

RHAPSODIES.

VI.

(By Bryceson Treharne.)

BRAMMS—MY DEMI-GOD.

A SERMON ON A TEXT FROM SCHUMANN.

1. "There must at last, all on a sudden, appear one whose mission it will be to utter the highest expression of his time in an ideal manner, one who will attain mastery, not by degrees, but, like Minerva, will at once spring, completely armed from the head of Cronos."

2. "HE is come, a youth at whose cradle the Graces and Heroes kept watch. He bears the name of JOHANNES BRAHMS."

3. "Salute him! Make him welcome, for every generation is linked together by a secret alliance between the spirits of the same family. You who form part of it draw up your ranks with energy, so that the truth of art may always shine with a bright and clear light, shedding joy and blessing on all around."

Certain people exist in every society who are endowed with a peculiar sensibility, who do not experience the same emotions as others, and for whom the exception makes the rule.

They create their own destinies and lives by the peculiarities of their dispositions. Now it is the exceptions who rule the world, and justly so, as it is to their intense temperamental activity that humanity owes its enlightenment and progress.

When these forerunners of intellect die, worn out by the hardships of the course they have chosen for themselves, then come Panurge's flock, enchanted at finding everything ready prepared, and taking to themselves the credit of having caused the revolution to triumph.

"I have done so much, that the path is now made easy for others!"

Brahms was—like Beethoven—one of the illustrious victims of this mournful privilege—being an exception.

Dear! did he pay for the heavy responsibility.

Terribly do exceptions suffer; and they cause suffering as well.

Do you think the crowd (that profanum vulgus, which Horace so abhorred) feels grateful, or would confess itself to be incompetent, before that audacious personage who dares to make a stand against old-fashioned customs and established routine?

Has not Voltaire himself said that nobody was as clever as everybody? And universal suffrage—that grand victory of modern times—is it not the verdict of this collective sovereignty, against which there is no appeal? Meanwhile, history, which is ever moving, onwards, and which from time to time deals out justice to a good many counterfeiters of truth—history teaches us that everywhere, in every instance, knowledge is given by the individual to the multitude, and not by the multitude to the individual; by the wise to the ignorant, and not by the ignorant to the wise; by the sun to the planets, and not by the planets to the sun.

You ask, is the voice of the people not also the voice of GOD?

What! you would make thirty-six millions of blind people represent a telescope—and thirty-six millions of sheep make a shepherd? And it is the crowd which has created the Raphaels, Michael Angelos, Mozarts, Beethovens, Wagners, Brahms—the Newtons and Galileos? The crowd? It spends its days in judging and rejudging; and takes turns in condemning its infatuations and its dislikes—and you would make the crowd a judge?

That wavering and contradictory jurisdiction—would you make of it an infallible magistracy? The idea is absurd. The crowd scours and CRUCIFIXES at first, with the certainty of reversing its decision by a tardy repentance—a repentance which, as often as not, is the work of the succeeding generation, and not of the contemporary one; and it is on the tomb of genius that the wreaths of immortality are showered, which were refused it during its life.

Posterity, the real judge, is only an amalgamation of successive minorities; the majorities are conservatories of the status quo. I do not blame them. They were ordained to be dormant and stock-still—it is their natural function in the appointed order of the universe; they keep back the chariot of progress; they do not allow it to advance; they set as curbs, when they will not give up the opinions they hold, and for the suppression of which they cannot give a good reason. There is no occasion to feel much pride in a contemporaneous success, which is frequently a mere question of fashion, proving that the work is on a par with—and not that it will survive—the age.

For a long time the music of Brahms was "caviare" to the general, so far from pleasing the millions it may be said to have touched only a few hundred believing disciples.

The majority found it stiff, austere, and serious, and seriousness of expression does not usually attract.

But have not all geniuses their asperities? The painting of Turner, Browning's poetry, the prose of Meredith, Irving's acting—citing modern instances alone, though the list could be multiplied indefinitely by referring back to the files of bygone ages.

Over that art which you say adds to nature, is an art that nature makes—but which seems very often to stand between the artist and his public. And Brahms is an instance in point. His thoughts are of the noblest, but he expresses them occasionally, although a consummate master of the art in all its technical aspects, in a fashion which repels the unsympathetic hearer. Is this result not due to the novelty of the message? Your prose seldom popular! "Conservation," Emerson "is debonnaire and social; it is individual and imperious."

