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THE MUSICAL TIMES AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

DECEMBER 1, 1879.

WANTED—A COMPOSER FOR THE ORGAN.

By H. H. STATHAM.

THERE is no intention to imply, by the above heading, that there are not many contemporary writers for the grandest of instruments whose productions are well worth the serious study of the player and the serious attention of the listener. One of the most gifted among our native writers for the organ we have unhappily recently lost, one who never wrote carelessly or indifferently, and never forgot the high character of the instrument or descended to sensational or popular composition for its key-board. But it would not be difficult to name a good many living musicians, English, French, and German, who have supplied and will, it is to be hoped, continue to supply the organ-player with much food that is convenient for him and his hearers, in a considerable variety of styles or manners all calculated to bring out and illustrate qualities special to the organ as distinguished from other instruments. As to a different class of writers who turn out, *currente calamo*, showy and flimsy marches, offertories, and other pieces calculated to produce much noisy effect with little real effort on the part of either composer or performer, and in which the true character of the instrument is entirely ignored for a style of handling which may be called prancing on it rather than playing on it, these need not be taken into account here at all. The organ is above all others the instrument for intellectual music, and productions into which no intellect goes are beside its mark altogether.

But admitting all the value and interest of a good deal that is written for the organ at present, it remains a fact, and a vexatious one for lovers of the instrument, that none of the few composers of the highest class, and who have the widest aims, seem disposed to pay any attention to the organ. There have been, in fact, only two classical composers for the instrument—Bach and (after a long interval) Mendelssohn. Handel may be named, perhaps, in virtue of his concertos, but he can only be named doubtfully. The organs on which he played, and for which he composed his few extant concertos, were so limited in their size and scope—wanting above all the great glory and power of the organ, the pedal-board—that it was impossible that he could realise or work out the special capabilities of the instrument. As rearranged for a large organ by the greatest of modern organ-players, two or three of these concertos can always be depended upon to “tell” with a general audience; and they are in this way very valuable to a player as furnishing music of a robust masculine type, such as no musician need be ashamed of caring for, and at the same time sufficiently simple and straightforward to appeal to the sympathies of a less cultured audience. It may be said that this praise, which may be applied in the same terms to a great deal of Handel’s choral writing, is in reality almost the highest that could be given to a composer: and so it is in one sense. But while Handel’s choral works not only represent the perfection of style in vocal writing, but rise at their best to the very loftiest musical feeling, his organ works never do rise to this point, and (which is more to the present purpose) they hardly ever represent the special powers of the instrument. With the exception of such short slow movements as that which opens the Fifth Concerto, there are hardly any movements among the organ concertos which may not be played with equal, some-

times with better, effect on the pianoforte; and, moreover, the “solos” introduced, and originally intended as display passages for the player, are mostly so hackneyed in form and resemble each other so much in manner, that a listener entering in the middle of one of these passages would find it difficult to say at the moment which out of two or three of the concertos was being played. What Handel may have made of these works when he played them himself, filling in the bare outlines and introducing, very likely, contrapuntal design extemporised at the moment, we can hardly judge; but, as they stand, these concertos can only in a modified sense claim to be regarded as classical organ music.

Of Bach it is unnecessary to say anything, of course: he is the acknowledged king of the organ. One observation may be made in regard to a point which amateur lovers of Bach, at least, hardly seem to recognise; that is, the decided way in which his organ preludes and fugues, as contrasted with those for the harpsichord or clavier, are put together in such a manner as to suit the special power of definition of the instrument. This is indeed obvious enough in the preludes, which are mostly of a style and design quite distinct from those written for the clavier. But a strict fugue is a strict fugue, for whatever instrument it be written; and accordingly some people have rashly supposed that the organ and harpsichord or clavier fugues of Bach may be interchanged from one instrument to another without loss of effect. But except in a very few instances this is an illusion. The organ fugues do not tell as duets on the piano, and the fugues from “The Forty-eight” do not as a rule tell on the organ: they are arranged so that the entry of the inner subjects can be brought out by means of finger pressure, while in the fugues for the organ, on which finger pressure has no effect in modifying tone, the subject is made to stand out by the mode of disposing the parts in extended harmony, which it would be impossible to play without the assistance of the pedal. The distinction is one difficult to define exactly or to illustrate by special passages, but it must make itself felt to all who endeavour to play the organ and the clavier fugues respectively in such a manner as to mark the entries of the subject clearly; and it is obvious that Bach, a great executant as well as a great player, felt instinctively the difference between the capabilities of the two instruments, and wrote accordingly, even in the strictest fugal composition.

After Bach, as before remarked, Mendelssohn is the one great name in organ composition. Mozart appears, judging from his recorded remarks, to have thoroughly understood the genius of the instrument, and to have extemporised on it in the pure organ style, to the equal delight of himself and of listeners who remembered Bach; but he wrote nothing specially for it. His two noble fantasias composed for a mechanical organ make splendid organ pieces as rearranged by Mr. Best, but they are not entirely in the organ style, and are in every respect exceptional among his works. Beethoven professed great enjoyment in playing the organ in his younger days, but wrote nothing for it. Schumann is the only other composer of great name who has touched organ-music, and his six fugues on the name of Bach are in the most serious and elevated style, and contain much to interest the player and hearer, but they impress one as laboured and only partially successful; and his little pieces called “Lieder ohne Worte for the Organ” have nothing organic about them, and might as well have been written for the piano. But Mendelssohn’s organ works stand on quite different ground. They form the only modern examples of organ composition, by a composer of the first class, at once

entirely suited to the instrument and representing the best capabilities of the composer. In this respect they have been very much underrated. Among the enthusiastic admirers whom Mendelssohn has had in this country, many (so separate an interest is organ-music in general society) hardly know anything of them; and by others we have heard them rated as among his weakest productions. To our thinking the very reverse is the case. Mendelssohn, who in a general way (as most people understand now) was a decided mannerist, and rather a sentimentalist among composers, is in his six organ sonatas less mannered and less sentimental than in most, if not any, of his other classes of work. They stand much higher as organ-music than his pianoforte-music does as pianoforte-music, and they are each completely distinct and individual in design and feeling, almost as much so as if they were the work of so many different hands: and of what other collection of compositions by Mendelssohn can this be said? The same may be said of his only other organ work, the three preludes and fugues. In the sonatas the fugues that are introduced are the weakest parts (except perhaps that in the Second Sonata, which has very fine points); fugue was not Mendelssohn's *forte* as a rule, and there is in his organ fugues occasionally a confusion as to the conduct of the part-writing, and even as to the method of writing it down, which is felt by the player perhaps more than by the listener. But, apart from this, these sonatas are noble examples of the application of new treatment to the organ—perfectly new at the time—which is entirely in accordance with the genius and the mechanism of the instrument. The step made in the First Sonata beyond all that had previously been written can hardly be overrated in its importance in regard to the modern development of the instrument; the recitative movement which precedes the finale opened quite a new set of resources in the expressive power of the organ, while the finale showed how effects previously regarded as special to the pianoforte could be translated into the language and adapted to the mechanism of the organ.* Each of the sonatas embodies some other suggestion for the treatment of the instrument, originated by the composer, in every case effective and successful, and most of which have since received the compliment of repeated imitation by composers of inferior calibre.

Now it is especially in regard to this suggestiveness and individuality of style in Mendelssohn's organ compositions that we are struck with the contrast when we consider the best of the organ-music which has been written since. Almost all the organ-music we have had since Mendelssohn (and, with his exception, since Bach) is that of composers who are specially organists, who play the instrument and write for it mainly. And players who write for their instrument almost always fall into a mannerism of style, and rarely achieve the highest that the art, or even the instrument, is capable of. If Beethoven, the greatest writer incomparably for the pianoforte, had confined himself to playing and composing for that instrument, there is every reason to suppose that, so far from his pianoforte works having been any finer or more perfect than they are, they would have been less so. The greatest compositions for any given instrument are produced by a composer of the highest calibre, whose genius demands many outlets, and can assimilate itself to the genius of each

* This fine movement is sometimes criticised as unsuitable to the organ, simply on account of its being played faster than the composer intended. As an organ-player himself, Mendelssohn was quite alive to the capabilities and limitations of speech of the organ, and there is nothing in either this movement or the Allegro of the Fifth Sonata which is at variance with the quality of the organ, if the composer's metronomed time is adhered to.

