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THE MODERN REVOLT IN MUSIC.

BY REGINALD DE KOVEN.

DURING the past few years, the works of a group of ultra-modern composers, foremost among whom is Richard Strauss, have attracted an attention, and compelled a consideration, which, in view of their inherent characteristics, and revolutionary tendencies, are in the highest degree significant. Throwing musical tradition and convention over the moon, and all previously accepted theory and practice of the art to the four winds, these composers, by works so far, perhaps, more remarkable for manner than matter, have succeeded in arousing among their admirers a spirit of extravagant enthusiasm, a rabidly zealous partisanship, which bids fair to become a Cult, and recalls the early days of frenetic Wagnerism.

It is not the intention here to discuss Richard Strauss—the Max Regers and Debussys are not yet individually to be reckoned with—as a melodist or a harmonist; to extol his marvellous orchestration, or decry his little less marvellous cacophony; to assign him a present place as a composer among the great ones of the earth, or to predict his particular niche in some future Temple of Fame. Critics, alive to-day, who characterized as “*Katzen Musik*,” and cacophonic, passages in Wagner which now appear almost obvious in their simplicity, stand as a warning to the dangers and pitfalls of premature critical judgment; while, in view of recent developments, the term “cacophony” is one to be handled with extreme caution and reserve. The endeavor here will be, therefore, rather to point out and discuss the real significance of the theories of Richard Strauss as set forth in his works, and their bearing and far-reaching effect on the theory and practice of modern music, if carried out and developed to their logical conclusion.

Having climbed the ladder of harmonic development, with Wagner up to Strauss, we can but admit that the terms "concord" and "discord" are purely relative, and as far removed from absolute as are the cognate ones of "right" and "wrong." We have shuddered in times past at so-called Wagnerian discords which now charm us as mellifluous; and, while it can hardly be denied that Strauss's harmonic vagaries may now sound abnormal, even repellent, to many, it may well be that future musicians will regard these, to us, extraordinary manifestations as simple, and even elementary, if and when his apparent theories reach their logical and seemingly inevitable development. We must attribute to Richard Strauss both sincerity and purpose. His daring challenges criticism; his mastery of expression commands thoughtful consideration of what he has to say. To admit anything fortuitous about the new musical Gospel he has begun to preach, would be to write him down the colossal musical fakir he certainly is not. His work is there to speak for itself. Vivid, virile, vital, it is pregnant with that forceful creative energy which makes for progress and development, which leads great movements; and to-day it waves the red flag of revolution and revolt over the musical world.

An art would seem to differ from a science in its greater empiricism, its greater susceptibility to radical and organic change within its own boundaries, and in that elasticity of possible development which ensures the vitality on which its very existence depends. It is true to a certain extent that each art carries in itself the limitations which define it; but this is less true of music, the one purely creative art, whose inspiration, being purely subjective and from within, is not tied down by external limitations, and is therefore free to find ever new forms and methods of expression. But in art there is no standing still; when once a boundary-line is reached, beyond which future progress and development under existing conditions seem impossible, one of two things must happen: either a way to change or modify existing conditions must be found, or the art becomes moribund, and ceases to exist.

That such a boundary-line had long ago been reached in music, was the opinion of Sir Frederick Gore-Ouseley, an eminent English theorist, late professor of music at Oxford, who, many years back, declared music to be a dead art. In his evident attempt to change and modify existing conditions, it may well be that Strauss is actuated by a similar idea and theory. To understand the

forces against which Strauss has chosen to array himself, and to appreciate the bearing and possible results of his vigorous effort to change existing conditions which seem, in his opinion, to limit the development of his art, one must, at this point, take up and explain certain technical aspects of the theory and practice of music, which control and govern the situation to an extent which makes even an attempt to call them in question appear subversive, heterodox and iconoclastic—almost, indeed, sacrilegious.

What the foot or yard measure is to the surveyor, the octave is to the musician, the basis and standard of tonal measurement the musical world over; and even in those countries whose musical system differs from our own. According to the tonal relations established by the so-called "equal temperament," a system of tuning invented by Bach, who thereby practically invented modern music, the octave is arbitrarily divided into twelve semitones, each represented by a note on the piano. These twelve semitones, repeated in varying pitch, higher or lower, form our chromatic scale of about seven octaves from the high B of the piccolo, to the low D of the contrafagotto, giving an aggregate of some eighty tonal units which the composer has at his command to express his thoughts. Now, mathematically the possible combinations of these units are absolutely limited; while the laws of harmony, key, tonal relation and sequence, the varying compass of the human voice and of the different orchestral instruments, not to speak of the endless restrictions of convention and tradition, impose still further limitations. Bound by these various limitations, and so believing that a boundary-line of development had been reached, Sir Frederick Gore-Ouseley, a scholiast himself and deeply imbued with the spirit of the schoolmen, declared music to be a dead art, because all the possible combinations of these tonal units had been exhausted, and an entirely new and original musical thought was therefore an impossibility.

