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George Hogarth

Excerpt

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# MUSICAL HISTORY.

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## CHAPTER I.

THE MUSIC OF THE ANCIENTS.—MUSIC OF THE HEBREWS—  
THE EGYPTIANS—THE GREEKS—THE ROMANS.

Music, though now a very complex and difficult art, is, in truth, a gift of the Author of Nature to the whole human race. Its existence and influence are to be traced in the records of every people from the earliest ages, and are perceptible, at the present time, in every quarter of the globe. It is a part of the benevolent order of Providence, that we are capable of receiving from the objects around us, pleasures independent of the immediate purposes for which they have been created. Our eyes do not merely enable us to see external things, so as to avail ourselves of their useful properties; they enable us also to enjoy the delight produced by the perception of *beauty*, a perception which (upon whatever principle it may be explained,) is something distinct from any consideration of the mere utility of an object. We could have had the most accurate perceptions of the form and position of everything that constitutes the most beautiful landscape, without receiving any idea of its beauty. We could have beheld the sun setting amid the glowing tints of a summer evening, without thinking of anything beyond the advantage of serene weather; we might have contemplated the glassy expanse of the ocean reflecting the tranquil beams of the moon, with-

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out any other feeling than the comfort of a safe and easy navigation; and the varieties of hill and dale, of shady woods and luxuriant verdure, might have been pleasant only in the eyes of farmers or graziers. We could, too, have listened to *sounds* with equal indifference to everything beyond the mere information they conveyed to us; and the sighing of the breeze, or the murmuring of the brook, while we learned from them nothing of which we could avail ourselves, might have been heard without pleasure. It is evident that the perception of external things, for the mere purpose of making use of them, has no connexion with the feeling of their beauty; and that our Creator, therefore, has bestowed on us this additional feeling, for the purpose of augmenting our happiness. Had he not had this design, he might have left us without the sense of beauty or deformity. “If God,” says Paley, “had wished our misery, he might have made sure of his purpose by forming our senses to be as many sores and pains to us as they are now instruments of our gratification and enjoyment; or by placing us among objects so ill suited to our perceptions, as to have continually offended us, instead of ministering to our refreshment and delight. He might have made, for instance, everything we saw loathsome, everything we touched a sting, and every sound a discord.”

In place of every sound being a discord, the greatest part of the sounds which we hear are more or less agreeable to us. The infinite variety of sounds produced by the winds and waters,—the cries of animals, the notes of birds,—and, above all, the tones of the human voice, all affect us with various kinds and degrees of pleasure; and, in general, it may be said, that it is such sounds as indicate something to be feared and avoided, such as the howling of wild beasts, or the

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## THE MUSIC OF THE ANCIENTS.

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hissing of serpents, that are positively painful to our ears. In this sense, all nature may be said to be full of music; the disagreeable and discordant sounds being (as in artificial music,) in such proportion only as to heighten the pleasure derived from those which are agreeable. The human voice is that which pleases us chiefly, and affects us most powerfully. Its natural tones and accents are calculated to penetrate the heart of the listener; and the union of these to articulate speech, in every language, not only produces a melody which pleases the ear, but an effect on the feelings, of which the mere words would be incapable. These natural tones of the voice, either by themselves, or joined to articulate language, constitute music in its simplest state; and the pleasures and feelings derived from such music must necessarily have existed in every form of society.

The history of Music, therefore, is coeval with the history of our species. In the earlier ages of the world, of the music of which no remains have descended to the present times, its history must be gleaned from ancient literature; and the scanty lights thus afforded, must be aided, (as far as possible,) by conjectures derived from the state of music in those rude and primitive stages of society which come under our own observation. Volumes upon volumes have been written upon the music of the ancients, full of learned research and ingenious speculation; but the results have by no means repaid the labour. From these works, a good deal of information may be acquired respecting the customs and manners of the ancients; but they hardly contain a single fact which can be of any use to the practical musician of the present day, or to those *dilettanti* who prosecute musical inquiries from a love of the art as it now exists.

Without reference to historical details of any sort, it

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may be concluded, from the existence of music in every state of society, at the present day, that it also existed in the earliest ages of the world. We find that the music of uncultivated tribes, and the music which, in civilized nations, has descended from their rude ancestors, though presenting many varieties, arising from the character of the people, the genius of their language, and other causes, has yet a strong general resemblance. By analyzing the simple melodies found among the common people of Scotland, Ireland, France, and other parts of Europe, and in Hindostan, Persia, the Islands of the Indian Ocean, Africa, and even China, it is discovered that these melodies are formed upon a certain scale, or series of sounds, which, therefore, is dictated and rendered agreeable to our ears by an original law of nature; and this scale, too, is substantially the same as that on which the most artificial music of the present day is founded, the latter being only rendered more extensive and complete. It cannot, then, be doubted, that, in the most ancient times, there existed melodies founded on a similar scale, and possessing similar characters to the national music of the present day: and it may reasonably be supposed, that the strains, for example, of the shepherds and herdsmen of the patriarchal ages, whose manners are so beautifully described in Holy Writ, were nearly akin to the untutored lays which are found to express the loves and griefs of the present pastoral inhabitants of similar regions.

