

ARTICLE VII.

THE IDEAL OF CHURCH MUSIC.

BY PROFESSOR EDWARD DICKINSON.

ST. AUGUSTINE, in the tenth book of his "Confessions," speaking of the dangers to the welfare of his soul which lie in the pleasures of the senses to which he is susceptible, thus describes the conflicts which he was compelled to undergo in resisting the seductive influences of music:—

"The delights of the ear had more powerfully inveigled and conquered me, but Thou didst unbind and liberate me. Now in those airs which Thy words breathe soul into, when sung with a sweet and tranquil voice, do I somewhat repose; yet not so as to cling to them, but so as to free myself when I wish. But with the words which are their life do they, that they may gain admission into me, strive after a place of some honor in my heart; and I can hardly assign them a fitting one. Sometimes I appear to myself to give them more respect than is fitting, as I perceive that our minds are more devoutly and earnestly elevated into a flame of piety by the holy words themselves when they are sung than when they are not; and that all affections of our spirit, by their own diversity, have their appropriate measures in the voice and singing, wherewith I know not by what secret relationship they are stimulated. But the gratification of my flesh, to which the mind ought never to be given over to be enervated, often beguiles me, while the sense does not so attend on reason as to follow her patiently; but having gained admission merely for her sake, it strives even to run on before her and be her leader. Thus

in these things do I sin unknowing, but afterward do I know it."

"Sometimes, again, avoiding very earnestly this same deception, I err out of too great preciseness; and sometimes so much as to desire that every air of the pleasant songs to which David's Psalter is often used be banished both from my ears and those of the church itself. Notwithstanding, when I call to mind the tears I shed at the songs of Thy church at the outset of my recovered faith, and how even now I am moved not by the singing but by what is sung, I then acknowledge the great utility of this custom. Thus vacillate I between dangerous pleasure and tried soundness, being inclined rather (though I pronounce no irrevocable opinion upon the subject) to approve the use of singing in the church, that so by the delights of the ear the weaker minds may be stimulated to a devotional frame. Yet when it happens to me to be more moved by the singing than by what is sung I confess myself to have sinned criminally, and then I would rather not have heard the singing. See now the condition I am in! . . . O Lord my God, give ear, behold and see and have mercy upon me and heal me,—Thou in whose sight I am become a puzzle to myself; and 'this is my infirmity.'"

A similar attitude of distrust toward artistic music in worship was taken by Cardinal Newman. He says, in his "Idea of a University":—

"These high ministers of the Beautiful and Noble [viz., the fine arts] are, it is claimed, special attendants and handmaids of Religion; but it is equally plain that they are apt to forget their place, and, unless restrained with a firm hand, instead of being servants will aim at becoming principals. Here lies the advantage, in an ecclesiastical point of view, of their rudimental state, I mean of the ancient style of architecture, of Gothic sculpture and painting, and of what is called Gregorian music, that these in-

choate sciences have so little innate vigor and life in them, that they are in no danger of going out of their place, and giving the law to Religion. But the case is very different when genius has breathed upon their natural elements, and has developed them into what I may call intellectual powers.”

After speaking of the way in which painting ceases to be helpful to the church when it attains the fullness of its function as an imitative art, Dr. Newman goes on to say:—

“What I have been observing about Painting holds, I think, analogously in the marvelous development which Musical Science has undergone in the last century. Doubtless here too the highest genius may be subservient to Religion; here too, still more simply than in the case of Painting, the Science has a field of its own, perfectly innocent, into which Religion does not and need not enter; on the other hand here also, in the case of Music as of Painting, it is certain that Religion must be alive and on the defensive, for, if its servants sleep, a potent enchantment will steal over it. Music, I suppose, has an object of its own; it is the expression of ideas greater and more profound than any in this visible world, ideas which center in Him who is the seat of all beauty, order, and perfection whatever, still ideas after all which are not those on which Revelation directly and principally fixes our gaze. If then a great master in this mysterious science throws himself on his own gift, trusts its inspiration, and absorbs himself in those thoughts which, though they come to him in the way of nature, belong to things above nature, it is obvious that he will neglect everything else. Rising in his strength, he will break through the trammels of words, he will scatter human voices, even the sweetest, to the winds; he will be borne upon nothing less than the fullest flood of sounds which art has enabled him to draw from mechanical contrivances; he will go forth as a giant, as far as ever his in-

