

DR. RITTER'S "MUSIC IN AMERICA."*

THE new edition of Dr. F. L. Ritter's book (not yet at all an old work in the first one) confirms us in our opinion of the merits of the record here set forth. Previous to its appearance no satisfactory review of the growth and rise of musical taste and its practical activity in the United States was available; and its supplementary value to Grove's Dictionary, which could have advantageously utilized some of Dr. Ritter's material, is emphatic. As history, Dr. Ritter has put together a volume in which is condensed much, and his telling of the story is marked by few significant inaccuracies. He writes clearly; with the literary art necessary for his purposes, and he condenses a good deal of pertinent matter into a small compass. As to criticism, we seldom find any pressing occasion to dissent from the author; and very frequently his judgment admirably asserts itself that of the thoughtful student and the catholic taste. We can quite appreciate the difficulty of collecting or digesting the imperfect but valuable and necessary materials scattered through especially the New England Public Libraries. Such a history and their collation is often Desdemona's picking bad from bad. The range of the book extends from the dawn of musical culture, the scarcely tolerated Puritan singing-schools for psalmody and the Bay Psalm Book, or its fellows, through the progress of drawing room music in the Colonies, the concerts and conventions in this or that section of the country, the beginnings of orchestral music and of opera, the birth and progress of the great vocal or instrumental societies of the East, at Boston and New York; and it concludes with these busy modern days, in which both cities are, particularly New York, among the most active and notable musical centers in the world. From William Billings's singing-classes and conventions in 1770 odd, to the performances of Wagnerian music-dramas at the Metropolitan Opera House, is not a far cry, as time runs in the development of a national taste. What has been accomplished in America since those not at all remote beginnings must astonish any one living in New York or Boston to-day. Dr. Ritter devotes considerable space to the careful record of the outset and growth of the Philharmonic Society of New York. He adjusts, in the process, several often misrepresented statements. For this bit of history alone his book is of interest and worth; altho there seems to be noticeable in the consideration of the Philharmonic's career the edge of a bit of antagonism to its present leader, or at least of undervaluation of Mr. Thomas's musical work in America. Personal differences, however, are very seldom traceable in Dr. Ritter's pages; and in a musical record of the sort they are commonly to be looked upon as inevitable. The account of the Boston Handel and Haydn Society is extended; and in the instance of another Boston musical organization of the past, the once-famous Germania Orchestra, a valuable notice of a musical influence is to be found. The advance of interest in Wagnerian music in the United States is carefully kept in view by Dr. Ritter throughout his book; and its culmination—if such a word is allowable—in the establishment of grand opera in German at the Metropolitan Opera House in this city, and the enormous popularity and intelligent enthusiasm for Wagner's music-dramas, is appreciatively set forth. As to one aspect of the matter that is a concern to others than himself, Dr. Ritter justly delivers a warning—the gradual development of a star system with German artists and opera in German at the Metropolitan, which, in the case of several valuable artists employed there, is assuming ominous phases.

In the concluding pages of his History Dr. Ritter enters very briefly and not as satisfactorily as might be into the new "school" of American music-writers, either still studying and writing abroad or returned to their own country and carrying on their work here, even if in a corner. It is plain he considers it not yet ripe for discussion, and that it is still too overshadowed by the foreigner in music, deservedly and undeservedly, to express itself satisfactorily. The sky is a good deal clearer and one can see further into the American musical future than a few years ago. We do not find Dr. Ritter is disposed to do the watchman's service. In the main, however, we must admit, as must every discerning student of the progress of music here, that the stage of our dependence for works and for

performers thereof upon foreign composers and artists is not very significantly passed as yet, even in this year of grace 1890. We are not likely to stand alone either as music-writers or singers or players for a longer time than the sanguine ones would have us expect—possibly not until as many decades be past as lie between us and Mr. Billings. We are not certainly to-day in a position to dispute the amusing definition of the United States by a Leipzig critic some fifty years ago, which Dr. Ritter quotes on the last page of his book; and it was made as a prediction: . . . "People sing, people play, and consider both as belonging to culture. In a few years hence this will offer a rich harvest to European artists." Undoubtedly just this is our national predicament and it must be such for a goodly time in the highest field of music-making; and, agreeable as the situation may be, it is a predicament.

*MUSIC IN AMERICA. By DR. F. L. RITTER. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons.