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R. A. Streatfeild

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BY

R. A. STREATFEILD

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MODERN MUSIC AND MUSICIANS

BY

R. A. STREATFEILD

WITH TWENTY-FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

SOME kind of explanation, if not an actual apology, is due from author to public for the appearance of a book of this kind, in which so much ground already familiar is traversed once more. I fear that I cannot claim any very striking novelty of treatment for the following series of essays on the development of modern music, or rather on the men who have most aided that development. I was led to undertake the book by the hope of being able to trace, in a study of the works of the great composers, the growth of the idea of a poetic basis in music. But such an aspiration, however constantly present in the mind of the author, means as a rule but little to the reader. I will only say therefore that it has been my aim in the following pages to give as little space as possible to the merely biographical side of my task, save when the incidents of a composer's life affected his music in any salient manner, and to lay stress upon the development of music as a means of personal expression, rather than upon its merely technical history, by tracing the character of a composer in his music rather than by criticising his

works in detail. How far I am from having reached the goal of even this modest ambition, no one can realise more fully than myself. I can only hope that my humble efforts may tempt an enthusiast with more opportunities for research than the scanty leisure of an official life affords, to undertake the history of programme music, if I may use the somewhat vague and unsatisfactory term now generally employed to express all instrumental music that is not purely abstract.

There are many who will be inclined to deny that programme music has a history at all, or at any rate one worth writing, but as a matter of fact the idea that music is capable of any but an abstract use is far older than is generally supposed. Nearly four hundred years ago, at a time when music, from our point of view, was barely articulate, Sir Thomas More wrote of his Utopians: "For all their music, both that they play upon instruments and that they sing with man's voice, doth so resemble and express natural affections, the sound and tune is so applied and made agreeable to the thing, that whether it be a prayer or else a ditty of gladness, of patience, of trouble, of mourning or of anger, the fashion of the melody doth so represent the meaning of the thing, that it doth wonderfully move, stir, pierce and inflame the hearers' minds." I should be glad to think that anything I have

written would inflame my readers' minds with the belief that music is not the mere science that our friends the advocates of "abstract music" believe, but a means of expressing human emotion as definite and as incisive as any of its sister arts.

It would be useless for me to try to give anything like a complete list of the books which have helped me in writing the following pages. Every one who writes about Beethoven and Schubert must necessarily be under great obligations to Sir George Grove, and Mr Fuller Maitland's writings on Brahms and Mr Barclay Squire's articles on Purcell have been to me no less useful in fact and fruitful in suggestion. I should like also to record the assistance which I have derived from Mr Alfred Kalisch's interesting analytical programmes to the works of Strauss, and to thank Mrs Legh, of Adlington Hall, Cheshire, for kindly allowing me to publish a facsimile of her autograph of Handel's "Hunting Song."

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MODERN MUSIC AND MUSICIANS

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNINGS OF MODERN MUSIC

IT is probable that few authorities would agree as to the point at which the history of modern music can strictly be said to begin, but one thing may be taken as certain, that for its beginnings we must look far back into the mists of the Middle Ages, when history is barely distinguishable from romance, and fact and fiction stand side by side. First of all it is necessary to find out precisely what we mean by modern as opposed to medieval music, and in what essential points the one differs from the other.

In a word, then, the main characteristics of modern music as opposed to medieval are rhythm, harmony, and the key system. The evolution of our modern system of harmony from the weird "Organum" of Hucbald, and of our keys from the ecclesiastical modes, was so gradual that it is impossible to fix upon any date as the precise moment when one gave way definitely to the other. The idea of rhythm is, of course, as old as the

human race itself. The primitive efforts of a savage to give musical expression to his feelings are rhythmical without being musical, and the idea of melody is a far later and more advanced development. Yet, in spite of the hoary antiquity of rhythm, what we may call its artistic employment is of comparatively recent growth, and it is the use of rhythm in this sense that forms one of the main characteristics of modern as opposed to medieval music. To the union of rhythm with harmony modern music owes its birth, and it is to the first dawn of an attempt to incorporate these two mighty forces that we must look if we wish to date the beginnings of modern music.

