

MUSICAL HOURS IN WEIMAR

WITH THE PIANISTS OF THE FUTURE.
III.

....Mr. S. G. Pratt, to whose piano and salon and cordial invitations we owed all our pleasant evenings, is a young westerner who has made musical composition the aspiration of his life. His history is a touching one. Thrown upon his own resources when a little lad of 12, he supported himself in Chicago and studied music without a teacher until, in ten or twelve years, he had saved enough to take him to Berlin. Here he began the study of music under Kullak, and gave every promise of coming out a brilliant artist; but before the end of the first year he strained his hand so that it was impossible for him to continue his practice. Instead of being so crushed by so dreadful a blow, his courage rose to a higher level, and he decided that, since he was unable to be an interpreter of the ideas of others, he would elaborate his own; in other words, be a composer. He set himself, therefore, to this new ambition, and has been buffeting the world manfully and cheerfully for it ever since, first in Berlin and then in Chicago. Now again he has gone to Germany to try and gain there such a recognition as will assist him in his own country, and at this time he was in Weimar in the hope of some kindly encouragement from Liszt. Finding himself so favorably situated at the Rüssicher Hof, he conceived the idea of giving an entire *matinée* of his own compositions, to which the musical circle thus temporarily gathered in Weimar should be invited. As he mentioned Liszt's name, "You will not 'think of inviting him!'" interrupted I, appalled at a presumption which I should conceive paralleled in my own case if I should ask Alfred Tennyson or George Eliot, great literary successes at the top of the ladder, to listen to the efforts of my humble self, at the bottom. "Of course I shall ask him. 'I should consider I insulted him if I left 'him out,'" answered this typical American.

The afternoon was rainy, and the ladies of the class did not venture out. Pinner and one or two others dropped in, and I began to fear that our friend would not have an audience. But a little after five the door suddenly opened and in its frame appeared Liszt's striking presence, with a dozen or more young men behind him. I was completely astonished, or, rather,—not to put too fine a point upon it,—"taken down." But there is never any telling what Liszt will do. He is said to rise at five or six in the morning, and to work until eleven or twelve, after which it does not make much difference to him how he spends the rest of the day. Probably he would as soon *flâner* in one place as another. At any rate, there he was, and in such an angelic mood, too, that he looked like a saint, all ready to be translated. (It must be confessed that he either looks that way or like something exactly the opposite.) He took Mr. Pratt's

notes in his hand, and immediately made himself comfortable, with the sympathetic Pinner on one side of him and another congenial spirit on the other. He was always looking around for Pinner, by the way. "Where is Pinner?" he would say; and, in fact, if people wonder why Liszt has been so loved and adored, it is partly because few are so dependent upon human sympathy as he. As my friend says, "he is putting out his tendrils 'all the time,'" and I have observed that this infantine need of response which some natures have calls it universally out.

Mr. Pratt had asked me to sit near him, so that he could have the support of feeling as if he were playing to some special person, and I accordingly took my place facing him at the left hand, or bass of the piano, all the rest of the company being on the other side. At the end of every piece Liszt would come and place the notes on the instrument, sit down to it, and question this, that or the other, or suggest here and there an alteration.

It was pretty to see them together, and made me think of nothing so much as of a great, grave, shaggy lion, and an audacious but apprehensive little hare. The young composer went persistently through his whole programme, but after every piece would receive Liszt's criticisms with the most genial acquiescence in his own mistakes or failures. This made Liszt very gentle, and it was truly exquisite to hear him put his hands on some chord in a piece, and by one of his subtle modulations transform the whole phrase. He teaches just as some master of literature might discourse on poetry, and illustrates any point in hand by snatches from this composer and that throughout the whole range of music.

