PRELUDES AND STUDIES.*

IN this volume of essays upon musical topics Mr. W. J. Henderson shows himself a Wagnerite, but not of the denunciatory and exclusive type. He is willing to reason with those who take their pleasure joyously in the royal purple and jewels of the score of Rossini's "Semiramide," the pearly notes, like the white berries of the sacred mistletoe, of "Norma," and the resistless passion of the songs of "Il Trovatore." We profess ourselves to be of the Italianissimi — as Mr. Henderson names the lovers of the operas of Bellini, Verdi, and Donizetti; we believe in music for music's sake, and thank the Creator who made the nightingale for the delight of Tuscan groves. But there is much to be said for the theories and the works of Wagner, and readers will find it well and candidly summed up by Mr. Henderson. He admits certain grave defects in the methods of Wagner, and notes them cleverly:

> Where Wagner has sinned against the nature of his art is in his attempts to make music express purely mental processes. There are several motiven, like that of the "Compact," whose meaning is entirely arbitrary. Wagner has ruled that a certain combination of tones shall indicate for his hearers the fact that Wotan is bound by his celestial nature to stick to a bargain. But music is not the language of bargains, and not even so great a genius as Wagner can make it so. You may learn the intended meaning of this *motif* and accept it according to the composer's intent, but whenever you hear it you will, if you have a fine feeling for music, regard it as a sort of musical Volapük, a manufactured language.

This is wholesome and independent criticism, and leads consistently to Mr. Henderson's opinion that the *leit-motif* is a good working theory for opera, provided it be not overworked. Such liberality is refreshing to the soul of one of the berated "Italianissimi" — although Mr. Henderson does express a doubt whether microscopic examination would discover a soul in such misbelievers!

Mr. Henderson declares the simple reason why Wagner's works take such a hold on the public mind, whenever they have had a fair hearing, is "because they are dramatic poems set to music." This is still more true of Verdi's "Aïda" and "Otello," which Mr. Henderson notes as other examples of the same cause for success; but how can he exclude from the category, as he does, "Lucia di Lammermoor" and "La Traviata," so powerfully dramatic in their original forms, the novel of Scott and the play and romance of Dumas? It is true that these libretti are conventional as poetry, but this defect may not inequitably offset the alliterative long-windedness of certain Wagnerian scenes. If one who would rank as "profane" at Bayreuth may express an opinion, the popularity of Wagner's operas appears based upon two reasons: first, like the novels of Tolstoï or the poems of Browning, they are one of the fads of these times, partly from their real genius, partly from the imposing eccentricity of their inspiration and form. The second reason is that Wagner's operas are anything rather than pure music. Since the "end of the century" mind is complex, tentative, analytic, distrustful of pleasure in its primal and simple expressions, that part of the Wagner audiences which is intelligent enough to have an interest in the works of the master, beyond the gregarious instinct of the flock of Fad, adores his operas precisely because in them music is a means, not an end. They are subjective dramas for orchestra, with explanatory comments by the actors; they are Schopenhauer's philosophy, with trombone obligato; they are a combination of the Norse Saga and the tank drama, and there is sometimes obvious a collaboration of the Nibelungen bard and Mr. Vincent Crummles.

The liking of the public for this composite art is not to be dispraised. It is founded upon large and healthful instincts, as public sentiments usually are. But let it not be mistaken for a plebiscite of a truly music-loving people! It is a psychological expression; it only proves that human and ethical studies, largely embodied in drama, with strong assertion of style and grandiose effects of scenery and of sound, are in accord with present phases of civilization and thought. Meanwhile, there remain the lovers of music for music's sake, who are content to take refuge in the Vallombrosa filled with the notes that charm without a syllogism.

Beside the "Ring des Nibelungen," "Parsifal," and "Tristan," Mr. Henderson studies carefully and intelligently the evolution of Piano Music and Schumann's relation to the development of the Programme Symphony. This is a suggestive, original, and well-equipped group of essays upon themes which interest musicians.

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