From the time of St Ambrose onward the river of music flowed in two channels, parallel but independent. The course of ecclesiastical music under the leaden sway of the Church was so little removed from actual stagnation that it was not until the tenth century that the first feeble attempts at harmony were made by Hucbald, and it took another five hundred years to arrive at even such mastery of counterpoint as is exhibited by the composers of the fifteenth century. Meanwhile, the music of the people pursued its way independent of ecclesiastical influence. Ignored or at any rate despised by the monks, the self-elected guardians of intellectual development, it flourished wherever men had hearts to feel and voices to sing. The folk-songs of the Middle Ages, which happy accident has preserved to us,

have all the freshness, melody, and rhythmic force that the Church music of the period is so conspicuously without. Nothing can express more vividly the narrow outlook upon life of the medieval Church than the fact that this rich store of music ready to every man's hand should have been allowed, so to speak, to run to waste. Yet from time to time some holy brother, less dehumanised than his fellows, had glimpses of the musical possibilities of folk-song. In England, for instance, far back in the thirteenth century, a monk of Reading took the lovely folk-song, "Sumer is icumen in," and, with a grasp of the principles of counterpoint which for that period is nothing short of amazing, made of it a round for four voices upon a drone bass given to two voices more. He even went so far as to hallow it to the service of the Church by fitting sacred words to the music. Whether it was sung in the choir of Reading Abbey or not we cannot say, but if it was it ought certainly to have revolutionised church music on the spot, for after singing that liquid and lovely melody, harmonised with so much charm, to go back to dreary plain chant and the ear-lacerating harmonies of the "Organum" must have been, one would think, more than even a thirteenth-century monk could endure. However, both as an example of folk-song being used as the foundation of church music and as a contrapuntal triumph, "Sumer is icumen in" appears to have been an isolated phenomenon. Nothing like it of the same

period has been preserved. Certainly it cannot be taken as typical of any tendency of the time towards a more natural and truthful method of expression. In the thirteenth century the epoch of freedom was still far away. If we compare "Sumer is icumen in" with the Tournay mass, which was written about a hundred years later, we find ourselves back once more in the dismal darkness of the Middle Ages. In this mass, written for three voices by some unknown Fleming, there is very little advance on the earliest strivings towards harmonic expression of the tenth century. Hucbald's system of consecutive fourths and fifths—the so-called "Organum"—is still in full swing, and the result to our ears is indescribably hideous. But a century later came Willem Dufay, one of the most important names in the history of early music, who was a contemporary of our own Dunstable and of the Burgundian Gilles Binchois. With Dufay the influence of popular upon ecclesiastical music first takes definite shape. He wrote masses which are founded upon melodies associated with popular songs, such as "L'Homme Armé," a practice which, though it afterwards led to strange and scandalous developments, unquestionably had the immediate effect of giving life to the dry bones of church music. Further, we may note in the music of Dufay and his period a feeling for definite rhythm such as could only have been produced by the influence of popular music. Modern music was now fairly started upon its career. The generation

that succeeded Dufay, of which Ockeghem may be taken as a typical figure, had an unmistakable feeling for sheer musical beauty and, besides, we find the composers of his day actually attempting to describe the sight and sounds of Nature in terms of music. By the side of these interesting aspirations there was a disheartening tendency towards cleverness for mere cleverness' sake. Ockeghem and his fellows were never so happy as when inventing abstruse "canons" — musical puzzles which taxed the resources of the most learned to solve. Nevertheless, these exercises could not but give technical dexterity, and as a matter of fact during this period the mechanical side of music was developed to an astonishing extent. In the middle of the fifteenth century Josquin des Prés was born, the first man who can properly be called a great composer in something like the modern acceptation of the term. In Josquin's music there is a beauty which can be appreciated without any reference to the man's position in the history of music. Josquin is the first musical composer who gives a modern hearer the impression that he knows how to get the effects at which he is aiming. The purely pioneer stage of musical development is over. For the first time we are in the presence of an artist. A glance at Josquin's music reveals the importance of his position with regard to the development of modern music. He shows us for the first time a highly gifted composer consciously blending popular and ecclesiastical music. From the popular

