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POPULAR SONGS OF OUR LAST HALF CENTURY.

BY JOHN HULLAH.

The student, whether of music or manners, may safely spend his knowledge of both by an occasional inspection of one of those dilapidated folio volumes, lettered "Vocal Music," or "Songs, &c.," which, though less numerous than they were a few years since, still now and then come under the hand or the eye, more often on the book-stall than the music-desk. They are touching memorials of another age, cheap dead-and-buried out-at-elbows copies of an age divorced distant from our own period of time, but, in feeling, opinion, taste, and manners of life, how far removed!

Catholicity in *taste* is not the falling of the average musician; and he will perhaps find little that he can like in these old music-books. Yet it is not to be useless, nor ought it to be unconsidering, to trace, by the analysis of typical specimens of each epoch, the progress in England, since the latter part of the last century, of a very important—certainly the most popular—branch of musical composition, the Vocal Solo.

The music-book of seventy or eighty years since—first expressive and faithful record of the tastes and powers of our grandmothers—will generally be found to contain songs by one or other, generally by several, of the following composers: Storace, Kelly, Carter, Dibdin, Shield, Arnold, Hook, Davy, Braham, and Jackson, of Exeter. Of Storace, *finelle piacque* is among the earliest; of Kelly, the style of effect, perhaps also in invention, there would be "Where the slightest Waters roam" (from *The Firefly*), "The Sailor's Wife" (from *The Siege of Belgrade*), or "With lowly Suit and plaintive Ditty" (from *No Song—No Supper*). Of Kelly we should find "No! my Love, no!" (from *Age To-Morrow*) and of Carter, the inevitable "O Nanny, wilt thou gang with me?"—like "Auld Robin Gray," a parish-school song.

The prolific genius of Dibdin—the poet, the composer, and the singer—would be represented by "Tom Bowling," "Poor Jack," "The my trim-built Wherry," "Saturday Night at Sea," or "Poor Jack," that of the more ambitious Shield, by "Ere around the huge Oak," "The Death of Tom Moody," "Whilst with Village Maids I join the Dance," or "The Wolf." Another bass air, "Flow, thou regal purple Stream," would be equally at home, so would, to whose editorial labors Church musicians and the admirers of Handel owe so large a debt of gratitude, be found the well-known "The Lass of Richmond Hill," "I'll sail with the me, my Love," or "Come, gentle Night! O Edmund Tom," another forgery on the Scottish muse; Davy, "Just like Love," and "The Bay of Biscay"; Jackson, of Exeter, "Old Stairs"; and Braham, like Dibdin, composer, singer, and even actor, whose "Is there, honest the Light," "No more by Sorrow chased," or "The Bird in yonder Cage confined." Jackson's laurels were for the most part won on the concert-fields, but a volume such as that we are considering would hardly be one bore testimony without "Encompassed in an Angel's Frame," or "When first this humble Roof I knew."

In addition to these songs by contemporary composers, we should find at least one "favorite song by Handel, "Lascia ch'io pianga" ever bright and fair;" and more than one by Dr. Arne, "Water parted from the Sea," or "Were Daisies all," certainly "The Soldier tired." Two or three anonymous productions, "I am a brisk and youthful Sailor," and "Since then I'm doomed," "Fray Goody," "Over the Mountain and over the Moor," and "The Blue Bells of Scotland"—would complete the volume.

These songs, like those which make up any contemporary issue of the kind, are naturally very unequal merit. The intervals from Storace to Kelly, from Shield to Hook, and from Jackson to Davy, are scarcely less than ages; but the best and the worst of the compositors which make up contemporary issues have some good qualities in common. They are almost without exception melodious, well fitted to the words, and responsive to the voice.*† and in those of them which rise above the level of mere tune, there is often a serious attempt at developing or pursuing musical ideas to their utmost consequences (the distinguishing power of *great* musicians, ancient or modern); the passages are spontaneous and natural; and grow out of the words more naturally, as though, once set growing, they could not have grown otherwise.

Moreover, the composers of these contemporary "favorite" songs were not only men of very unequal powers, but of various ages. In the last decade of the last century some of them were beginners, others were in the prime, others in the decline of life. Braham had just entered on a career which was only to end in our own time. Shield had composed the music for the journey of his life; Jackson was not attaining its term; while Storace, like Purcell, Linley, Mozart, and Mendelssohn, left the ready furnished amateur illustration of the paradigm, "Those whom the gods love die young."

Some of the most successful productions, therefore, of the contributors to our "music book" were subsequent to its collection; among them, for instance, the "Death of Nelson," a song which, whatever its shortcomings, has survived by more than half a century the shock caused by the event which it is still popular.

