOTION, AND MORALS.

I.

 HE sun smiting through crystal drops shakes its white light into blue, and red, and yellow fire; and, as the beads of fresh-fallen rain tremble in the wind, we may watch the primary colours of the rainbow, combined and recombined with wondrous alchemy into more subtle flame of emerald, purple, and orange. A cloud passes over the sky, and in a moment every tiny globe hangs before us, scintillant still, but pale and colourless, with its one quivering speck of crystalline light. Then we can see with quiet eyes the metallic lustre upon the wide blue wings of the Brazilian butterfly—the green dissolving into glitter of rubies upon the breast of the humming-bird—the long reaches of golden king-cups in June meadows, or opal tints upon wet shells and

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blown foam. Have we not looked into the great laboratories of light itself? Have we not seen the essential colours in the very moment of their evolution falling like shattered flame-flakes from the sun? Is it so strange to find them mingled bountifully with all created things, and made fast in every conceivable tint upon plume of bird and petal of flower?

The painter goes forth each day into a new Eden, and finds his palette already laid for him. He cannot choose but take the materials and follow the suggestions which Nature so freely gives him. He, too, can combine and recombine; can distribute his hues in concord and discord of colour; can associate them with definite images, or, making them the vehicles of poetic emotion, paint "the sunshine of sunshine, and the gloom of gloom."

The wailing of the wind at night, the hum of insect life,
 2. the nightingale's note, the scream of the eagle,
 THE FOUNT OF SOUND. the cries of animals, and, above all, the natural inflections of the human voice—such are the rough elements of music, multitudinous, incoherent, and formless. Earth, and sea, and air are full of these inarticulate voices; sound floats upward from populous cities to the Cloudland, and thunder rolls down its monotonous reply. Alone by the sea we may listen and hear a distinct and different tone each time the swelling wavelet breaks crisply at our feet; and when the wind with fitful and angry howl drives inland the foam of the breakers, the shriek of the

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retiring surge upon the shingles will often run through several descending semitones.

It would seem, then, that we have only to take the Colour
 3. and the Sound provided for us by Nature and
 NATURE AND ART. transform them at once through the arts of
 Painting and Music into the interpreters of human thought and emotion. But, in reality, between music and painting there is fixed a great gulf of difference. Nature gives man the art of Painting, as it were, ready made. For him the sun sets and rises, and the summer glows, and the woods change so softly and slowly beneath his gaze, that he has time to chronicle every tint before it has passed away. All forms of beauty, from the supreme outline of the human body to the filmy speck of the minutest insect, are constantly limning themselves upon the retina of his eye until his sensitive brain is supplied with objects of enchanting loveliness, which he is at liberty to reproduce and recombine at will. Nature not only provides the painter with fair forms and rich colours, but she also teaches him the magical art of selection and arrangement. But what has she done for the musician? She has given him sound, not music. Nowhere does there fall upon his ear, as he walks through the wide world, such an arrangement of consecutive sounds as can be called a musical subject, or theme, or melody. Far less does he find anything which can be described as musical harmony. The thunder

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is not affecting because it is melodic, but because it is loud and elemental. The much-extolled note of the lark is only pleasant because associated with the little warbler, the “sightless song” in the depth of the blue sky, for when the lark’s trill is so exactly imitated (as it can be with a whistle in a tumbler full of water) that it deceives the very birds themselves, it ceases to be in the least agreeable, just as the sound of the wind, which can also be well imitated by any one compressing his lips and moaning, ceases under such circumstances to be in the least romantic. The nightingale’s song when at its best has the advantage of being a single and not unpleasantly loud whistle. That, too, can be imitated so as to defy detection. But once let the veil of night be withdrawn, and the human nightingale disclosed, and we shall probably all admit that his performance is dull, monotonous, and unmeaning. The cuckoo, who often sings a true third, and sometimes a sharp third or even a fourth, is the nearest approach to music in Nature; but this tuneful fowl gets less credit for his vocal powers than almost any other; and whilst he is screamed at and hunted from hedge to hedge by his own species as a very outlaw among birds, he is voted but a coarse and vulgar songster by man. At any rate, though some may admire his call as the herald note of spring, yet when “cuckoo cuckoo” is blown, as boys know how to blow, upon the hollow fists, no one except the cuckoo cares to listen to the strain for its own sweet sake. The cries of most large birds,