he gets his freshness of melody and his sense of rhythm, from the ecclesiastical his knowledge of the principles of harmony and counterpoint. In his secular music, in the part songs and canzonets of which he was practically the inventor, we find what are obviously harmonised versions of popular airs, little gems of melody such as "Petite Camusette" which are as entrancing now as on the day he wrote them. And in his sacred music the popular influence is scarcely less noticeable. Let us take, for example, the "Ave Maria," which has been printed by M. Charles Bordes in his "Anthologie des Maîtres Religieux Primitifs" (*Livre des Motets*, i. 92), and compare it with a motet by Dufay or Dunstable, written only a generation earlier. Instead of the long unrhythmical sweep of the Gregorian tunes, we have short crisp phrases, sometimes treated canonically, but often harmonised in simple chords, just in the modern fashion. The motet, too, is constructed in a curiously advanced style, the flow of the piece being broken by a delightful little passage in triple time, in which the influence of popular music is unmistakable.

The importance of Josquin's work was speedily proved by the generation that succeeded him. Willaert in Venice, and Jannequin in Paris, to name only two of his pupils, carried his tradition far and wide. In England, where progress of all kind was retarded by the Wars of the Roses, the music of the early part of the sixteenth century

shows little trace of Josquin's influence, but in other European countries the iron traditions of church music began to yield at the touch of popular song. In Germany folk tunes, such as "Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen," were openly annexed by Luther and the Reformed Church, and used as hymns, a proceeding akin to that of the Salvation Army in our day. In Italy the invasion of the Netherlanders was followed by the establishment of music schools, that of Goudimel at Rome, where Palestrina was a pupil, being the most famous. At Venice Adrian Willaert is said to have introduced antiphonal writing into church music, fired thereto by the presence of two organs in St Mark's Church, of which he was organist; but it is only necessary to glance at Josquin's music, the "Ave Maria," for instance, to which reference has already been made, to find there the germs of antiphonal writing, as indeed of much else that is attributed to a later age. The sixteenth century saw the rise of the madrigal, which with its offshoots, the *canzone*, the *balletto* (the latter designed for dancing as well as singing), the *villanella*, and other delightful forms of unaccompanied vocal music, speedily gained wide popularity in Italy, and before the end of the century in England as well.

In music of this kind we find not only the most brilliant display of technique, but an ever-growing feeling for musical beauty. Allied to this was a rudimentary taste for realistic effects, taking form in an attempt to echo the sounds of nature and of

human life, at first purely imitative, as in Gombert's musical imitation of bird-calls and Jannequin's famous "Battaille de Marignan," and afterwards more artistic, as in Luca Marenzio's lovely madrigal, "Scaldava il sol," with its chirping grasshoppers, or his still more beautiful "Strider faceva," with its imitation of shepherds' pipes, or the numerous "cuckoo" pieces by English composers, in which the bird's cry is used as a definite musical motive with admirable effect.

Experiments of this kind led naturally to innovations in harmony, and long before the end of the sixteenth century composers began to be uneasy in the fetters of the modal system. The process of development which ended in the church modes being replaced by our modern key system was very gradual; in fact, it was not until the age of Bach that the older system ceased to exercise some sort of influence upon music, but by the beginning of the seventeenth century the battle was practically over. All through the sixteenth century the composers of Italy and the Netherlands were continually enlarging the borders of permissible harmony, and every innovation meant a nail in the coffin of the modal system. The increasing use of accidentals, which in the strict days of the modal system were only permitted with many restrictions, and the gradual acquisition of the principles of modulation had the result of effacing the subtle distinctions which existed between the various modes. The laws of evolution worked here as consistently as in

the animal kingdom. The fittest of the modes survived, and became the major and minor scales of the new key-system ; while the others, though lingering for a while in church music, soon ceased to have any vital influence upon the development of music. The English composers of the Elizabethan age were among the hardiest innovators of the period. Not only were they continually making experiments in harmony, often with hideous if interesting results, but they appear to have been in advance of their Italian and Netherlandish contemporaries in their grasp of the principles of modulation. The attempts of Byrd and Orlando Gibbons to express the emotions of pity and terror by crude violations of the accepted rules of harmony are among the first signs of a revolt against the laws which governed the polyphonic school ; while in the madrigals of Wilbye we find a consummate ease of technique and a graceful flow of modulation such as are rare even in the most accomplished Italian writers of the period, and are certainly not to be found in the productions of the Netherlandish school, at any rate before the days of Sweelinck. But in spite of the beauty of the English madrigals, it is in the sacred music of the Italian masters that we find the most perfect utterance of the time, and of all the Italians the most gifted was Palestrina, whose name stands for all that is best and purest in the music of the Church.

