

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MUSIC

I

Throughout the history of mankind, music has linked itself intimately with the religious, political, and social elements of nations and peoples. From the day when ancient Pythagoras is said to have discovered the musical scale by coordinating the various sounds proceeding from the ringing anvil of a nearby smithy, down through succeeding ages, the power of music, in its various forms, has played upon the very heart-strings of mankind.

Ancient mythology abounds in examples of its power and influence. The mastering strains of Apollo's lyre, we are told, turned many a beast and dragon from paths of destruction and wrath. Rocks and trees moved to the magic of Orpheus' voice. The walls of Thebes fell into line at the magic power of Amphion's lyre. In Sacred History, too, we read that the sweet strains of David's harp sufficed to put to flight the evil spirits besieging the mind of King Saul.

Our own times bear witness to the power and psychological influence of music, made manifest especially during the recent war, when music proved an invaluable factor in maintaining the morale of the contending armies. Our own individual lives moreover, testify to the power and influence of music, for we need only to hear, for example, the strains of the "Star Spangled Banner," and instinctively patriotic enthusiasm for this "land of the free" fills our minds and hearts. Similarly, the plaintive strains of a "Requiem" or a "Dies Irae" suffice to turn our minds and hearts to the more serious consideration, that we are born to die, and that "we have not here a lasting city."

This we have all experienced, and we call it simply the power of music. It is to look into the nature of this mysterious power—this charm of music—that we venture to consider music in its relation to psychology, for being a spiritual, an intellectual,—an aesthetic pleasure, its explanation must be sought in Psychology.

II

In every art, there are two elements,—a scientific element, and an artistic element. From Philosophy, we know that there can exist no true art where a scientific fundament is lacking. It

would be absurd to try to suppose a sculptor who would take up his chisel hap-hazard and strike and blow, and expect to produce a finished, intelligible work of art. He must of necessity follow scientific rules,—fundamental, scientific laws of mathematical proportions, if he is to produce a master-work of art. When to this he adds the inspiration of genius,—his own soul-concept of the work,—the result is artistic beauty.

And so it is with music. It has physical, mechanical, physiological laws, which are the fundament of the art, and aesthetic, psychological laws and principles which govern its concept and appreciation. We are here concerned with these latter, or primary laws of psychology, which alone can explain the whence and the why of the power of music.

Music in its nobler element, proceeds from a spiritual source and addresses itself preeminently to the soul and intellect of man. The spiritual element is the essence, the soul of music. Hence its primary aim is the stimulation of thought,—not mere sensuous excitement, as some would have us believe. It is the art which appeals most powerfully to the heart and affections, and through these, to the character of men. It has been fittingly styled the natural language through which the thoughts and feelings of the soul express themselves,—the only language, by the way, universally spoken and understood. It exercises a marked influence on the will, which is moved as well by what we hear as by what we see and feel. Thus does music captivate the faculties of man,—rousing the soul to loftier sentiments, soothing grief and instilling joy, and stimulating the will to renewed vigorous action.

Well did Pope express this charm and power of music in his "Ode on St. Cecilia's Day":

"Music the fiercest grief can charm,
And Fate's severest rage disarm.
Music can soften pain to ease,
And make despair and madness please.
Our joys below it can improve,
And antedate the bliss above."

In all varieties of aesthetic pleasure, the element of association is a prominent factor. To association, in a great measure, is due the charm of music. With the strains of the organ we associate religious sentiments. The trumpet is associated in our minds with triumphal marches and sentiments of patriotism. Hence particular instruments and particular compositions, and

even particular chords are each associated in our minds with particular, corresponding sentiments. These fundamental associations are universally found in men. It is a matter of common experience, that major and minor chords awaken different emotional sentiments. Major chords are somehow adapted to sentiments of joy, contentment, pleasure, and the like, while the minors seem more adapted to sentiments of sorrow, pity, grief, fear, melancholy, and pathos. And thus these natural moods and sentiments of the soul are expressed in majors or minors, just as the natural vocal sentiments of joy or sorrow are respectively expressed in short, high-pitched tones, or long wailing tones. These inherent associations, therefore, account for much of the charm of music.

An even more important factor contributing to the charm of music is the faculty of the aesthetic imagination, which is intimately connected with the concept and appreciation of a musical composition. Imagination might be defined as that power of the mind by which we form pictures to ourselves of things not present. Beauty, and not knowledge, is the aim of the aesthetic imagination. It soars aloft toward realms of ideal beauty and delight, where absolute perfection alone is to be found. Hence it is accompanied by high emotion, which accounts for the long established fact that great artists are invariably of emotional natures. The great masterpieces we possess in music, poetry, painting, and sculpturing, are mainly products of the aesthetic imagination. Every chord, every tint, every curve is pregnant with the ideal which lived in the mind of the artist. When we listen to the masterpieces of Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Mendelssohn, and the other great musicians, our aesthetic imaginations fall into line, as it were, with theirs, and we are carried away to ideals of perfection and beauty in harmony, that come but little short of being celestial. Needless to say the imagination must be well regulated if it is to escape the absurdities which over-imaginative minds fall into. These latter must restrain their excessive fancy, whereas the unimaginative must put forth effort to arouse it if they would rightly interpret and enjoy music. Between these two, there is a medium which we term "well regulated," for "*in medio stat virtus.*"

In the aesthetic imagination, lies perhaps the greatest charm to be found in music. Imagination is to the musician what wings are to the bird, namely an absolute necessity if he would fly to

heights of artistic perfection. It is an essential requirement for the composer; it is the opening key for the listener.