And then came Wagner!

In the Middle Ages, knowledge of any kind was a precious possession, a secret almost, jealously kept and guarded and rendered as difficult of approach to the neophyte as possible, and so, in the spirit of the age, the early musicians, with apparent purpose and seeming delight, bound down their art with chains and fetters of often arbitrary formalism which it has taken two centuries of constant progress and development to unloose. But, while ring-

ing the death knell of music, Sir Frederick Gore-Ouseley lost sight of the fact that merely arbitrary limitations, which like the laws of the Medes and Persians alter not, could have no lasting place in art; that, had the self-imposed restrictions of Palestrina and his compeers been allowed to stand without protest, there would have been no John Sebastian Bach; if no Bach, then no Beethoven; and, without Beethoven, no Wagner. The advent of each of these musical epoch-makers was marked by a removal of some of the pre-existent limitations, by a change in existing conditions; and, lo! the boundary mark was moved on, a wider range and freer scope were obtained, and once more the art progressed. And so by degrees, and little by little, the chains of tradition were loosened, the fetters of convention and arbitrary theory broken; this limitation disappeared, that restriction ceased to bind; and, failing any generally recognized law as to what constitutes beauty in music from a purely æsthetic standpoint, the theory of "*Wohlklang*," or whatever sounds well, is right, became of almost universal acceptance among musicians.

But this doctrine of *Wohlklang*, once accepted, carries with it a further corollary, namely: Whatever sounds *at all* is right, when one is accustomed to it.

And this is no extravagant statement; for the most advanced thinkers claim that the human ear may be trained and cultivated to the extent of receiving a pleasurable sensation from any sound or series of sounds, so long as an emotional impression is conveyed thereby; that, psychologically considered, concord and discord are meaningless terms, musical form superfluous, and all harmonic theory a delusion and a snare. And after Strauss's "*Salomè*," who shall say them nay?

Let us admit, then, that all the possible combinations of the tonal units forming our present scale have been exhausted; let us admit, further, as we may, that all other restrictions imposed by previously accepted tradition, convention, theory and practice, have been removed and set aside as arbitrary and unnecessary—and a glance at the score of "*Salomè*" will be sufficient to prove that they have been so set aside—what then? Are we to say that this score represents the last word in music; that another boundary-line has been reached to bar further development in the art? Not so; for this score in itself contains evidence pointing to possibilities of further development that are practically limitless; to a

still further change in existing conditions—a change so radical, so momentous, that, like a second Deluge, it bids fair, if carried out, to alter the face of the musical world.

For many years, the most modern thinkers have looked upon Bach's "equal temperament"—which, by sharpening some notes and flattening others, produces a systematic concordant relation between the series of sounds which form our chromatic scale—as a clever compromise, an ingenious makeshift, that would, in time, inevitably be superseded by a different order of things; and musicians who have spent their lives at the keyboard have realized the deficiencies and limitations of our present tonal system from an æsthetic standpoint. When, for any reason, the existing concordant relations of the degrees or intervals of our present scale are disturbed or falsified, we say that the instrument on which it occurs is out of tune, simply because our ears, having been trained to things as they are, refuse at first to accept new sound relations. But for that reason are such new relations an impossibility? Certainly not; for Wagner surely proved that the human ear can become accustomed to almost anything. The tendency of modern music for years past has been in the direction of chromatic harmonies, and the subdivision of intervals thereby secured; and it would certainly seem as if Strauss were meditating, or at least paving the way for, a revolutionary attack on the last stronghold of music as we know and have known it, the very basis and foundation of our entire system of harmony, the relations between the intervals which form our scale.

The division of the octave in our present system of music into twelve equal semitones, referred to above, is more or less arbitrary, for the purposes of practical harmony. Acoustically, the octave is divided into some forty-eight parts appreciable to the ear called "commas," which when played consecutively produce continuous sound. In Eastern countries, and more particularly in India, there are a number of scales in use which differ so radically from our own that their intervals are not reproducible on any of our keyed instruments, though possible on the violin or any stringed instrument. The reason for this is found in the fact that, while using the same basis of tonal measurement, the octave, this tonal space is differently and variously subdivided. For purposes of illustration and to avoid technicalities in acoustics, it may be said that the intervals forming our scale of twelve semitones proceed regularly

in groups consisting of four commas each, while the Eastern scales, recognizing the possible subdivision of the semitone, move in irregular groups of more or less than four commas; so that there are scales in use in India containing as many as thirty or more tonal units in the same octave space where our scale has but twelve. The peculiar emotional effect of this more minute subdivision of the scale has been remarked and vouched for by many who have made the music of the East a study. There can be no question as to the possibility of such a subdivision. The notes obtainable by subdivisions of the semitone all exist, and are appreciable to the ordinary ear. Indeed an instrument exists to-day, called an *Enharmonic Organ*, the invention of Mr. R. H. M. Bosanquet, of St. John's College, Oxford, now in the South Kensington Museum, where each comma is represented by a key, and on which any one of these curious Eastern scales can be accurately reproduced.