CHAPTER II

PALESTRINA

THE great men in the history of music can, roughly speaking, be divided into two classes, the revolutionists and the evolutionists—that is to say, those whose genius led them to exploring paths untried before, and those who summed up in their own work the various efforts and achievements of their predecessors. Viewed from a modern standpoint the development of music is like the resolution of a series of discords, each period of experiment and endeavour ending in a perfect consonance, after which progress is only possible upon a fresh path. The manifold struggles of the early composers towards a perfect method of expression culminated in Palestrina. He represents the ideal at which they had aimed. He invented little, but with the materials laboriously accumulated by generations of earnest workers he built an edifice of such faultless beauty that it still stands as a model in its kind of unapproachable perfection.

Little is known of Palestrina's birth and upbringing, and even of his later life only meagre records survive. The position of a musician in the sixteenth century was very different from what it is now. Palestrina was by universal consent the

PALESTRINA

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greatest composer of his time, yet his position during the greater part of his life was little more exalted than that of a servant. The brilliant company of warriors and churchmen who thronged the corridors of the Vatican would have smiled if they had been told that to touch the garment of the poor Maestro di Cappella was the greatest honour to which they could aspire. Palestrina received all the honours that at that time could fall to the lot of a musician. Of his greatest mass a pope said that it was some such music that the Apostle John heard sung by the angelic chorus around the throne of God. Cardinals complimented him in the words of Dante, and he had a saint for confessor and friend. But his honours were barren so far as worldly wealth was concerned. At the time of his greatest prosperity he was earning a bare thirty scudi a month, and he left little but unpublished manuscripts to the scapegrace of a son who survived him. So little interest did the man, apart from his music, arouse in the world in which he lived, that no one troubled to write his biography until he had been dead for over two hundred years. Thus the materials for constructing a living portrait of the man are of the scantiest. We must learn to know him in his music, or not at all.

It is probable that he was born in the town of Palestrina in or about the year 1526. His father was a well-to-do farmer, and the house in which he was born is still standing. Nothing is known of his childhood. Probably his musical instinct drew him to Rome at an early age. There is a pretty story that

he was heard singing in the Roman streets by the organist of Santa Maria Maggiore. It may be so, though it is recorded that as a man he had a poor voice. It is certain, at any rate, that he received his musical education at the hands of Gaudio Mell, a Netherlander, usually called Goudimel, who had come south and established a school of music in Rome. Palestrina was an apt pupil, and in 1544 he was appointed organist of the cathedral of his native town, where he remained for seven years. At that time most of the music sung in Italy was written by Netherlandish immigrants, and it is significant that Palestrina's first collection of masses, published in 1554, was the first book of music dedicated by an Italian to a pope. When he produced this work Palestrina was choirmaster in the Cappella Giulia of the Vatican. His music pleased Pope Julius III., and in spite of the fact that he was a layman, a married man and a bad singer, he was appointed to the Pontifical Choir. Julius III. died in the same year, and Marcellus II., who succeeded him, died after a reign of twenty-three days. Paul IV., the next pope, seems to have shared the general belief that a good voice is at least as essential a part of a chorister's equipment as fine musicianship, and he turned Palestrina into the streets with a pension of six scudi a month. Palestrina was soon appointed to the choirmastership of the Lateran, and it is a noteworthy indication of his pecuniary position that he took care to ascertain that his acceptance of the post would not entail the loss of his pension. It is not necessary

to follow Palestrina through his various changes of occupation, which affected in no way his career as a composer. It must suffice to say that in 1571 he was appointed Maestro di Cappella at St Peter's, a post which he retained during the reigns of seven pontiffs until the day of his death. The turning-point in his life came in the year 1563. The Council of Trent which was sitting at the time had turned its attention to the question of church music. The abuses then prevalent had reached a pitch which called for drastic reformation. In the hands of the Flemings the worship of mere technique had reached extravagant limits. Composers thought of nothing but devising new methods of displaying their own cleverness. For the spirit of the words which they set they cared not at all. The practice, healthy in its inception as we have seen, and provocative of important results in the development of music, of using popular tunes as the basis of sacred music had been carried to untoward lengths. Not only the tunes, but even the words of popular songs had found their way into the services of the Church. While one section of the choir was engaged in singing the words of the mass, another would be shouting a nonsense refrain of "Alleluja" or "Angelus," and another the ribald strains of the popular song upon which the mass, musically speaking, was founded. Even when this grossest abuse was absent, the music was rarely anything but a display of meaningless and inappropriate counterpoint, little tending to induce