struments can reach, starting from their secret depths fresh and fresh elements of beauty and grandeur as he goes, and pouring them together into still more marvelous and rapturous combinations; and well indeed and lawfully, while he keeps to that line which is his own; but should he engage in sacred themes, is it not certain, from the circumstances of the case, that he will be carried on rather to use Religion than to minister to it, unless Religion is strong on its own ground, and reminds him that, if he would do honor to the highest of subjects, he must make himself its scholar, must humbly follow the thoughts given him, and must aim at the glory not of his own gift but of the Great Giver?"

The warnings of these great churchmen must appeal with much force to those who may be led to study the ever-recurring problem of church music. This problem simply concerns one phase of the broad question of the relation between art and religion, a question which in some form every religious organization is compelled to consider. St. Augustine and Cardinal Newman are representatives of a class of devout thinkers who attach no value to art as an embellishment of worship, or rather they look upon such art as positively mischievous; true worship to them involves a complete absorption from all secular concerns and associations, and only the art that furthers this absorption are they willing to tolerate in the church. The warnings of such men cannot be met by the rhetorical eulogies of the religious value of music which are so frequent in sermons, and in works written from the standpoint of a special musical enthusiasm. The alliance of religion and art, although inevitable and philosophically justifiable, contains more or less of danger, for the natural man is far more susceptible to the fascinations of the senses than to appeals to his conscience, and nothing is easier than to mistake æsthetic thrills, and those melting moods which are

only the reaction from nervous excitement, for an actual uplifting of the heart. The problem of church music simply resolves itself into this simple inquiry—how the sensations of delight which follow the revelation of beauty in sound may be made to blend with conscious devotional impulses, so as to reinforce the longings of worship, and aid in giving them a permanent and salutary direction.

A little thought will make it plain that among all the arts that have been employed in the service of religion music is the least prone to limit and degrade spiritual conceptions. The reason why a large section of the Christian church has rejected pictures and images from its places of worship while retaining music strikes at the root of the whole matter. Painting is an imitative art, it is representative, conveying to the mind exact and definite conceptions, arousing emotion mediately and indirectly through the agency of sensible forms which are but the idealization of objects of common observation. It appeals less than music and poetry to the imagination; it can suggest the unseen only symbolically through the agency of actual forms and colors, and the observer is inevitably more impressed by the beauty of the image as a concrete limited object than by the idea that may be symbolized. And even although it may properly concern itself with certain historic embodiments of religious belief, painting does not willingly restrain itself within that austere and spiritualized range of subject and treatment which is alone helpful in the promotion of pure religious feeling. Theoretically pictures in the church are for the purpose of instruction in the historic aspects of Christianity, or else they furnish allegorized types of godliness as objects for contemplation or imitation. In the early ages of Christian painting, this art doubtless had usually an edifying influence. And so in many instances it has to-day. Yet the very definiteness of painting which, up to a certain point, is an advantage,

has often proved a facile means to the expression of conceptions which tended to sensualize or belittle spiritual ideas. So long as painting was in its immature state it undoubtedly reinforced the teachings of the church, but as soon as it became fully developed it strove to break away from the restrictions of religion, to revel in the representation of the glory and gladness of nature and the goodness of human earthly life; and even when it concerned itself with sacred themes, it could scarcely refrain from beguiling the attention of the beholder away from the religious lesson to an æsthetic joy in ravishing color and form.