The conclusion seems obvious. If all the possible combinations, melodic and harmonic, of a scale containing twelve tonal units, are exhausted, and we expand that scale so as to contain, say, twenty-four tonal units—which could be done in several ways by varying the number of commas in each successive group forming a tonal unit or note, and so arriving at not only one new scale, but many—would not the number of possible combinations be immediately doubled, and the scope of melodic invention broadened and enlarged by just so much? The fact also must not be lost sight of that the builders of our present scale were forced to recognize and provide for the existence and the subdivision of the semitone; and in this way. The two notes, C sharp and D flat, to instance one of the five enharmonic semitones, while represented on the piano or organ by a single key, are by the orchestra played as separate and distinct notes, according to the tonality employed. But the scientific and acoustic aspect of a more minute subdivision of our present scale, its possibility, or effect on our present systems of tuning by equal temperament, mean tone, or unequal or just temperament, is not so much the question as its effect on the melodic material which the composer has at his command. Melody is beyond question the starting-point and the end, the root and basis, of all music; harmony and everything else must follow in its train, for without melody there would be no music. If, therefore, we enlarge the scope of melodic invention by giving to

the composer an increased number of what might be termed units of musical expression, the possibilities and value of the new melodic combinations thus secured can hardly be estimated.

The effect of a recognized adoption of the idea of a subdivision of the intervals of our present scale would mean revolution indeed; an upheaval which, Samson-like, would overthrow the entire Temple of Musical Art; and who should say who or what might not be overwhelmed in its fall, or buried in its ruins. It would involve a reconstruction, *ab initio*, of our entire system of harmony and tonal relations, if, after the latest inroads of Strauss *et al.*, there is any system left to reconstruct, which is doubtful; as well as a complete change in the method of construction of all keyed instruments, including the harp, piano and organ. One may well stand aghast at the bare contemplation of such a possibility. But such radical changes would, of necessity, be wrought out gradually; two centuries were needed to bring music to its present stage of development, so that the imminence of the possibility need not alarm one.

In this connection the question may well be asked: "What are the indications of intent and purpose in the works of Strauss, or others, which would warrant the assumption that a movement toward a subdivision of the scale was a dominant tendency of the most recent development in musical thought? And, admitting its possibility, which can hardly be denied, is such a movement either practical or probable?" An exhaustive answer to such a question would involve a critical analysis of the works of most modern composers since Wagner, and an amount of technical disquisition hardly interesting, if intelligible, to the average layman. Speaking generally, as noted above, the marked tendency in all modern music toward chromatic progressions, both in melody and harmony, shows at least an instinct among composers toward a subdivision of the scale quite as significant and fruitful of result as a deliberate and acknowledged intent; while, in the latest works of Strauss, who is cited typically in this argument as the most modern, the most daring, and the most successful exponent of the modern revolt in music against tradition and for an entirely free and untrammelled expression of musical thought, the intent to the musician is so evident that he who runs may read. A single instance, in itself so conclusive as to explain and justify the entire point at issue, may be adduced for the layman. Several

times in the score of his opera "*Salomè*," which, whatever its defects, must be classed as an epoch-making work, Strauss has made his orchestra play in several different keys or tonalities simultaneously, thereby securing absolutely new tonal relations and sound values, and approximating in effect the intervals of the subdivided Eastern scales hitherto unknown to, and unheard by most of us. Here is not alone palpable intent, but also notable result; for it must be confessed that these are the most thrilling, impressive, and original moments of a score so original as to be absolutely unique. And when we admit this, we also admit the practical downfall and wiping out of all previous traditional theory and practice, and the beginning of a new musical era, when, all limitations and restrictions to the entirely free expression of musical thought having been removed, what is now a revolt will become a revolution that will sweep all before it.