devotional feelings in the minds of a pious congregation. So strong was the feeling in favour of sweeping reform that there was a powerful party in the Council in favour of abjuring polyphonic music altogether for church purposes, and returning to the unadorned plain chant of the Middle Ages. But there was another party which was determined not to give up polyphonic music without a struggle, and at the instance of Cardinals Borromeo and Vitellozzi, Palestrina was requested to compose a mass which, if accepted, might serve as a type of what the church music of the future should be. Palestrina composed not one mass but three, the greatest of which, the "Missa Papæ Marcelli," was performed under the auspices of the cardinal, and made so deep an impression upon all who heard it that the future of polyphonic music was assured. This is the story as given by Baini, Palestrina's first biographer, but it is only fair to the reader to point out that the laborious results of modern research tend to discredit many of the details. I am, however, inclined to look upon Baini's account as true in a higher sense than that of mere fact. The story, as it reached Baini, represented in a compact form the respective attitudes towards music of Palestrina, the Cardinals, and the Council of Trent, as interpreted by the united common-sense of seven generations of mankind. The massed experience of mankind is the one safe guide vouchsafed to us in our walk through this vale of tears, and this particular story, whether apocryphal or not, has won the imprimatur

of the ages. I have little doubt that some generations hence a critic will arise who will prove by documentary evidence that the story, let us say for example, of Bishop Stubbs and his "Bradshaw," has no foundation in fact. I only hope that his contemporaries will be wise enough to reply that the story was accepted by those who knew the Bishop as an admirably complete exposition of his attitude towards life, and as such it is truer than if it had actually happened. For a true story may easily give a very false idea of its subject, whereas an untrue one, having no evidence to back it up, lives only by virtue of its intrinsic truthfulness, and the fact that it has survived at all is the best reason for our accepting it.

Whatever were the facts of the case, Palestrina's mass was accepted by everyone as a model of what church music should be, and for the rest of his life he enjoyed such honour as could fall to the lot of the unquestioned prince of living composers. The "Missa Papæ Marcelli" is generally spoken of as his masterpiece on account of the circumstances of its composition, but of the ninety-five masses attributed to him many others are at least as fine, while among the almost innumerable motets, hymns and offertories which he composed, there are countless gems of the purest water.

Palestrina lived, as I have said, before the days of biographies and interviews, and barely a tradition remains to us of the man in his habit as he lived. But his character is written in his music in

unmistakable terms. Even if it were not known that he was dear to the saintly Philip Neri, in whose arms he died, his works would proclaim him a man of exquisite tenderness and of child-like simplicity. It is a pet theory of certain critics of the present day that the character of a man has nothing to do with the quality of his work. Morals being to a certain extent a matter of chronology and latitude, it is plainly conceivable that a sixteenth century Italian should be from a modern point of view the reverse of respectable and yet compose sacred music of complete sincerity, but it is safe to say that no one does well what he does not do with his whole heart. In the time of Palestrina the Church of Rome was the chief patron of painting and music, and painters and musicians alike were summoned to devote their principal energies to her glorification; but it is only necessary to compare, let us say, the works of Palestrina and Perugino to realise the difference between work done for the glory of God and work done for the glory of man. Even if we knew nothing whatever of the men it would be impossible not to recognise the fact that Palestrina was working with his heart and Perugino with his head. Both had the same mastery of technique, but the one wrote with an overflowing enthusiasm born of love to God and man, and the other painted for the purpose of making money and of exhibiting his own executive ability to the best advantage.