These composers, whatever their merits, whatever their places in public favor at the end of the last century, were destined soon to suffer an eclipse, from which they are still by no means free, from the advent and prolonged course of a composer who possessed imagination, certainly in science, taste and facility, surpassed them all. The year 1809 is signalized in the history of English music by the production of *The Circassian Bride*—as opera in two acts, which, as in those days), the music of which was the composition of Henry (more recently Sir Henry) Bishop. This opera was the first by the year of his death (in 1800), a period of fifty years, Bishop kept his hold on the public and more firmly than any English predecessor or contemporary. Not that he was without rivals,—and formidable rivals too; such as he was either the greatest genius or the most learned and skilful musician of his age in his country, but that he was for a great length of time the only Englishman who exercised musical genius and learning in the field of dramatic composition, and in those particular directions without which public favor at once grows cold and success is unattainable to a musical composer. For, the most distinguished contemporaries of Bishop, in his early days at least, were content to them his rivals. Of our four best glee composers, Webbe, Stevens, and Hawley, the first alone attempted the musical drama; nor can any vocal author of those masters, at all comparable in excellence or in quantity to their part-music, be named which could have competed with the works of Bishop, in popular estimation. The same may be said of Wesley, or any of the writers of those compositions are, it is believed, still withheld from their concerts; William Russell, J. Stafford Smith, Samuel Cooke, Spofforth, Dunley, and others. Partial exceptions might be made in favor of two or three of these. Mr. Welsh wrote one very successfulsong, "The Mansion of Peace"; and Callcott's "Angel of Life," "Friend of the Brave," and "Sisters of Acheron"; and Horsley's "When shall we Three meet again," and "Hark the Echo Tempest," continue to find willing performers, if not always willing listeners. But granting these the unusual advantage of merit and public favor, what are they to the long succession of compositions at once admirable and popular by these same masters, which any experienced *part*-singer could enumerate, with or without a moment's notice?

Who will venture—with any hope of arriving

*No longer anonymous. The re-orches ter of Mr. Chappell has restored to Arnold's music its original charm. [Ed. Mag.

†We use this happy phrase to the late Mr. Braham.

at the end of the list—to enumerate Sir Henry Bishop's *songs*, the product (and hardly the chief product) of an artistic life of fifty years, no day of which could have passed by but there cut a line?" He was "concerned in" about seventy musical dramas in all; few of them, it is true, operas in the proper sense of the word, but all of them supported, adorned and enriched by a wealth of musical thought which no frequency or extent of call seemed able to exhaust. With the concerted music of Bishop we are not now concerned; it is only with his songs we have to do. *Their* number, which we have no means—perhaps now there are no means—of ascertaining, is not to be estimated even approximately by that of the drama to which he contributed music. Many, especially of his later airs, are "stray waifs" in the days of their publication, and if he sometimes borrowed a phrase or a section from a so-called "national" melody, he frequently lent to that often very poor production its single peculiarity or its single grace.

For many years, however, after his first dramatic success, the theatre must have furnished Bishop with employment sufficient for the most productive and indefatigable of musical composers. We have before us (and certainly not complete) of his dramatic productions, which, between the year 1806, when he made his first essay, and the year 1824, which closes his first period, number sixty-eight—especially for the song in the eighteen years! His part in many of these pieces was limited to instrumentation (in which no precedent existed), and he was a worthy successor of Arne, Shield, and Jackson, of Exeter, like the same skill and arrangement, i. e. correcting, curtailing, or expanding other people's music; but to others he made large contributions of original matter,—overtures, melodramatic music, concerted pieces, and songs. Among other undertakings he was actively concerned in a series of Shakspearean revivals (happily not imitated since), which consisted in turning the dramas of our great poet into melodramas with music. For these productions we owe some of the best of Bishop's songs. By the Simplicity of Venus' Doves," "Should he upbraid," and "Bid me discourse," are all that are left to us of these profanations of Shakspeare,—inclusive of the "Banks of Allan Water," which, it might be said they'll hit justify.

No English composer was in any way worthy of comparison with Bishop appeared during the first years of his career. In or about 1820 the composer of "Artaxerxes" opened a boy, had attained considerable reputation as a musical composer in the concert-room, and to be treated, though sometimes with severity, always with consideration, by the musical critics of the day. The song of Mr. Barnett, like those of Sir Henry Bishop, are by no means equally meritorious, but the majority of the most popular owe their existence to the stage. "The Light Guitar," "Miss, gentle Maid," and others which, if less and are likely to keep, their hold on public favor, are many of them the sole remaining memorials of dramas of which they were, no doubt, the most interesting features; and "Farewell to the Mountain," and "Deep in a Forest Dell," are integral parts of the Mountain Sylph, the first opera (properly so called) yet produced by an Englishman, that which seems to us the most likely to live.