instrument he selects as the medium for expressing his ideas. It is only genius of the second or third order which is content to write merely for one instrument (Chopin being a rare, perhaps the only, exception). And the misfortune is that most of our modern organ-music is furnished simply by organ composers who never get to the heights of musical expression, and many of whom are hopelessly uninteresting. It would hardly be possible to find a more dead-level of mediocrity than in the voluminous pages of Rink's "Organ School," and the ponderous dulness of Hesse is only relieved by one or two pieces possessed of some brightness and character. We have had much better works produced by other writers for the organ since; but somehow the interest of their writing seems to concentrate in one or two successful and effective pieces which exhaust their capabilities. We get a sonata perhaps with the name of Van Eyken, or Ritter, or Merkel, which is so effective that we look out for other works by the same composer, only to find that they are echoes, as one may say, of the one successful work which has given the composer his name. Herr Merkel is a little more "all round" in this way than some others of his brethren, but it must be confessed that he draws upon Mendelssohn and Beethoven, unintentionally perhaps, but very obviously, to an extent which very much weakens his claim to originality. Herr Rheinberger's works present more variety and individuality than those of most of his contemporaries, and it is worth remark that he is one of the few modern organ composers whose works in other branches of composition have attained a recognised and deserved repute. This is the case too with our own late composer, Henry Smart; but even in his case the most friendly critic (and none could be more so than the present writer) must be conscious that there is a remarkable similarity in the style and even the phrases of a good many of his organ movements. Dr. Wesley, an organ-player of real genius, expended his strength, as far as the organ is concerned, mainly in extemporising, and his few published compositions serve rather to indicate what he might have done if he had given his mind more systematically to such composition, than to furnish any large or important addition to the organist's library. We are indebted to Mr. Silas for compositions few but admirable, and possessing more variety, colour, and piquancy of style than are found in the works of some organ composers more popularly known and reputed. Of the numbers of writers who have brought out "Three Andantes for the Organ" (and who has not?), all that can be said is that they have increased the stock of "in-voluntaries" (for "middle voluntaries" seem to have gone out), to be forgotten as soon as they have served that purpose.

But of the best and most respected of the contemporary writers, some of whom have been named above, it cannot surely be said that any one has contributed works to the organist's library which can be regarded as among the great classics of music. They themselves would be the very first to disclaim the idea. They have done what they could, and done it well, and we owe them the more thanks for their efforts to contribute to a branch of the art unaccountably neglected by the highest rank of composers. But what we want is to see the organ receive due attention at the hands of the foremost composers of the day. We have had a new violin concerto by Brahms, and a great excitement its production caused; but why cannot a composer of his calibre, so lofty in his style, so serious in his aims, turn some of his genius towards the organ, and give us a new sonata or set of sonatas which might form another epoch in the treatment of the instrument, and be as much

a matter of general interest as a new violin concerto? Why can we not have something of the kind from Gounod, whose genius certainly has an affinity with the instrument, and who ought to be able to give us something which would take as high a position in organ music as his "Messe Solennelle" occupies in Catholic church music? It would be matter of great interest, too, to hear what Wagner would do with a work for a great modern organ; something new and unprecedented ought to come out of that, unquestionably. The contribution of important works for the organ by such composers would not only be a matter of the highest interest to the organ-player, but it would do something to bring the great instrument out of its comparative neglect by the modern musical world, and place it on a level in general estimation with the pianoforte. At present there are numbers of amateurs, well acquainted with other modern instruments and the music written for them, to whom organ-music is a *terra incognita*, and who have the most shadowy notions as to the instrument and its capabilities. And when the great composers entirely neglect it, we can hardly blame the general public for knowing no better.

THE GREAT COMPOSERS, SKETCHED BY THEMSELVES.

BY JOSEPH BENNETT.

No. VI.—MENDELSSOHN (*continued from page 577*).