A passage from one of Dr. Hueffer's essays deserves quotation. He says:—"A great original creator is necessary to a man of very individual stamp. He is engrossed by his idea in sympathy with an entirely different engrossed."

Brahms, perhaps, classified by Emerson, for well-grounded law with utter disregard for restrictions. Examples of his observation you may find in any work you like to name; of his contempt for mere formula and convention in almost any other. And to this latter quality no doubt is due a certain amount of that difficulty which is experienced in approaching his works. For a composer to be accepted without question by his own generation is perhaps the surest sign of mediocrity in music. It is only the second-rate men who conquer without opposition. Mendelssohn, that gentle blameless soul, who would not offend the susceptibilities of a single hearer, whose compositions are the incarnation of smoothness and correctitude, was one of these. Almost alone among the greater men, he was accepted with undiluted enthusiasm by his contemporaries. And to-day? Not all his polished form and finished workmanship and elevated sentiment have availed to avert the disesteem into which his works have fallen. Even Chopin, the most winning of the immortals, had his critical obstructionists to overcome, and Brahms had only to expect a like experience. His thoughts are much too original and independent to win immediate acceptance.

But there—popularity is NO test of art. The quality that makes for the popularity of an artist is a thing apart from the quality which crowns him with his artistic title.

You would not say that the accident of popularity ascribed any essential vulgarity

to the build of any given intellect; but it is clear that a communication has passed from such an intellect into the home of essential vulgarity.

The most unknowing, the most thoughtless, the vulgarest type of sentimentalist confesses to emotion in company with the musician. The fact comes near to demonstrating the nature of that quality which—apart from art, apart from knowledge, apart from nobility of culture—dowers sometimes the artist, sometimes the man in the street, with the perilous reward of popularity. If the popular idol be in touch an artist, his sympathy touches artist and mob alike; if he be a mere charlatan, the mob alone is his precious acquisition. In Brahms' case, even the exclusive fraternity of critics failed to discern the innate beauty and unending inspiration of his works—how could they be so blind? They bludgeoned his writings with the iron knob of crass ignorance.

He, like most wise men, found restful tranquillity in the velvety insinuations and rock-like expression of would-be detractors.

His was evidently a nature that loved to be dominated—yet the dear "thoughters of the press," as Meredith says, should bear in mind that violence can never dominate.

For most of us, the critic creates an occasional powerful peace.

Just sometimes, he is divine! But his divinity is by no means illimitable; indeed, aloof from the pretty trick of combining insult with a subtle undercurrent of flattery, I must still declare that the critic has his limits. And, alas! the critic often misses the saving grace of exclusiveness, which should accompany and sanctify limitation of any kind—his catholicity of sympathy has a dangerous trend towards philanthropy.

It is often a mystery that certain productions of the human brain are able to command an extensive and exciting popularity upon the moment of their publication, and that, after a brief lapse of years, they are permitted to fall, as Jeremy Taylor has it, into a lot of outworn faces. In nearly every such instance it will be found that the popularity that encompassed their few hours of triumph was due to a certain quality which appealed to the vulgar heart, or to the heart of the elect artist, but which, dying out with the minutes that move like the waves upon the pebbled shore, has left it pale, bloodless, shorn of vitality and staying power.

As a general rule, art, regarded as a belief, implies an implicit surrender, not because it is reasonable, but because the believer knows himself to be right. The artist, let me say, is aware of the beauty as the devout Mussulman is aware that Mohammed is the Prophet of Allah.

There is, indeed, a strong analogy between the credo of art and the credo of a definite religious faith. An artist is intolerant, he is exclusive, and his mind is fixed.

Just as an infallible source of religion forbids so much as a question upon its promulgations, so the artist, himself an infallible source, allows no doubt on the doctrines that he has sanctioned by his word of decree.

He knows, because he believes.

There is, indeed, no such possibility as an artistic axiom.

The collection of the world's loveliness is here for him, even as the collection of a church's dogmas is there for the religious believer.

There is to me a close relationship between the music of Brahms and the poetry of Browning.

With both of them, the thought is of paramount importance, the manner of its expression a secondary thing.

The idea or notion of the poem, the theme of the music, are nearly always of great and incontestable beauty; but some rhyme or turn of expression that seems clumsy to ears accustomed to the honeyed cadence of Tennyson, some harmonic or rhythmical change that strikes admirers of Mendelssohn as ungainly, comes in almost as if intent on preventing the piece from making a completion of connected beauty.