When Mr. Pratt was about two-thirds through his programme he had lights brought in, as the rain made it very dark, and also some wine. Then Mr. Gurickx had the brilliant thought to offer the "Master" a cigar, and in five minutes all the men in the room were smoking and happy. I confess that I was happier with them, and I admire the good sense of the German women in making friends with the tobacco smoke, for why should we *gêner* the other sex in so innocent an indulgence? Certainly it seemed very friendly to me that afternoon as I sat at the bass of the piano facing the performer, and that performer Liszt, cigar in mouth, talking in German or French, while his hands wandered over the keys, even though only in snatches. I saw, too, one tableau through the blue smoke-wreaths and the candles that I shall never forget. Liszt was seated at the piano pointing to the notes and talking, and Mr. Pratt was standing behind him listening most docilely. Liszt's long gray hair, large, time-beaten features and clerical dress were already in picturesque contrast to Mr. Pratt's short, black curls and rounded Italian contours; but just beyond the instrument stood in line at right angles to him, tranquilly smoking and looking on, three young men of such striking and differing beauty as to be almost a revelation. These were Pinner, Maas,

and De Schéniss. The latter is a young painter of great promise, who has a studio at Weimar, and who, being very fond of music, was often present at our musical gatherings. Pinner is small and slight, with very dark hair and eyes, a small head with regular, Persian features, and the most musical, sensitive face in the world. Next him stood Maas, taller, and German in type, with auburn hair, broad brow, calm, expressive and extremely large and luminous hazel eyes. Behind, taller still, perfect in height and shape, was De Schéniss,—an absolute blonde, with hair and moustache of a peculiar amber-gold, deep blue and living eyes, and the features and throat of a Greek statue; in short, such a specimen of humanity as, in these days of crossed breeds and mixed races, I had supposed impossible. This Narcissus, we heard, was the last lonely scion of an ancestry of ages, and with a change of name, what Henry James, Jr., said in his last novel of the Neapolitan prince, Casamassima, might have been written for him: "Nature had evidently been making De Schénisses 'for a great many centuries, and had learned to mix her materials to an extraordinary fineness, and to perform the whole operation with extreme 'smoothness.' Looking at the exquisite, thoroughbred creature, I could not help thinking that if unlike Narcissus, he could rise above his own beauty sufficiently to become a great, or even a fine artist, he will be a genius indeed."

When after about two hours Liszt finally took his leave with his train, my friend and I embraced each other, and almost embraced Mr. Pratt,—so delighted were we for his sake to feel that his own tact, and graceful position of learner merely toward the master had made the matinee we had so dreaded a charming occasion. Never was the maxim "Be bold, be bold, but not too bold," more applicable in regard to any undertaking than the somewhat hazardous one of making approaches to Liszt, and Mr. Pratt had hit the happy medium to perfection,—the more marvel to me, as I never thought of venturing so much as a word to the great man! Only once again did I see Liszt. It was at the last Sunday matinee of the season, as he was to leave Weimar on the following Saturday, and he closed the performance by playing from the MS. his Adagio or Gretchen movement, from his Faust Symphony. I was standing at the far end of the grand piano, the lid of which was raised, forming, with the rosewood bar that upheld it, such an effective and, at the same time, characteristic frame or setting for his head and face, that it seemed a pity he could not be painted in just that position. I had never heard the work, and so I listened intently in hopes to retain a memory of his manner of playing it. It was very long drawn out, and, as I was interested in "photographing him on the 'tablets of my mind,'" as the Bab Ballad has it, I don't think I surrendered myself very much to the influence of the music. But after I had got out of

the house, and was walking home with the principal phrase repeating itself in my head, I became conscious that a very tight hand indeed was round my heart, and that I should be very glad to loosen it by a fit of crying! A young artist who had found the piece too long laughed at me, and said that it was all my imagination. "You thought that it was Liszt who was playing, and, therefore, fancied yourself affected." But Pinner, who turned the leaves, told me afterward that he himself had never heard Liszt play anything that he had felt so much, and I think this quite possible. Pinner was familiar enough with the Adagio to take in the effect of every note of it, which I was not. He and Liszt were soon going to part, and it would have been just like that ruthless man to speak at this loving heart in the most tragic tones he could command. From time to time he would turn on Pinner a moving glance, or in a pathetic but almost imperceptible shake of his head convey unutterable things,—for Liszt's consummate art overlooks or despises not even the *finesse* of external effect; or as my friend better expressed it, "Liszt's playing has got to that point when it is purified from all earthly dross, and seems like an exhalation of the soul 'that mounts straight to heaven.'"