In the history of music Palestrina represents the

culmination of the polyphonic school of vocal music. His work has that complete maturity beyond which all progress is decay. He wrote no instrumental music, no music for a solo voice. He had not a touch of that revolutionary impulse which drives men upon new paths. He worked only with existing materials, but he brought music as he knew it to the highest conceivable point of perfection. His earlier works show strong traces of the Netherlandish influences under which he was educated; some of them have to the full the futile ingenuity which was characteristic of the school. But as his powers developed he found the secret of the true balance between science and expression. He learnt how to disguise his enormous erudition under a cloak of apparent simplicity. In Palestrina we first find the melodious suavity which has since become typical of Italian music. The roughness and crudity which is characteristic of even the greatest Netherlanders is softened in Palestrina to an even flow of delicate harmony. The difference in this respect between Palestrina and his great contemporary Orlando di Lasso is very marked. Lasso is often bolder in his harmonic devices, but there is an experimental feeling in much of his music which is not found in the mellow perfection of Palestrina. From a modern point of view Palestrina worked within very narrow limits, but within those limits his command of expression was extraordinary. Such discords as he employed are of the mildest description, and are always carefully prepared, but

the effect that they make is extraordinary. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that no more poignantly pathetic setting of the "Stabat Mater" than Palestrina's has ever been written, yet the harmonies employed are almost child-like in their simplicity. It is the perfect proportion of part to whole that is one of the secrets of Palestrina's power, and the perfect adjustment of means to end.

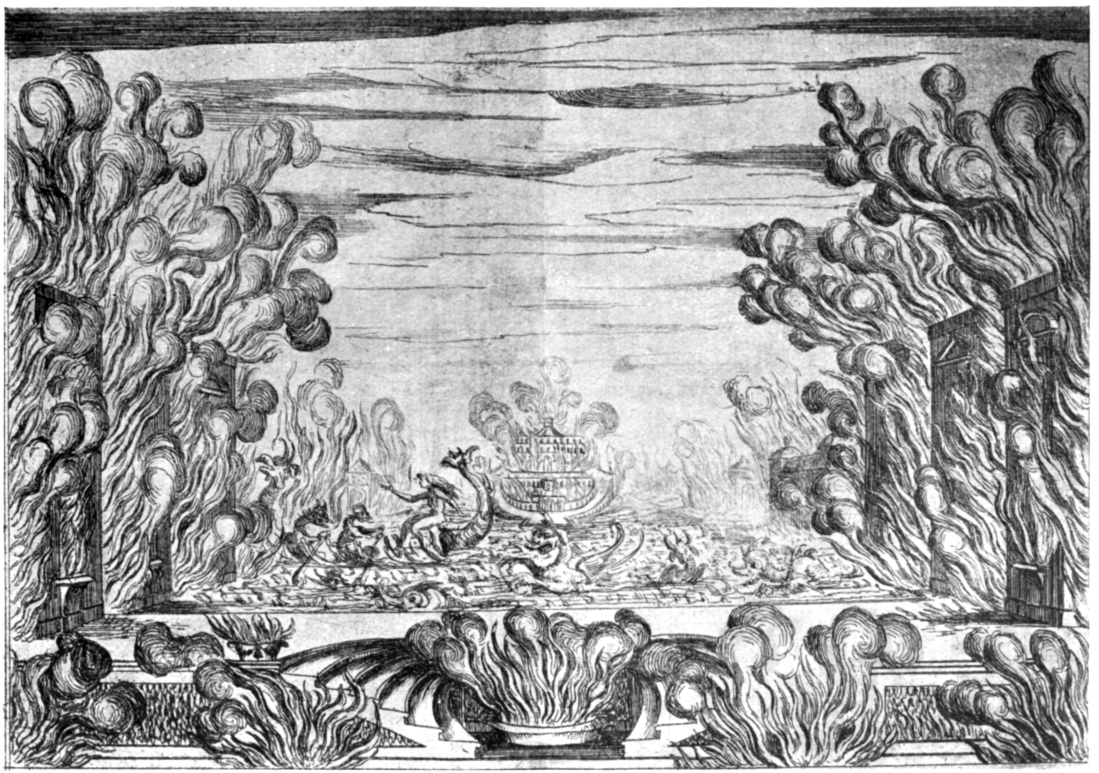
Nothing is more difficult than to describe music and the impressions produced by music in terms of plain prose, and the music of Palestrina in particular is of so delicate a fibre that it is almost impossible to find words in which to paint its distinctive charm. The prevailing note of it is its intense spirituality. Not a touch of earth degrades its celestial rapture. It voices the highest and purest mysticism of the Catholic faith as it never has been voiced before or since. Palestrina seems to view the mysteries of the Christian religion through a golden haze. Its external aspects were nothing to him, its inner meaning everything. The gross materialism of a later day, which emphasises the physical side of Christ's passion, would have been inexpressibly repugnant to him could he have conceived it. His music is inextricably bound up with the words to which it is allied and the acts of adoration which it illustrates. Apart from the services of the Church it loses its essential meaning, but in its proper sphere it still stands as the exemplar of ultimate perfection.