The most ancient notices of music are to be found in the Bible. The invention of musical instruments is ascribed, in the Book of Genesis, to Jubal, who is mentioned as being the “father of such as handle the harp and organ.” The invention of instruments at this early age of the world implies the previous existence of vocal

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music; for instruments have always been devised for the purpose of imitating the melodious accents of the human voice. What was the nature of the instruments invented by Jubal, can only be matter of conjecture; for the words “ harp and organ,” used in our translation of the Scriptures, are not to be held as meaning the instruments now known by these names. The translators of the Bible into modern languages, knowing nothing of the instruments used among the Hebrews, seem to have employed the names of modern instruments almost at random, in this as well as other places. In the French translation of this passage, the words “ le violon et les orgues” are found; and in the CL<sup>th</sup> Psalm, where there is an enumeration of the instruments then in use among the Hebrews, the French translators have again used the word “ violon,” though there is not the slightest reason for supposing that any instrument at all analogous to the violin was known prior to the middle ages.

That the Hebrews were a very musical people, appears from every part of the Old Testament; music being mentioned as forming a part of all their religious rites and ceremonies, and as being used on all festive occasions, whether public or private. During the reigns of David and Solomon, the most splendid period in Jewish history, this art seems to have been at its height among that people. David was himself a musician; and his inspired lyrics, the Psalms, were set to music for the purpose of being performed by “ the chief musician,” and the band or orchestra under his direction, which consisted of numerous singing men and singing women, and players upon different instruments. Of these instruments nothing more is known, than that some of them had strings, seemingly on the principle of the modern harp; that others were of the nature of horns, or trumpets; and

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that others were beaten, like cymbals. As to the music itself, it probably resembled very much the rude, but frequently grand and imposing music still to be heard in various parts of the East, consisting of a very simple strain or melody, adapted to the enunciation of a long poem, sung by a single voice, intermixed with chorusses in the unison or octave, and accompanied in a similar manner by instruments. During the period of their national prosperity, the Hebrews appear to have excelled their contemporaries in music, as in other arts; for, in the beautiful lamentation composed on the Babylonian captivity, (the cxxxvii<sup>th</sup> Psalm,) the captives are described as being importuned by their oppressors to entertain them with the "Songs of Sion." "For they that led us away captives required of us a song, and melody in our heaviness, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Sion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning!" Though the Hebrew people were afterwards restored to their country, yet their subsequent history is that of a continual decline, down to their total destruction as a nation, and affords no materials whatever for throwing light on the state of their music.

That music was cultivated by some of the nations by whom the Jewish power was overthrown, particularly among the Chaldeans, appears from different passages in the sacred writers. Daniel describes the musical establishment at the court of Nebuchadnezzar as being magnificent, and as comprehending the different instruments in use among the Hebrews. For their music and instruments, the Chaldeans were probably indebted to their captives. But there is one people, the Egyptians, among whom music, like other arts and sciences, seems to have flourished in the most remote ages, and in a

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## MUSIC OF THE EGYPTIANS.

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degree far surpassing anything to which they afterwards arrived in other parts of the ancient world.

This wonderful people were formed into a powerful kingdom, at a period when the ancestors of the Jews were confined to the single family of Jacob. Even then, they appear, from the Book of Genesis, to have been far advanced in civilization; possessed, of course, of music, as well as those arts which belong more exclusively to polished life. By the concurring testimony of Greek writers, music was cultivated in Egypt from the most distant times to which their records ascend. From these writers, however, we learn nothing more than the fact, that music was cultivated, and that the Greeks derived from the Egyptians many of their musical instruments. But there still exist some pieces of Egyptian antiquity, from which it may be inferred that the music of that country must have been, like other arts, in a great measure lost, before it began to be cultivated by the Greeks.