Liszt devotes himself now chiefly, I believe, to orchestral and religious compositions, as symphonies, oratorios and cantatas, and his religion is said to be a very earnest thing with him, as he has always felt more or less a "vocation" for the church. Those most in his society, however, fancy that he is not so whole-hearted a Catholic as his abbe's coat would seem to imply, and, indeed, it seems as though any one whose laugh is so Mephistophelean a chuckle as Liszt's must be a sceptic somewhere. The disappointment of his life is that his larger works do not find recognition. In Berlin and Leipzig for example, the musical centres of Germany, Liszt is seldom or never played, and he has been heard himself to say somewhat bitterly: "I helped 'Wagne', but who will help Liszt?" And yet Liszt's generosity has been so great, his musical magnanimity and appreciation so true and unselfish, that the performance of his works until they had had a fair hearing would seem to be but a small debt of gratitude to pay for that encouragement to all rising talent of which he has so largely been the centre. None but his is the musical breast to which all the young composers first fly to get their little drops of comfort and cheer before facing the cold world; but too often, when they arrive at the fame and influence to which his sympathy assisted them, they neglect or oppose him, as witness the great violinist Joachim of Berlin, who from being Liszt's protégé fifteen years ago is now his bitter enemy.

The estimates of Liszt, so far as I have observed, are mostly of two types,—the blindly enthusiastic, or the superciliously scoffing. To those he is all

gold; to these he is all glitter. To the student of comparative humanity, I think he would be neither, but rather that most tragic of spectacles,—a great nature which has not found, or been able to make for itself, an adequate career. It might be said him, as of a transcendent genius in another art, who, likewise, only half fulfilled his possibilities,—“Leonardo (da Vinci) loved admiration, and kept a retinue of flatterers about him. “He was not less self-willed than Michael Angelo, “but seemed to play with his talents and to seek for *“something which could entice him to exert his “powers.”*

The examples of these two celebrated men might well convey an impressive lesson to the young aspirant in every walk of art, for perhaps the very wealth of their gifts prevented that concentration of the energies which is the price of all sublime achievement. To each Nature offered the choice of being the artist, the interpreter, the cynosure of society, or of blessing mankind as a thinker, composer, creator. Both thought, against the known impossibility of serving more masters than one, that they could combine the two, and both succeeded perfectly but in the lesser aim, which yet could not satisfy their own ideal. Moreover, they both distrusted family ties, as tending to trammel their genius, only to prove, like many another, how inevitably, unless some high, unworldly or religious motive takes their place, man wastes himself outside of them. A thoughtful Frenchman has pointed out that no libertine was ever a sound patriot. I go further and say bluntly that license in love is only the outward expression and effect of secret scepticism toward God and profound cynicism toward humanity. To be fond of many, and therefore faithless to all, clouds the perceptions, confuses the judgment, and more or less unhinges the whole man, breaking up the clear sheen of the soul, which might otherwise reflect the universe, into a splintered mirror, whose parts, indeed, sparkle back to the sun, but which, as a whole, not only reveals nothing, but is incapable of doing so. If, in the end, Liszt's music does not obtain universal recognition it will be because, in spite of its masterly and splendid style, it has no connected message. It says nothing definite, and is but a succession of the phases, moods and senses of that distracted and restless “Ego,” which has never been at one with itself, simply because, in spite of his profound religious sense, he could not, as did his Master, crucify his magnificent nature with its affections and desires, and point away from his own glorious gifts, to the infinite glories of the Creator. Liszt is a phenomenal being, whose like will probably never appear again. He is not only *all* music; he has a keen and wide intellect, a poet's imagination, a large and royal heart, a powerful will, the swiftest perceptions, the most tremulous sympathies. If only his

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earnestness had been equal to all these, or if some single-hearted wife and her children could have imparted it to him as they have to so many of his sex, music might have known no greater name than his.

