

FOLK-SONG

THE prominence that folk-music has recently attained is only part of that great revolt which has affected not only politics, religion, and philosophy, but the arts-- literature, the drama, and music.

That this recognition of folk-song as a musical power, and as having status, is a healthy sign none can honestly deny.

There is no doubt it brings us back to an elemental standard in the musical art which we appear to have forgotten. The musician, in his eagerness to push technique to its utmost, has perhaps sometimes lost sight of that for which technique was created. It is the pitfall of all arts, this temptation to overshoot the mark originally aimed at in the delight of craftsmanship, and the conquering of difficulties of workmanship. To put it bluntly, it is too often the case that the tail wags the dog!

While we may wonder at, and admire, the marvellous performance of a skilful instrumentalist, for example, we might often very reasonably pause to consider whether the composer was quite justified in creating a musical situation that demanded so much from the performer; for the fact remains that musical art and genius may be enshrined in a few bars, and may be absent from an elaborate composition, while, of course, the reverse may also be granted.

In the matter of vocal music it is quite evident that a great change has recently taken place, but whatever merit this change may possess, there is positive proof that such change has broken much of it away from that primal element, which was the very essence of its existence.

A song in its primal and most logical form is a lyric expression of a personal emotion, or a sentiment. A person sings because he is happy, or sad, or because he wishes to voice sentiments of love, patriotism, or worship. He may even, as in the case of old ballads, wish to give a musical charm to a rhyming narrative.

Folk-song fulfils all these conditions and goes no further.

The emotions and sentiments may be felt by a concourse of people, who may unite in expressing them in song, but in strict logic the musical expression must be in unison.

Except in the case of the folk-song, as originally sung by the folk-song singer, musical art may have enriched such song, either by instrumental or by vocal accompaniment. This is quite a legitimate adornment, but, as in other arts, it is bad if the adornment becomes principal instead of subordinate. Then it departs from its proper function.

To a mind jaded with elaborate technique, or to one that does not fully grasp the meaning of such, folk-song comes as a great relief. Its simple artlessness and charm of melody appeal strongly. It is a welcome reversion to a primitive form.

It is surely an illogical position which, as in many modern songs, makes it impossible to declare your lyric sentiments only to the accompaniment of a grand piano, and in a composition so interwoven as to prohibit any portion being separated from the instrumental passages. Folk-song was never hampered by such fetters and the words are of as much importance as the air to which they are set.

The man sang at his plough, and the maid in her dairy, and both got from their ditty all the comfort and all the joy that it is the office of song to give.

The 'art song' was equally, in times not far distant, a song, and not a composition; that is, it could be sung apart from its original harmony, or, without breaking into its whole scheme, could be set to fresh accompaniment. It had thus the same charm and quality as a folk-song. If it be true, as I think it is, that a class of people do not sing spontaneously nowadays, as they formerly did, there is small wonder when we remember the modern tendency of which I have spoken. Thus it is that the class of people who formerly sang folk-song now sing the music-hall production, for the simple reason that there is a distinct air to sing, and because it is, as was the folk-song in its day, up to date, or at least in current usage.

The attempt to revive in the populace the singing of folk-songs is a worthy mission, but it is beset with difficulties, which do not appear to be quite realized by those who advocate the scheme. All history shows that not only in music, but in all other things, the general tendency is to go forward, and if an old fashion is revived, however worthily, it is only a revival for the moment, and does not affect the general forward flow.

I quite agree in deploring with those who proclaim that foreign influence in music has wrecked our English school of composition and made it but an echo of another nation's, and I also agree that our folk-music is in general almost the sole survival of a national and purely British type that might have wrought great things in this world's music, could it have been fostered instead of being over-ridden by the powerful German school that sprung upon it after Purcell's death. Our heritage of British folk-music is, therefore, a precious one, and, simple though it may be, it should be preserved with all honour and respect. Our 'national' song is of equal importance, and as equally ignored. We have a wealth of noble song and melody peculiarly adapted to our national character which is left severely alone by singers and promoters of concerts. Instead of these, our programmes of ballad concerts are filled with foreign productions of a type which is really quite opposed to our national character, and it is not that people are tired of our national song or that it is stale. It is never heard, for it is a mistake to suppose that a dozen songs, headed by the 'Vicar of Bray' or 'Tom Bowling,' make up the whole of our national vocal music.

A praiseworthy effort was, some time ago, made by the education authorities in 'a suggestion' that our National songs should replace the vapid songs, mainly with non-copyright German tunes, that formerly held ground in schools.

When folk-songs are likewise advocated for school-singing, I cannot concur. The folksong is, generally, so different in spirit that I conceive it utterly out of place among young children, and I say this both on behalf of the folk-song and the child -

making some very few exceptions. In a great number of cases the folk-song sings of matters which are, or should be, above the comprehension of a child.

Its subject is too frequently a tragic episode, treated in powerful, if rugged, verse, and very frequently in allegory, which is plain enough to those who are older and are familiar with this early method of treating such matters.

Of course, in these instances the songs are, when put forward, robbed of their unpleasant savour by omissions and alterations, but they cannot then be properly called 'folk-songs,' though with a charming tune they may be very passable lyrics.

There is another very great objection to the school singing of folk-songs, and that is that when a song, or a type of song, has become associated with schools, or handed over to the children, nobody will sing it on a concert platform!

In consequence, a folk-song, which in many examples is the essence of beauty, is seldom rendered by singers who are capable of expressing the delicacy and pathos that is the real charm of a folk-song. Though we may tolerate the shrill singing in unison by a couple of dozen young school children of such an emotional and personal song as 'I sowed the seeds of love,' or others of like character, yet the most enthusiastic advocate of folk-songs for schools cannot maintain that it could possibly be sung under these conditions as to display either its beauty of tune or of words. It is, however, quite certain that when such a ditty has become recognized as associated with a school class, few singers would venture to include it in their repertoire for concert production.

The idea that the songs which a child has sung (under compulsion) at school, he will turn to with avidity in his mature years, is one with which I cannot agree. In my own experience, I have never found an instance.

If it be considered that folk-song is desirable towards a child's education, let it hear folksongs sung with all the grace and expression that an experienced singer can draw from it, then the child may perhaps dimly realize for the first time the quality to be admired therein.

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