There is beauty there, if we will but see it; but it is not of a kind that wins our heart at once, nor is it easy to grasp the general drift of the poem or the musical creation at first, or, indeed, until after they

have been assiduously studied. If there is no parallel among the musician's productions to the poet's virtually insoluble riddle of "Sordella," there are many compositions more or less like it, in that passages of exquisite and easily intelligible beauty are continually foisted by others of less clarity and comprehensibility.

To push the analogy further would be to lose sight of the thousand melodies of perfect symmetry and haunting beauty that pervade Brahms' music, and find only rare counterparts in Browning's lyrics. Of both, one thing is certainly true—that the better they are known the more deeply they are loved, and the more extraordinary it seems that any person of normal intelligence and the usual educational endowment should fail to understand and admire them.

Both, again, have the priceless quality that you never leave off delighting in them, when once you have learnt to love them.

"How they brought the good news to Ghent" might be constantly recited at village entertainments, or Brahms' cradle song might be as incessantly performed as Mascagni's intermezzo; one could never lose the sense of graphic power in the vigorous poem, or of perfect beauty of expression in the simple song.

Brahms does not wear his heart on his sleeve, neither does he appeal to the frivolous or indolent—there never was a composer who paid less regard to the most sweet voices of the multitude or conceded less to the idols of the market-place.

Nobility of thought, grandeur of utterance, depth of feeling—these are the qualities which preeminently distinguish his music; he expressed himself with uncompromising sincerity, and gave full vent to the truest cravings of his innermost nature.

He possessed equally character and talent—the latter amounting to genius, and the former to heroism. Say what sophists and selfists may, I am convinced that genius is in proportion to goodness; the better you are, the better your work will be; every word, every thought, every act—for all you do and say is the expression of what you are.

If you are not pure, your poetry will not be pure—more than that it will not be mighty. If you wish to be great, first be good.

A man can only utter what is in him—express what he is. Since, then, the good affects us most, how can a not-good man affect us?

Striking as a Byron, for example, may be, he is but theatrical to a Milton or a Shakespeare. Volcanic glare and mud-bath are not to be confounded with solar fire.

The secret reason for the LIFE of Brahms' music lies in the fact that it is profoundly good.

I cannot imagine purely instrumental music—or, shall I say, pure music—written greater than Brahms' any more than I can ever imagine Job or Homer surpassed, or Shakespeare rivalled.

I don't see how his music can be transcended, embracing as it does the whole compass, from angelic delicacy to god-like might.

But the last and dearest thought of all is—Do the works predicate immortality? We love to draw our intimations of immortality from the present—from the good and beautiful now. For instance, can anything but an immortal soul really love?

Surely a lovely spirit ought to go on, af-

ter having shuffled off the mortal coil of this chrysalis life!

We feel the unconscious reason why we bow down before a perfect woman is, because we feel her to be immortal.

Assure us she is mere clay, and how the magic vanishes! Casting a glance upon the starry heavens, we cannot express how utterly miserable, what a stupendous mockery, it seems if, once having evolved into realising them we are never to see them again or know more of them.

So, too, with music—If it does not hint immortality, what is the secret of its power? If it fails to convey that secret, then the divinest chord in us, and faculty of it, vanishes.

We are only eating sugar. An idle belief in immortality is of no value; it should show itself in conduct, though not be the spring of it. THAT should be the love of goodness for its own sake; but without its eternal background the heart of man is like earth without heaven.

It seems the inevitable corollary of hope.

But yet, again, an indiscriminate or uniform immortality is improbable; to be immortal hereafter, you should be so now—that is, of similar character and quality; in short, you should deserve it.

But surely it is a faith as legitimate as sublime that our beloved Brahms, a mark of the eternal, here having delivered his message unto us, should pass on into a higher life whence he had come, or whither from that countless age he had been tending; while, unto us who adequately receive that message, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear," it waits the assurance and whispers the promise that the ideal world it represents shall be REAL; wherein we shall not, as now, merely take refuge from this painfully real one, the slave of drudgery and theatre of pain, full of pitfalls and crosses, freezing the smile on the lip of happiness and blighting the heavenly cheek of goodness itself with the pale cast of thought; but wherein we shall live and move and have our being, and which time shall no more scar than the meteor doth the eternal heaven.