It cannot be denied that music has passed through analogous phases in the course of its history, but in the relation between music and religion the proper balance is more easily restored; the tendency to profane sacred ideas is not so strongly inherent in music's nature. For music does not imitate external images, it does not employ symbols or natural forms to express definite ideas; it is only by a violent and unauthorized straining of the fancy that abstract music can be connected with positive conceptions of the intellect. Music carries changes of mental state directly to the sympathetic mind, while the other arts can reveal them only by the words, bodily attitudes, or facial expressions which flow from them as a consequence. But it is only in a very limited degree that these mental states indicated by music can be definitely characterized by it. Music is symbolic, suggestive, call it what we please,—it is not definitely representative. From one point of view this mysterious abstractedness from all that is concrete and tangible is a weakness,—music cannot in itself alone exert a moral or intellectual influence. In another aspect, however, this peculiar nature of music is an element of unique power, for by its very constitution it is able to unite itself with definite ideas as set forth in words, and by its magic spell upon the emotion lend a moving potency to intellectual and

moral conceptions. Music possesses a subtle and almost boundless pliability and adaptableness. It is not wholly abstract and vague; the comparison of musical forms to arabesques and kaleidoscopic figures which writers of the formalistic school assert, as though music apart from words were entirely meaningless, a mere agreeable sense-play without intellectual or spiritual content—this view of music is altogether untenable.

Musical enthusiasts have certainly made claims for their art which do not bear analysis, but absolutely unexpressive music is not. If it were, then Beethoven's "Pastoral" symphony might just as well be called heroic, and the "Heroic" symphony pastoral; dirges and wedding marches might be interchanged; there could be no common basis of feeling between a melody of Schubert and the poem to which it is set. The elements of musical effect are pure tonal sensations set in free ideal motion under psychologic impulses. The nature of these psychologic impulses is revealed in the quality and intensity of the tone and character of the motion. Music is thus able to convey impressions of broad, fundamental moods, but does not indicate the personality of the subject of these moods, or their causes or relations. It is doubtful if music can express even such general emotions as love or grief, but it can typify those states of tenderness or longing which are the basis or result of these, and of other describable emotions. Solemnity, joy, fury, mirthfulness; notions of grace, power, immensity, resistless motion—these and more may be suggested by music, but it does not, like painting, present objects in which such qualities inhere, or, like poetry, describe both qualities and objects by means of symbols that appeal to imagination and memory. So far as music deals with action also, it is the reflection of passion or volition in potentiality, not yet issuing in definite result. The missing elements of localization or direction may be supplied by words

which direct the current of musical effect into positive channels, the two factors blending into a composite art which is adequate to excite the sensibilities more profoundly than either agent could do alone. The power of music is chiefly that of an intensifier of conceptions, moods, desires, etc., which lie outside of itself. Given a style of music that symbolizes that state of sensibility in which the sentiment of the words is likewise grounded, and the music is infinitely docile, seeks not to deflect the impression through any previous association of its own, for it resigns all assertion of a meaning which it might be supposed to possess in an isolated capacity, and lends all its subtle charm and appealing sweetness to enhance the thought which the text seeks to convey.

It is this pervading, intensifying power of music, free from material sensuous suggestion, that has given it so large a place in the observances of worship in all religious systems within the record of history. It has always been felt that there is some special consonance between music and religious feeling, such that it would be hard to find a form of religious ceremony in ancient or modern times in which music has not held a more or less conspicuous place. And it is in the most spiritual of all the historic religions, viz. Christianity, that music has been developed to its highest degree of expressiveness and beauty. Piety falls into the general category of the profounder, more absorbing emotions, such as love and patriotism, which naturally utter themselves not in prose but in poetry, not in ordinary unimpassioned speech but in rhythmical tone.