One of these is an Egyptian pillar, brought to Rome by Augustus, and still to be seen there, where it is known by the name of the *guglia rotta*. On this pillar, (which is supposed by the most learned antiquaries, to have been erected by Sesostris several centuries before the Trojan war,) there is a representation of a musical instrument of two strings, and having a neck somewhat resembling the modern lute. Now, the contrivance of giving to stringed instruments a neck, or finger-board, by which one string can be made to produce a series of notes by the pressure of the different fingers, was totally unknown to the Greeks; and this method of increasing the powers of stringed instruments was one of the circumstances which contributed most essentially to the advancement of modern music. The possession, by the Egyptians, of this most important expedient, and its

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being unknown to the Greeks, would lead to the inference, that, as the Egyptians had an instrument so much more perfect than any of those known to the Greeks, they possessed a kind of music corresponding to the superior powers of this instrument.

Another piece of Egyptian antiquity was discovered by Mr. Bruce, and is minutely described by him in a letter to Dr. Burney. It is a drawing of a musical instrument, in an ancient sepulchre adjoining to the ruins of Thebes. After describing the sepulchre, and its indications of a very remote antiquity, Mr. Bruce gives an account of the picture in the following remarkable terms:—"At the end of the passage on the left hand, is the picture of a man playing upon the harp, painted in fresco, and quite entire. He is clad in a habit made like a shirt, such as the women still wear in Abyssinia, and the men in Nubia. This seems to be white linen or muslin, with narrow stripes of red. It reaches down to his ancles; his feet are without sandals, and bare; his neck and arms are also bare; his loose wide sleeves are gathered above the elbows; his head is close shaved; he seems a corpulent man, and about fifty years of age, in colour, rather of the darkest for an Egyptian. To guess by the detail of the figure, the painter should have had about the same degree of merit with a good sign-painter in Europe; yet he has represented the action of the musician in a manner never to be mistaken. His left hand seems employed in the upper part of the instrument among the notes in *alto*, as if in an *arpeggio*; while, stooping forwards, he seems with his right hand to be beginning with the lowest string, and promising to ascend with the most rapid execution; this action so obviously rendered by an indifferent artist, shows that it was a common one in his time, or in other words, that great hands were then



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frequent, and consequently, that music was well understood, and diligently followed." Mr. Bruce then goes on, at greater length than is necessary for our purpose, to describe the construction of the instrument, and accompanies his description with a figure of the harp. According to his representation, it closely resembles the harp of the present day, and is as elegant in form, and rich in ornament, as those which are seen in our drawing-rooms. Taken in proportion with the size of the performer, it must have been, according to Mr. Bruce, about six feet and a half in height, with thirteen strings, which must not only, from its size, have afforded powerful tones, but a scale of considerable extent. Mr. Bruce concludes his letter with the following observations: "This harp overturns all the accounts of the earliest state of ancient music and instruments in Egypt; and is altogether, in its form, ornaments, and compass, an incontestable proof, stronger than a thousand Greek quotations, that geometry, drawing, mechanics, and music, were at the greatest perfection when the harp was made, and that what we think, in Egypt, was the invention of arts, was only the beginning of the era of their restoration."

In the same letter, Mr. Bruce mentions another ancient harp, which is represented on a *basso-relievo* at Ptolemais, a city built by Ptolemy Philadelphus. It has fifteen strings; from which circumstance, and from there being no harp with so many strings found in any remains of Grecian sculpture, Mr. Bruce concludes that it, like the other, is Egyptian;—a conclusion which is strengthened by the place where its representation was found.

Whatever was the splendour of the Egyptian monarchy, and the state of the arts and sciences among the people, in ages of which nothing is known, it appears

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that this splendour had decayed, and those arts and sciences had been lost, before any Grecian author, whose writings are extant, had acquired any personal knowledge of that country. The earliest Greek writers who describe the pyramids, and other monuments of antiquity, seem to have been as ignorant of their history and origin, as we are at this day; and everything that they say, conveys the impression of a country full of the wrecks of a more elevated state of society. Though, therefore, the Greeks admit that, in the earlier periods of their own history, they borrowed largely from the arts and sciences of the Egyptians, it is probable that, even in that remote period, the decay of Egypt had begun, and that there no longer existed that music, and those instruments, which they had formerly possessed. Egypt, during the whole period of its authentic history, was in a state of gradual decline; till at last, under the dominion of Alexander the Great, its arts and sciences, and even its language, were Grecian;—thus receiving back from the Greeks, a portion of that which, in the days of its own glory, it had bestowed upon them.

The Greeks are the people of antiquity, whose music has attracted the largest share of attention among the moderns. During the whole period of their history, they considered music as an art of great dignity and importance, and cultivated it with the utmost assiduity. Its practice formed an essential part of education among the higher ranks, to whom, indeed, it was in a great measure confined; and its theory occupied the attention of the most distinguished men of science, several of whose writings on the subject are still extant.

It might, therefore, have been expected that our knowledge of Grecian music should be considerable. But in truth, it is quite the reverse; and neither the contents of the ancient writings, nor the multifarious researches