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such as the ostrich and peacock, are intolerably disagreeable. Nor are the voices of the animals, from the pig, the cat, and the donkey downwards, any better. We need not go so far as Mr. Darwin's Gibbon monkey to find an animal that sings several notes and occasionally hits an octave, for the same can be said of the domestic cat; but in neither case is there such an arrangement of notes as can be called Melody, or such a combination of notes as can be called Harmony. Poets from time immemorial have tried to throw dust in the eyes of mankind whenever they have touched upon this subject, but it is high time the truth should be told. The Harmonies of Nature are purely metaphorical. There is no music in Nature, neither melody nor harmony. Music is the creation of man. He does not reproduce in music any combination of sounds he has ever heard or could possibly hear in the natural world, as the painter transfers to his canvas the forms and tints he sees around him. No, the musician seizes the rough element of sound and compels it to work his will, and having with infinite pains subjugated and tamed it, he is rewarded by discovering in it the most direct and perfect medium in all Nature for the expression of his emotions.

The Painter's art lies upon the surface of the world; its secrets are whispered by the yellow corn-fields spotted with crimson fire, and the dappled purple of heather upon the hills; but the Musician's art lies beneath the surface. His rough material of Sound is like the dull diamond,

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earth-encrusted and buried in deep mines; it simply does not exist as a brilliant and a thing of priceless beauty, until it has been refined and made luminous by deliberate arrangement of glittering facets, set in splendour of chaste gold.

And then—what then, it will be asked, what does all this
 4. manipulation of sound end in? what is the value
 MUSIC or dignity of this art of Music? We easily
 AND OTHER recognise the foundation of other arts. The art
 ARTS. of Sculpture rests upon the fact that when man awakens to a sense of the beauty, power, or even grotesqueness of form, he is impelled by a creative instinct to reproduce, select, and combine its various qualities—firstly, that he may perpetuate the forms of fleeting beauty that he sees around him; and secondly, that he may impart to the ideal conceptions of his imagination an outward and concrete existence. We are not ashamed to derive the keenest satisfaction from the Niobe or the Antinous, for we see in these a perennial and dignified expression of human grace and pathos. And even when we turn to such painful and distorted figures as the Laocoon, although we may call them “debased art” according to our canons of taste, yet neither these nor any other specimens, however corrupt or weak, can affect the real dignity of sculpture itself. Similarly, the art of Painting rests upon a rational impulse to select and combine colours, chiefly in connection with intelligible forms and subjects of definite interest; and although painting is

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less definite in some respects, and less complete in others, than sculpture, yet its range is wider, its material infinitely more ductile, whilst its command of emotion through the vehicle of colour, and of ideas through variety of outline, gives it an importance and dignity which it would be difficult to over-estimate. Even such an art as Legerdemain is capable of a satisfactory explanation; for it is the outward realization in one department, however narrow, of certain excellent qualities of the eye and hand. A Phidian sculpture, a picture by Titian, even a conjuring trick by Professor Frikell, can be accounted for and justified in a few words. But when we come to a Symphony by Beethoven, philosophy is dumb, or rides off upon a quibble about the scientific structure of music or its technical qualities, all true and interesting, no doubt, but still leaving untouched the great Art-problem of music—What is the rationale of its existence, and what the secret of its power over the soul?

Music, as distinguished from the various rude attempts of the past, is only about four hundred years old. Modern music, which is alone worthy of the name, is in fact the youngest of the arts, and stands at present in a correspondingly unfavourable position: for whilst it has been brought to the highest perfection, the secret of its power is almost wholly unexplored; and as long as this is the case, music must continue to be ranked last among the fine arts. But the day is at hand when the veil of the prophetess will be

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lifted. Already in Germany, the land of thought, music has been adopted as the national art—as painting was once in Italy, and sculpture in Greece. Already the names of Beethoven and Mozart are whispered through the civilized world in the same breath with those of Phidias and Michael Angelo, and the time is probably not far distant when music will stand revealed perchance as the mightiest of the arts, and certainly as the one art peculiarly representative of our modern world, with its intense life, complex civilization, and feverish self-consciousness.

It has often been said that music is the language of the emotions; but what there is in music to act upon emotion, or how it both expresses and excites it, sometimes compelling the mind to clothe the awakened emotion with definite ideas—at others, dispensing with ideas altogether—this has never yet been explained. With the cautiousness and humility of one who feels himself upon untrodden ground, I offer the following reflections as a contribution to the much-neglected study of Musical Psychology.

II.

WE cannot do better than start with the popular assertion that music is the language of the emotions. But before we attempt to show the points of contact between emotion and