DWELLING a little while longer upon the Düsseldorf letters, we find in one of them, addressed by Mendelssohn to his sister Fanny, a remarkable opinion upon an abstruse question of art. Frau Hensel, it appears, had heard the violinist Lafont, and, addressing her brother, had spoken of the "revolution in violin-playing" since Paganini. Against this idea of revolution Felix protested with all his might, saying, "I don't admit that any such thing exists in art, but only in people themselves; and I think that very same style would have displeased you in Lafont if you had heard him *before* Paganini's appearance; so you must not, on the other hand, do less justice to his good qualities after hearing the other. I was lately shown a couple of new French musical papers, where they allude incessantly to a *révolution du goût* and a musical transition which has been taking place for some years past, in which I am supposed to play a fine part; this is the sort of thing I do detest." Mendelssohn's sisters—Rebecca joining in the argument—appear to have combated his notion of subjective as opposed to objective change, and hence the master quickly returned to the charge in a letter which deserves very careful consideration. He said, addressing Rebecca: "I . . . must absolutely resume the question of *révolution*; though this is chiefly meant for Fanny; but are you not identical? . . . And have I not pondered and brooded much over this theme since I got your letter, which now prompts me to write? You must, however, answer me in due form, till not one jot or tittle remains to be said about *révolution*. Observe, I think there is a vast distinction between reformation or reforming and revolution, &c. Reformation is that which I desire to see in all things, in life and in art, in politics and in street pavement; and Heaven knows in what else beside. Reformation is entirely negative against abuses, and only removes what obstructs the path; but a revolution, by means of which all that was formerly good (and really good) is no longer so, is to me, now as ever, the most intolerable of all things, and in fact only a fashion. Therefore I would not for a moment listen to Fanny when she said that Lafont's playing could inspire no further interest since the *révolution* effected

by Paganini; for, if his playing ever had the power to interest me, it would still do so, even if in the meantime I had heard the angel Gabriel on the violin. It is just this, however, that those Frenchmen I alluded to can form no opinion of—that what is good, however old, remains always new, even though the present must differ from the past, because it emanates from other and dissimilar men. *Inwardly* they are only ordinary men like their predecessors, and have only *outwardly* learned that something new must come, so they strive to accomplish this, and if one of them is moderately applauded, or once in print, he instantly declares that this is a *révolution du goût*. This is why I behave so badly when they do me the honour (as you call it) to rank me among the leaders of this movement, when I well know that, for thorough self-cultivation, the whole of a man's life is required (and often does not suffice); and also because no Frenchman and no newspaper knows, or ever can know, what the future is to bring; and, in order to guide the movements of others, we must first be in motion ourselves, while such reflections cause us to look back on the past, not forward. Progress is made by work alone, and not by talking, which those people do not believe." This is a long quotation, but its importance is equal to its length, since it shows us very clearly what was Mendelssohn's opinion upon a question even more prominent now than in his day. The master believed that whatever is good in music at its creation remains good for ever: that its excellence is inherent and unchangeable, and cannot be affected by subsequent events. It may go out of fashion and be laid up in store as a curious exemplification of ancestral weakness, but this is a change in public taste, not in the thing itself. Hence, strictly speaking, there can be no revolution in art, but only in the minds of those who regard it. Mendelssohn held this so strongly that he could not alter—a fact set forth with singular vividness in his assertion that whatever he once thought good in old-fashioned Lafont he would continue to think good, though the angel Gabriel set a different style. We cannot all be Mendelssohns, but in proportion as right views obtain about art will the public mind approximate towards Mendelssohn's belief in this matter. At present music is to a large extent the sport of fashion. A man here or a man there starts up with a novelty, and the heedless crowd turn their backs upon their former idols to go and worship at the new shrine. Meanwhile, truly enlightened amateurs have the satisfaction of knowing that the good though unfashionable things remain as good as ever; and that, if revolutions must go on, the turn of that which is now despised will sooner or later come again.

At this time, and, no doubt, at all times since his last reference to the subject, Mendelssohn was anxiously desirous of writing an opera. But his strong perception of what a lyric drama should be, and absolute inability to discover a fitting poet, continued to stand in the way. Thus he wrote to Spohr in the letter from which a quotation has already been made regarding "St. Paul": "How gladly would I write an opera; but far and near I can find no libretto and no poet. Those who have the genius of poetry cannot bear music, or know nothing of the theatre; others are neither acquainted with poetry nor with mankind, only with the boards and lamps and side scenes and canvas. So I never succeed in finding the opera which I have so eagerly yet vainly striven to procure. Every day I regret this more, but I hope at last to meet with the man I wish for this purpose." By-and-by he thought to have found the much-desired man in Mr. Planché, who had written "Oberon" for Weber. But of this anon. The remainder of the