

THE STORY OF CHAMBER MUSIC

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The story of chamber music by N. Kilburn

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Introduction.

BERLIOZ, who, by the way, wrote no chamber music save a serenade for two flutes and harp ("L'Enfance du Christ"), in his imaginative fashion somewhere speculates as to which of his own works he would preserve if it were ordained that all except one should perish. In like manner, we may ask ourselves which of the great forms of musical composition we would plead for in case all the rest were doomed to destruction. Music for the orchestra, with its vivid colours, its strength and delicacy; the vast range of choral music; works for the organ, that huge modern plexus of pipe and reed;—these and others no doubt have strong claims on our musical affections. But, if forced to such a choice, it is certain that many a musician would, without hesitation, pledge himself to uphold the claims of Chamber music, for who can measure the almost infinite variety and charm which it affords, and that, too, with the slenderest means?

Probably no other form of music would wear so well as this, and to hardly any other could we turn, day by day, with such abiding satisfaction. Of course, in a

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matter of this kind unanimity is not to be expected, and some will no doubt take exception to the view here stated; but, all the same, it may be confidently asserted that the more this kind of music is cultivated, and the more thoroughly its literature is known and studied, the less divergent will opinion tend to become.

The term chamber music, excluding piano solos, which, strictly speaking, do not come under this head, embraces compositions in the form of duets, trios, quartetts, and other larger combinations, for strings (*i.e.* violins, violas, 'cellos, and double basses), and for wind instruments (chiefly wood wind and horns), both with and without the pianoforte.

Of all the musical forms, this of chamber music is the most adapted for home consumption, and its cultivation by any community may safely be taken as a strong proof of an advanced condition of musical taste.

As regards the present day tendency, no doubt many chamber works are written too much in orchestral style; and, in addition to this, there has arisen an inclination on the part of some composers to make this form express more than it seems naturally fitted to do. We allude to string quartetts such as Raff's op. 192, "Die Schöne Müllerin," and Smetana's "Aus meinem Leben," which introduce the programme idea into chamber music.

It should not, however, be overlooked that this tendency is by no means absent in the compositions of earlier times. Among others, Bach and Beethoven

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contributed towards it; and in a number of Haydn's string quartetts we find a proneness towards realism, although the usual classical form is in no way violated; such, for example, as op. 33, No. 3, "The Bird"; op. 50, No. 6, "The Frog"; op. 64, No. 5, "The Lark"; op. 74, No. 3, "The Rider." It is not to be taken that Haydn gave these names to the movements, but that the imitations, while artistically good, are too obvious to be overlooked, and have led up to the fancy titles which have grown round the compositions.

Even in the earliest forms of vocal music such realism may occasionally be found. Mr. Henderson, in his book, *How Music Developed*, tells of certain composers, about the year 1550, who tried to imitate natural sounds and movements. He names a work by one Jannequin, in which an attempt is made to portray the street life of Paris; and that, too, in a piece written for four voices, and entirely unaccompanied! As showing how, with a difference, history repeats itself, one can hardly help being reminded by this of an orchestral composition by a distinguished musician of our time which has for its purpose the portrayal, in vivid musical colours, of the street life of great London city. We allude, of course, to Dr. Elgar's *Cockaigne* overture, "In London Town."

It is also now the custom to perform chamber music in large concert halls. No doubt, so far as the public is concerned, this is convenient, and maybe it is, financially, essential. None the less it cannot but be regarded as a perversion, for such music is heard to the

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greatest advantage under what may be called domestic conditions. Richard Wagner said that he never knew what Beethoven's sonatas really meant until he heard them played by Liszt, under the most sympathetic conditions, at Wahnfried, his (Wagner's) residence in Bayreuth.

The String Quartett may be regarded as the prototype, on the instrumental side, of chamber music, and along with it must be placed the other like forms of Quintett, Sextett, etc.; also the Octett, and Double Quartett, which differs in its antiphonal style from the Octett.

All these imply the opportunity for perfect intonation. The use of the pianoforte, however, introduces another "atmosphere." Perfect intonation is no longer possible, and the purity which the "strings" afford is of necessity somewhat marred.

It may no doubt be fairly urged that "all life is but a compromise," and that the utility of the pianoforte and the splendid array of compositions which it has called forth condone its defects. This is unquestionably true, but none the less it must be said, in spite of the practical hindrances which exist, that the imperfect intonation of the tempered scale falls short of the artistic ideal.

The late Sir G. A. Macfarren, although an advocate of the tempered scale, acknowledges that "on the voice and on bowed instruments the smallest gradations of pitch are produceable, and so all notes, in all keys, can be justly tuned, which, among others, is one reason for

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the exceptional delight given by music that is represented by either of these means."¹

Those who are interested will find the matter fully argued in Perronet Thompson's treatise on *Just Intonation*, in the preface of which work the case against the tempered scale is thus stated with characteristic fervour:—"Among the signs of progress in these times (1850!) is the growing discontent with the thing called temperament. Instead of being considered as the crowning exertion of musical skill, it begins to be viewed as a lazy attempt to save trouble, like nailing a telescope to one length for all eyes and distances, or making the fingers of a statue of one medium size. The belief also gains ground that all who are able, as for example singers and violinists, do without it, or more properly, perform in tune in spite of it."

On the other side a high authority² says:—"An ideally tuned scale is as much a dream as the philosopher's stone, and no one who clearly understands the meaning of Art wants it." And farther on he adds:—"It will probably be a good many centuries before any new system is justified by such a mass of great artistic works as the one which the instincts of our ancestors have gradually evolved for our advantage."

Thus we find that one view is based on the ideal principle that if, on instruments of the piano and organ type, one key can be put in perfect tune, the whole matter becomes only a question how practically to get

¹ Article "Music," in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

² Sir Hubert Parry, *The Art of Music*, p. 50.