“In acts of devotion,” says Dr. John Caird, “we give manifestation and embodiment to our inward elevation to that unity which lies beyond all differences; we gather up our fragmentary temporal life into its anticipated eternal harmony; we forecast and enjoy amidst the efforts and struggles of time the sweetness and rest of the blessed life

that is to be. The peculiar significance of prayer lies in this, that therein we rise above ourselves; we leave behind the interests which belong to us as creatures of time; we enter into that sphere in which all the discords and evils of the time-world are but deceptive appearances and illusions, or possess no more reality than the passing shadows of the clouds that lie here beneath our feet. The world in which we outwardly live is only the unreal and the evanescent making believe to be real; the true, the real, the world of unchangeable and eternal reality, is that in which we pray. . . . But even when we pray that evils may cease, it is, if our prayer be the prayer of faith, because in spirit we realize that they have already ceased, because we are in a sphere in which we discern the nothingness of all that is not of God; even when we pray that new blessings may be communicated to us, it is because we realize that already all things are ours."¹

Taking this as an accurate statement of the experience of devotional self-surrender, it is not difficult to understand how music is the one art most competent to enter into such a state of mind. For the ecstasy aroused in the lover of music by the magic of his art is more nearly analogous than any other emotion to that depicted by Dr. Caird as the mystic rapture of devotion. So much so that musical enthusiasts often speak of all high-class music as sacred and devotional, while no one would say the same of painting, sculpture, or architecture in general. The reason of this is, as I have said, that music does not definitely characterize, it does not employ forms which are borrowed from nature; it is pure, it cannot in itself suggest evil, it refines and exalts everything it touches. So worship is disconnected from all the concerns of physical life, it raises the subject into a supersensuous region, it has for the moment nothing to do with temporal activities, even moral

¹ *The Philosophy of Religion.*

conduct belongs in another sphere. The absorption of the mind in contemplation, the sense of inward peace which accompanies emancipation from the disturbances of active life, and the effort to fix the thought upon that which is holy and divine, has a striking resemblance to those phases of musical satisfaction where the analytical faculties are not called into exercise. Hence the readiness with which music combines with religious experience as illustrator and intensifier. Music in its mystic indefinable action seems to render the mood of prayer more self-conscious, to interpret it, as it were, to itself, and by something that seems divine and celestial in the harmony to make the mood deeper, stronger, more satisfying than it would be if shut up within the soul of the individual and deprived of this means of expression. Music also, by its universal, impersonal quality, furnishes the most efficient means of communication between all the individuals engaged in a common worship, the separate personalities are, we might say, dissolved in the general tide of rapture symbolized by the music, and the common mood is again enhanced by the consciousness of sympathy between mind and mind to which the music testifies, and which it, more than any other single agency, seems to promote.

Here then we touch upon the borders of the mysterious relation between music and religious emotion. But at this point we are again challenged by the warning of St. Augustine and Dr. Newman, reminding us that music is not always or necessarily an aid to devotion, and that there may even be a snare in what seems at first a valuable ally. However strong our conviction that music in its very nature is a powerful adjunct of devotion, we must always bear in mind that the analogy that exists between religious emotion and musical rapture is, after all, only an analogy; that æsthetic delight, though it be the most refined, is not worship, that the mood of melting tenderness that follows a

grand strain of orchestral music is not contrition. Those who speak of all good music as religious simply do not understand the meaning of the terms they use. For devotion is not a mere vague feeling of ecstasy; it must involve a positive consciousness of an object of worship, a reaching up, not to something undefined, but to a God plainly revealed and cognizant of the sincerity of the service offered Him; it must involve also a sense of humility before an Almighty Power, a contrition for sin, a desire for pardon, reconciliation, and blessedness, a consciousness of need and dependence, and an active exercise of faith and love. Into such spiritual conditions music may come, lending her aid to deepen them, to give them tangible expression, and to enhance the sense of peace and joy which may be their divinely permitted consequence; but let not music presume to offer her own felicities as an equivalent for the higher experiences of the soul in pure communion with its Maker. The office of music, so far as it concerns itself with definite ideas at all, is not so much to arouse precise sentiments as to intensify feelings already existing; the sentiment proper to the sanctuary is one of worship and that only, and it is the function of music to purify this mood, to separate from it other moods and reminiscences which are not in perfect concord with it, to establish it in a more complete self-consciousness and a more permanent attitude.