The remaining names in the list of Mr. Hullah is facilitated by the fact of their temporary rivalry, and by that of Mr. Balfe (like Mr. Barnett, a dramatic singer) having played a principal part in one of the latter's operas, *Farinelli*. The first mention of Mr. Balfe as a composer we are acquainted is in *The Iberonnicon* (Vol. V., p. 52), wherein a composition of his is spoken of somewhat severely. It is spoken of as "a song which evidently means to make some pretensions" (odd, after a complete denial of both poetry and the muffe "do not go on smoothly and agreeably," and altogether grammatically, that "there is, however, merit in parts of the composition which *entitle*," &c., &c. Mr. Balfe, however cast down by this criticism on his youthful production, did not allow the matter to rest. He set to work, and in 1825 produced his first opera, *The Maid of Artois*, for which he composed "Oh! Maiden, my Maiden," and "Though the Wood" (the last two favorite songs of the lamented Malibran) have lost little of their former popularity.

A musician of great accomplishment,—a German by birth, but, whom (like Handel and for like reasons) we have got to think of as one of ourselves,—Jules Benedict, is the composer of several English operas. The name of a song in one of them, "Hage, thou angry Storm," has come to mean one of the first concert pieces—more than once very recently; while another, "By the sad Sea Waves," a rare example of refined and individual melody, must form part of every contemporary contralto's repertory.

Some of the successful productions dramatic and other, of Vincent Wallace and George Macfarren, though more recent, are still sufficiently remote to claim a place in this article. Those of Mr. Wallace too, have, alas! come to an end. His talent was, perhaps, more happily exercised in the concerted piece than the single composition, especially the solo with its accompaniment reduced to drawing-room dimensions: but his instrumentation was very skillful. Like Mr. Wallace, Mr. Macfarren is a prolific master of combined effect, vocal and instrumental. As a song-writer he occupies the first rank; but composer of many minor works which have found favor as well with the many as with the few.

Theatrical performance is for the musical composer the most efficient of all modes of advertisement; and that which is first heard within theatrical walls starts with advantages unattainable through any other mode of presentation. Nevertheless, some of the most popular as well as some of the best English songs of this country have altogether wanted the support of dramatic situation, and have owed their success in their intrinsic merit or their felicitous rendering in the concert-room. Of these we have collected a large number of examples, to which it would no doubt be possible to add as many more. The difficulty in dealing with it is not the impossibility of a solely that of choice. Here are the materials in approximate chronological order.

The first that will come under our notice, from their number, popularity, and the length of time over which their publication was spread, are those connected with the name of Thomas Moore. We leave out of consideration, as of the collections entitled *Irish Melodies, National Melodies, Evenings in Greece, &c.*, to which Mr. Moore contributed words, and Sir John Stevenson very indifferent, and Sir Henry Bishop very ingenious, "symphonies and accompaniments." Nor shall we stop to estimate the extent to which the majority of these *National Melodies* are in any sense "national," or, anonymous, ancient or traditional in any nation; or how far *Evenings in Greece* were the work of "Evenings at home," though being very much to the west of the favored land "where grew the arts of war and peace," Mr. Moore was the avowed creator as well as author of many favorite songs, and a very successful composer (it is believed) of many more. He was an unlearned musician; and an unlearned musician can only exhibit himself as he is, or as he is gifted with it, in melody (*melopoia*), but rather in melody than rhythm, the rhythmical limits at least of which are of necessity very narrow and unelastic. Learned or unlearned, however, the composer of "Young Love once dwelt in an humble Shed," "My Heart and Lute," "The Woodpecker," "Those Evening Bells," and "Oft in the stilly Night" found a road to the hearts of his hearers which many a pundit has altogether mistaken, or been too clumsy to trave.

The first of Moore's contributions to Wade and Samuel Lover (the latter only remotely) to the *Here* can be practiced so gracefully), have been very successful songs; writers like Moore, too, setting their own words. "Meet Me by Moonlight" and "Love was once a little Boy" are, after the Irish melodies, the most meritorious of Mr. Angel's Whisper" (a more recent production, "running hard" some of the best of Moore's) will always find a sympathetic voice.

The Prince of Wales, the late John Parry, the father of our musical Gavarni,—is the composer of a song, "Jenny Jones," whose popularity was great, and had been so long enjoyed, that about the year 1835, Mr. Charles Mathews introduced it in a dramatic piece, and sang it "in character," under the impression that it was a "national melody." Mr. Parry of course put forward, and easily established his claim to the parentage of "Jenny," whose unlooked-for turn in the wheel of Fortune was by no means disadvantageous to her progenitor. Mr. Parry was the composer too of a song, the popular ballad, "Norah, the Flower of Dare," which his son, before his specialty had been revealed to him, used to sing very finely.

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