MUSIC

"Music as a Language."*

THE fact that the magnitude of the task which he allotted to himself in his little book did not appall Mr. Goodrich at the inception of the first chapter and then forever deter him from its prosecution is in itself sufficient proof, if any besides the book itself were needed, of his entire unfitness for it. The subject—if, indeed it b a subject—is one that is calculated to call forth at once the most profound knowledge of the musician and the most subtle power of the metaphysician ; it requires not only a thorough acquaintance with modern and contemporary music and its resources, but much and accurate historical information as well. In all of this Mr. Goodrich appears to be singularly deficient, and as a consequence he presents to the public a study which is, on the whole, about as shallow and superficial as it could be. The object of the book, as stated in the preface, is, firstly, "to demonstrate that musical sounds can be so arranged or combined as to possess the power and capacity of an appreciable language ;" and, secondly, "to point out the causes which produce certain effects, and to so arrange and explain the examples that the entire matter may be reduced to a practical, as well as theoretical, basis." And in order to accomplish this purpose Mr. Goodrich begins by saying, "I will call the reader's attention principally to fragments of vocal compositions, for the obvious reason that the words of a song tell us with exactness and certitude what meaning is, or ought to be, in the sounds which are wedded to the words," etc.—conceding that "with instrumental music . . . the meaning is less apparent and more ambiguous; and in the next sentence he adds: "music receives an additional interest from being deeper and more mysterious than words."—"music begins where speech ends," with more to the same purport.

The effort to rob music of its mystery—which to the musician must always remain one of its highest qualities—and enchain it within the limits of a set of paltry formulas as a regulated and precise form of language, is not a new one. It is as old, in fact, as the era of ultra-susceptible amateurs or mistaken composers of pure programme music. From the time of the Flemish composers of the fifteenth century, with their various essays at accurate musical portraiture in purely vocal compositions, down to our own progressive day of Liszt and Berlioz and Saint Saens, there have not been wanting those who, not content with their art within its proper and clearly recognizable limits, have with strenuous endeavor aimed to make of it something more (or less), than music. To them and their followers—prominent among them the little theorizers—music was hardly music unless it was at the same time painting, sculpture, poetry, architecture and metaphysics. The range of these compositions, as well as of the attempts at theories by which they were accompanied, is remarkable at once for its great extent and for the fact that it embraces nothing but failures. From Lemlin, Scandelli, Jannequin, di Milano, down through the English composers who took the fashion from the Continent, and even including the sturdier Bach and Vogler, none of these things have lived, nor have the controversies that accompanied them resulted in the formulating of a single theory that has been of any value in practice. We know to-day, as those who have heard music rightly have always known, that it is a language to those who can understand it ; but also that it is a language which no two understand alike. Each one carries the key to it within himself, and it is only from within that music is rightly heard. Those who depend upon guide-posts such as Mr. Goodrich and his fellow-theorizers would set up for their safe conduct will never succeed in reaching their journey's end. Nor is there any reason why they should. They travel in the wrong direction, and are likely to be quite as well content. It seems a pity, however, if such a book as this was to be written, that there should not have been brought to bear on it somewhat more of knowledge and of accurate treatment. Setting aside such remarkable statements as "psychology is, to a great extent, incomprehensible, or inexpressible," on which the philosophical value of the work rests as a basis, we find the musical side of the question treated in an almost puerile manner. There are a few quotations from Schumann, Schubert, Beethoven, Handel, etc. (these all from vocal compositions, where the fitness of music to words is sought to be illustrated by the translated text, which frequently has a very different meaning from the original), and also a few from American composers. Liszt, Berlioz, Wagner, Meyerbeer, in fact, the very composers who would have supplied the material which Mr. Goodrich vainly seeks in Fesca, Kücken, Ketterer, Burgmüller, and others of that kidney, are entirely overlooked or only vaguely alluded to. Such trifles as a reference to "the blare of the trombone" in the pastoral symphony or Mendelssohn's "Spinning Song" (Heller's title ; Mendelssohn said that if it meant anything he would call it "The Bees' Wedding"), or calling Saint Saens' "Rouet d'Omphale" Omphale's Spinning Song, would probably not seem of great importance to one who suggests the study of compositions of Egghard, Lichner, and other trashy writers in support of his theories. Mr. Goodrich only knows—and it is of no value whatever to the rest of the world—that certain combinations of sounds affect him in certain ways. For instance, Schumann's "Warum" is to him a question. But is he at all sure that if the title had been "Longing" or "Yearning" the theme would have still suggested an unanswered question ? How is it in Robert Franz's song, "Hither he Hurried," where the same theme is used almost note for note ? Will Mr. Goodrich undertake to say that there is one song in a thousand to which a new and entirely different set of words might not be given and leave the song quite as expressive as in its original form ? Handel did this to the very song quoted in Mr. Goodrich's book (from Rinaldo), yet it is cited for its appropriateness. Once, indeed, Mr. Goodrich is betrayed into being quite in the right, and that is where (page 104) he admits that "the general character of these pieces is expressive of the title, and this much is, as a rule, all we may definitely know as to the meaning of the sounds.

* Music as a Language, or the Meaning of Musical Sounds. By A. J. Goodrich. New York : G. Schirmer.