"When I am about to perform music," writes a distinguished musician on the subject, "I endeavor to concentrate my whole self on what I am to play." (Now note the play of his imagination.) "If I am to play a funeral march, I first strive to enter the house of mourning. There I see the dead one lying in his coffin. I see the floral offerings, and methinks I can smell the very tuberoses. I see before me the family of the deceased, with pain and sorrow depicted on their faces. Yes, I hear from time to time the moans and sobs which irresistibly escape their lips, breaking the monotonous and painful silence that pervades the death chamber. . . . I see them close the coffin after the family have taken the last sad glance. I see them carry the body out, I hear the creak of the hearse door, and a cold chill runs over me. . . . I see the people standing on the pavement, looking at each other with sorrowing faces; I hear the bell toll, I see the procession start, and thus I prepare myself to play a funeral march."

We see in this example, the workings of a musician's imagination. A well regulated, vivid aesthetic imagination such as this, is of such vital importance, as to make the real appreciation of a musical composition of worth, almost impossible without it. Thought and sentiment are indeed essential, but these must be supplemented by the imagination which will enable one to dwell in the very atmosphere of the composition, and feel the beauty and perfection of its ideal.

Another important factor which contributes much to the charm of music is that known as symbolisation. Symbolisation differs from association in this,—that the latter presupposes no resemblance between the tones and the feelings which they suggest, whilst the former imitates or reproduces things. Excitement and strong feeling are given expression in loud resonant sounds, higher or lower than those expressive of ordinary feelings. The resemblance of mass of sound to the mad rushing of a torrent, the howl of waves, the rolling of thunder, and other natural phenomena, constitutes, according to the opinions of many, the essential delight and charm of music,—or in other words, that symbolisation accounts for the deeper charm of the art. Other factors may contribute, such as imagination and association, but the "innermost emotions of the soul are only touched by the significance of the tones."

Writers are generally agreed, however, that a consciousness of the definite signification of a composition is not necessary in order to derive enjoyment from it. Persons differ widely in the amount of significance they give to a composition. What may be deeply significant to one nature, may be but slightly pleasing to another. In like manner, the deep significance of one composition may impress us, whilst another may be equally impressive merely by the force of its melodies.

III

The charm of music has ever occupied the attention of men, and many and varied theories have been brought forward as explanations. However, it would seem that the elements of association, symbolisation, and especially imagination really account for the deeper charm of this art of arts. That it possesses a power for moral good unequalled in any other art, is a glory and an honor it has held throughout the ages of its history. Nevertheless, it has been more or less the mystery of antiquity, and its precise laws are still contested.

The Catholic Church has recognized from the very beginning the worth and power of music. Almost exclusively for the first sixteen centuries of Christianity, she fostered and developed this, the most spiritual of the arts. She received it from the angels themselves, whose nine wondrous choirs sing one glorious hymn of praise before the eternal throne of God. And hence the Church militant, no less than the Church triumphant, sends up to that eternal throne her tenderest sentiments of love and praise through the fitting art of music. Seven times daily, her consecrated sons and daughters assemble to chant the praises of the eternal God in psalms and hymns and canticles. Judiciously, indeed, has the Church chosen the art of music as an expression of her most sacred communings with Heaven. She has intimately interwoven it with her external cult, and jealously has she guarded it against the modernistic assaults of each succeeding century.

Truly then, is music the most sublime of arts. It has a power which humanity itself has never been able to resist. Ages have rolled by,—mighty nations and empires have drunk at its inexhaustible fount, and still its charm and beauty and power are not in the least diminished. It has ever been,—and may it ever continue to be,—an inspiration to the grandest, most noble, and most God-like expressions of the human soul. Sacred in its very con-

cept, sacred in its angelic beauty,—sacred in its mission here below, may the art of music ever instill into the characters of men the message of beauty and joy and consolation which is its Heaven-appointed mission.

“Music! Oh how faint, how weak,
Language fails before thy spell!
Why should feeling ever speak,
When thou canst breathe her soul so well?
Friendship’s balmy words may feign,—
Love’s are e’en more false than they:—
Oh! ’tis only music’s strain,
Can sweetly soothe and not betray.” (Moore.)

—Bro. Damian Goggins, O. P.