As for the young pianists themselves, with three or four exceptions, the general impression they made upon me was that of persons destitute of culture outside of their music, either of mind or heart. Their narrowness and incapacity to see each others' merits was simply absurd, and their complete intellectual nothingness lamentable. They all speak more than one language, but say nothing worth hearing in any. An amusing example of their mutual undervaluation was the opinion that Frauleins Gaul and Timanhof had of each others' style. Fraulein Gaul found that Timanhof had “no feeling, no soul” in her playing. In her the true musical culture was absent, and “some things “she half murders.” On the other hand we vainly tried to get from Timanhof an acknowledgment of Gaul's talent. “Fraulein Gaul is a beautiful “artiste,” said my friend. No response. “I find “her playing truly remarkable.” Silence. “It seems to me she is now one “of our most promising young pianists.” Still not a word. “Don't you *really* think “well of her playing?” At last, “Y-e-s, if you like “that Stuttgart school, which is so *mannered*. “You hear two or three pieces and you think it “beautiful, but after that everything sounds alike, “until you are perfectly sick of it.” Now, there was truth in both these young ladies' remarks about each other, but the pity of it was that they saw *only* what was to be criticised. The merits they were totally blind to, and I could give instances of still more flagrant mutual injustice among the men.

Now, what is the reason of this? It is, that the piano is so exacting an instrument, it takes such years to master it, that with the majority of these young people the whole of life had been sacrificed to it, and they knew nothing else—had nothing whatsoever of any other culture. In the plastic arts it is entirely different, for in learning any one of them it is hardly possible to help learning a great deal by side. I believe that a dozen young painters, gathered together in this hap-hazard way, would have shown almost infinitely more intelligence and mutual appreciation than did these young pianists. Nor is this all. The want of education in young musicians is deplorable enough in itself, but its result is something sadder still, for the conservatories of Europe turn out these finished pianists by the dozen every year. They are so very near in attainment to Rubinstein and Bülow that, hearing them, one wonders that the world is not full of Rubinsteins and Bülows. But how very few of them ever attain to eminence—are ever heard of after their first season or two; in other words, ever

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grow! People seem to fancy that music is a thing apart, and that it can project itself indefinitely forward along the line of its own progress without outside impulse. Nothing can be a greater mistake. Musical intelligence, like all other intelligence, is based on general intelligence, and the music in the musician's soul requires to be fed by all vigorous intellectual influences as much as any other art, or the divine flame must dwindle and expire.

In educating a musician, therefore, parents should take care, first of all to give the child as broad a mental training as possible. The pianist, as much as the physician, should have a foundation,—should know something of Latin, mathematics and the natural sciences, together with history and literature, and rather than deprive him or her of them, the musical debut should be postponed as long as the medical. No more than a young doctor or clergyman, should a young musician expect to support him or herself before twenty-three or twenty-four; but most of these young artists were not more than twenty-one, and they were all anxiously speculating about their "engagements." They were all dreaming of a "career"—of applauding audiences, full purses, and artistic prestige. But, judging from the immense majority of those who have preceded them, their career will consist of playing (amid inexpressible anxiety and sickening disappointment) a few times or a few seasons in concert, then taking as many pupils at high prices as they can get, with perhaps an organ on Sunday, and spending their days, after all their drudgery of learning, in the worse drudgery of teaching.

Sad contrast to their youthful aspirations! But even this humbler mission is a beneficent one, for it is they who will form the fine amateurs of society, and patiently coax the heaven-dwelling and reluctant Muse to descend into the home circle. And, after all, perhaps their disillusion will not be greater than those experience who, in any sense whatever, essay to "come before the public."

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