Again, however, the question may be asked: "Were this astounding revolution actually accomplished, the theories of Richard Strauss and all that they imply recognized as the new musical Gospel, and the subdivided scale a generally accepted fact, would the music composed under these conditions continue to be music as we now understand it?" To this, reply may be made that, in view of what has been said above regarding concord and discord, and the fact that the human ear will ultimately accept and enjoy any sound or combinations of sound conveying a definite emotional impression; and, furthermore, failing any definite and recognized canon as to what constitutes in music, from an æsthetic standpoint, that beauty which must be inherent in any art, the experience of the past alone can teach the lesson of the future. Wagner's "*Music of the Future*" has, in a single generation, become the music of the present; far less revolutionary in tendency than the present revolt headed by Strauss, its beginnings were marked by uproar and the din of critical battle, while the new movement strides ahead, helped rather than hindered by respectful critical comment. The world moves rapidly these days. The musical world learned much from Wagner, and accepted it—finally; it may learn more from Strauss, and there seems no good reason to doubt the same final acceptance for the newer knowledge. Strauss is the logical development of Wagner, as Wagner was of Beethoven. Art, to remain vital, must develop; and will develop as long as the development is logical and sequential.

But there is another aspect of what we have styled the modern Revolt in Music, a psychological, emotional and temperamental aspect, which has been, perhaps, the most powerful factor in determining the scope and direction of the revolt against hidebound tradition and formal theory now under discussion. Music is first and foremost an emotional art; and those who practise it are more often swayed by their feelings than by their faculties. Who among the army of brain-workers in many fields has not felt and writhed under the lash of the arbitrary "Thou shalt not." Who has not felt the despair of the inevitable, the tragedy of routine, sink like iron into his very soul? Some such feeling as actuated the man who committed suicide because he was tired of getting up, and going to bed, has come to every brain-worker possessed of even a spark of the divine fire. Imagine, then, the creative musician, with soul afire, seeking an outlet for thoughts beyond words, hemmed in, bound down by forbidden intervals and prohibited progressions, harmonies not allowed, chords interdicted, and resolutions proscribed; the chains and fetters, centuries old, of monastic scholiasts. Imagine a poet, or essayist, compelled to end each verse or paragraph with some set phrase such as "This is the end"! And yet this is what the musician who adheres to the stereotyped antiquated formula of the Cadence is forced to do daily. The writer may terminate his thought where, when and how he pleases; while the musician must declare his thought ended forty times during its expression, by a cadence, tacked on much after the fashion of the "Q. E. D." of a problem of Euclid.

But, now that the archaic bugaboo of consecutive fifths and octaves, and the like, has been safely laid by the heels in the limbo of musty tradition, may not the musician inquire: "If consecutive fifths and octaves, why not consecutive augmented fourths or any other interval either in harmony or melodic progression?" And the answer must be: "Why not, indeed, when the whole question has been shown to be one of aural adjustment and assimilation?" We must again insist that no purely arbitrary restrictions proven such by practice and experience, which contain no inherent and self-evident elements of æsthetic right or wrong, can be permanent in a purely emotional art like music. Hence a revolt against all such restrictions was sooner or later inevitable. That it has taken the direction of absolute and untrammelled liberty, not to

say license—and be it remembered that license has been ever the attendant of successful revolutionary movements—cannot be wondered at, when we consider the temperamental and emotional aspects of the men involved, and the essential character of their work. And after license, greater or less, comes reaction; and when the ear, tortured beyond the possibility of endurance or acceptance, refuses further acoustic vagaries or experiments, we may be in a position to formulate definite canons of what is or is not æsthetic beauty in music, and govern the art accordingly.

One may scoff, sneer at and deride even the idea of the revolution foreshadowed in this modern Revolt; may call it impossible, impracticable and useless. The same was said of the electric telegraph little more than half a century ago; and to-day the phonograph and wireless telegraphy are but ordinary incidents in our daily life. But, say what we will, think as we may, believe or doubt as our attitude of mind is liberal or narrow, progressive or reactionary, the modern revolt in music, as typified in the works of the arch-innovator Richard Strauss, is with us, and advancing in importance and influence with giant strides.

And because of it, the musical world to-day is confronted with an unusual dilemma. Either we must accept the music of Strauss and all that it implies, and thereby admit the possibility, at least, of such consequent organic changes in the art as have been outlined above; or we must reject it as outside the proper limitations of music, and admit that the boundary-line which cannot be passed has been reached, the last word in musical form and expression spoken, and that, after two centuries of constant sequential development, music has become a dead art.

No; a thousand times, no!

Even a cursory glance at existing musical conditions is sufficient to show that, at the present moment, music is farther than ever from being a dead art. The whole musical atmosphere is charged with the unrest of progress, the desire of new things; and, unless all signs fail, it can hardly be doubted that we stand to-day on the threshold of a revolution involving a reconstruction of our present scale, so important and far-reaching that it bids fair to change the face of the musical world.

REGINALD DE KOVEN.