And let it once for all be said that music in the sanctuary must not assume to do its work alone, because pure unalloyed musical enjoyment is not worship, although easily mistaken for it, and a musical impression disconnected from any other cannot in the very nature of things conduce to the spirit of prayer. It is only when the prayerful mood already exists as the definite tendency of the mind, induced by the sense of love and duty, by the associations of the time and place, by the administration of the other portions

of the service, or by any other agencies which turn the heart of the believer in longing toward the Mercy Seat—it is only in alliance with such a state of desire and expectancy that music fulfills its true office in the sanctuary. It is not enough to depend upon the influence of the words to which the music is set, for they, being simultaneous with the music, do not have time or opportunity to act with full force upon the understanding, since the action of music upon the emotion is so much more powerful and swift than that of the words upon the understanding that the latter is but feebly affected and often unregarded in the stress of musical fervor. How this preliminary mood of devotion, this antecedent condition of expectancy, is to be aroused is a question that would lead into quite another field than that now under discussion. Certain it is, however, that the spirit of worship must first exist,—music may enhance and direct it, but cannot be expected to cause it. The case is with music as Professor Shairp says that it is with nature:—“If nature is to be the symbol of something higher than itself, to convey intimations of Him from whom both nature and the world proceed, man must come to the spectacle with the thought of God already in his heart. He will not get a religion out of the mere sight of nature. If beauty is to lead the soul upward, man must come to the contemplation of it with his moral convictions clear and firm, and with faith in these as connecting him directly with God. Neither morality nor religion will he get out of beauty taken by itself.” With some such principle as this, I believe, we come to the heart of the problem of the relation between religion and art. If the love and study of art are to make man more faithful, more truthful, more holy, then he must approach it with moral convictions firmly fixed by means other than those of art, that he may find in the manifestations of the beautiful the embodiment of truth as well as of beauty, and be able to

weave the better teachings of art into the fabric of his higher spiritual experience.

These principles do not, of course, solve the whole problem of church music in detail. The attitude of the worshiper is not the only point involved in that great controversy over the proper style of music in worship which has perplexed the church ever since the days of St. Augustine, and is still far from settlement. It never will be settled to the satisfaction of all religious bodies, for a form of music that is edifying in a Salvation Army barracks would be an offense in an English cathedral, and a musical performance that would lift a French Catholic to the very gates of heaven would have a very different effect upon a Scotch Calvinist. The Gregorian chant, the unaccompanied contrapuntal chorus of the Palestrina age, the Lutheran chorale and motet, and the Anglican chant and anthem, are all the expression of a devout piety, and are all claimed in turn as the worthiest expression of religious emotion in artistic form. Their common ground consists in elevation of tonal character, distinction, dignity, conformity to æsthetic laws, and sincerity as utterances of genuine piety. The growing demand in this country for a prevalent style of church music that shall be worthy alike of the church and of the rising national artistic taste can be met only by the subjection of music to the ideal needs of devotion rather than to the needs of æstheticism. Artistic perfection certainly, for music that is an offense to taste can never be worshipful; but first of all a humble devotional spirit on the part of choir and people. There must be a return to the conception of the early Christians, of the pious monks of the middle ages, that church music is prayer. There are many abuses in American church music, and voices are heard from all sides calling for reform. The only reform that is really to be desired will inevitably come when clergy, congregation, and singers submit their artistic attainments to

the precept so beautifully expressed by the Synod of Carthage in the fourth century, in the formula which it prescribed for the ordination of choristers: "See that what thou singest with thy lips, thou believest in thy heart; and what thou believest in thy heart, thou dost exemplify in thy life."