

Essays on Modern Music

OF the making of books of journalistic musical criticism there is no end. Each new year sees the publication of two such volumes, where the old year counted one. The literature about music bids fair to become almost as extensive as that about literature. The musical critics

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of *The Sun* and of *Harper's Weekly*, respectively, now come forward to swell the harvest, each with a sheaf of papers dealing with the music of to-day. Writing of similar, sometimes the same, themes, their treatment of them is yet vastly dissimilar.

The reader rises from a perusal of Mr. Henderson's book* with the impression that in his opinion the "drift" of modern music is to the "demnition bow wows." This is really too bad. We cannot believe that the noble art is "drifting" that way, at all. For him "*Parsifal*" is "the child of Wagner's artistic decrepitude," "a decrescendo in inspiration, a ritardando in invention," "a most imposing pageant set to unimposing music" mere futile, uninspired copying of greater things the composer had done before. For him even the Wagner of the "*Nibelungen Ring*" did not know the true significance of his own work. For him in the Italian opera of recent years

Nothing's new, and nothing's true,

And nothing signifies;

and the oratorio of to-day, as exemplified by Elgar, is an absurdity.

Concerning Richard Strauss, the most commanding figure among contemporary musicians, to whom he devotes seventy pages, Mr. Henderson cannot quite make up his mind. He would call Strauss a madman, "a symphonic poetaster," "a noisome, nasty, rollicking Till Eulenspiegel, Gargantua of Germany, with the whirligig scale of a yellow clarinet in his brain and the beer-house rhythm of a pint pot in his heart," and so have done, were it not that he feared the future would laugh him and his criticism to scorn—as it undoubtedly will, if his ghost remains.

It may be seen that Mr. Henderson wields a trenchant pen, and dashes off vivid, picturesque, venturesome phrases and figures. He is witty. Sometimes he is flippant. In the exuberance of his gayety he bursts into song in dedicating his book to his colleague, James Huneker, upon whose pungent and coruscating style it often appears he has modeled his own—not always to the best advantage it seems to us.

The book is more significant as a plea

for the likes and dislikes of Mr. Henderson than as a serious and permanent contribution to the history of the development of music. But it will be found intensely interesting—by the people who are interested in that sort of thing and the impressionistic school of criticism seems to be in high favor just now.

On the whole, we are much better pleased with Mr. Gilman,* who gives us a dozen short papers on Richard Strauss, Edward MacDowell, Edward Elgar, Charles Martin Loeffler, Pietro Mascagni, Peter Cornelius, Edvard Grieg; on "*Women and Modern Music*," on "*The Question of Realism*," on Verdi and Wagner, and on "*'Parsifal' and its Significance*," and in them makes a sincere and notable attempt at a constructive criticism of certain of the more interesting phases of latter-day music. He has wider sympathies than his fellow critic and deeper insight. If he does not deliver the sledge-hammer blows delighted in by Mr. Henderson (note you, constructive analysis is not to be accomplished by the pounding required for the destructive variety: you do not smash your marbles when you are preparing to build a palace with them), he yet writes vividly and well. He shows a tendency to rather too frequent quotation from other critics (yet they are usually excellent things that he borrows: his taste is good), and surely there was no real need for the inflection upon his readers of such a verbal monstrosity as "*Romanticistic*." But these are venial sins.

It is not so much that we agree with the judgments uttered by Mr. Gilman, fair and sound and good as most of those judgments are, as it is that the tone of his work is reassuring. While he appraises the achievement of his music-makers with keen discrimination, he has approached his task with that respect for it and for its subject which engenders respect in the reader. Your flippant critic by the very irreverence and irrelevancy of his pertness vitiates his own competence and authority.

Mr. Gilman is not so witty as Mr. Henderson. He is not so rhapsodical as Mr. Huneker, tho his praise is often lavish enough, in all conscience. But he is

* MODERN MUSICAL DRIFT. By W. J. Henderson. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. \$1.20.

* PHASES OF MODERN MUSIC. By Lawrence Gilman. New York: Harper & Bros. \$1.25 net.

never dull. His book is more than interesting. At times it is illuminating. And it leads to the expectation of greater things from him in the future.

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