CHAPTER III

THE SECULARISATION OF MUSIC

THE opening of the seventeenth century saw a revolution in music such as has never since been paralleled. With Palestrina and his school music, as it then was known, reached a climax of perfection beyond which progress was scarcely conceivable. But the productions of this school, though perfect in degree, were narrow in kind. The church musicians of the sixteenth century, with all their highly-wrought technique, worked in a restricted field. The genius of their age tended to expansion and discovery. The result was unavoidable, though it came, as it seems to us, with strange suddenness. Leaving behind them, as it were, the gorgeous palace, so carefully erected by generations of earnest workers, the new generation of musicians set forth boldly upon an unknown and stormy ocean, in craft ill-built and without rudder or compass. That in time they arrived at the wished-for port was due certainly to no care or forethought on their part, but rather to the happy genius of the Italian race for adapting itself to circumstances and circumstances to itself. As a matter of fact the revolution was by no means so sudden or so drastic as it now appears to us. In spite of the

new departure which music took in the early years of the seventeenth century, the old school lived on under the wing of the Church for many years, at first untouched by the revolutionary ideas of secular composers and afterwards only gradually affected by them. But the rise of opera, of instrumental music, and in fact of secular music as a separate entity gave a new complexion to the whole world of music. The circumstances of the new departure would surprise us were they not repeated in almost every revolution of the kind. The founders of the secular school were resolved to make an entirely fresh start. Their primitive efforts owed nothing to the work of their predecessors. They had ready to hand a musical organisation of exquisite complexity and consummate finish. They ignored it altogether. For all the influence that he exerted upon Peri and Cavalieri, Palestrina might never have existed. The little band of Florentines who set themselves to create the new music worked as if unconscious that a thousand years of development lay behind them. They had no science and no experience. Their first strivings after expression are pathetically ineffective. By the side of the majestic oratory of Palestrina their works appear like the incomprehensible gibberish of childhood. Yet the truth was in them, and from the humble germ that they planted sprang one of the noblest developments of music. But before the fathers of opera were justified of their offspring, a weary path of experiment had to be



ITALIAN OPERA IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

SCENE FROM "LA LIBERAZIONE DI RUGGIERO"

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traversed. Unlike many sister forms of art, opera had to work out its own salvation. Printing and oil-painting sprang full-grown from birth. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the first book printed, the Mazarin Bible, and the first picture painted in oils, Van Eyck's "Adoration of the Lamb" for beauty of conception and perfection of execution have never been surpassed; but it was many years before opera became even articulate; even now, after three hundred years of incessant development, it is legitimate to believe that the zenith of its achievement has not yet been reached.

Opera, like so many other things, owed its foundation largely to accident. Late in the sixteenth century a small band of Florentine enthusiasts proposed to themselves the task of reviving the lost glories of Greek drama. Nothing was farther from their thoughts than the creation of a new art-form. They worked upon what they believed to be antiquarian lines; they wrote plays, and because they fancied that the Greek drama was sung or rather chanted in a kind of accompanied recitative, they decided to perform their plays in the same way. Their first efforts, such as Peri's "Euridice," which was performed in 1600 on the occasion of Henry IV.'s marriage to Maria dei Medici, and Caccini's work of the same name, have very little musical value. They are almost entirely set to a bare monotonous recitative, varied at rare intervals by simple passages of choral writing and short instrumental interludes. From beginning to end there

is nothing that can be called a tune, and the accompaniment merely supports the voice by occasional chords contributed by a harpsichord and three instruments of the lute type.

In the same year another attempt was made at finding a new method of musical expression, which was destined to have results fully as important as that of Peri and Caccini. In 1600 Cavalieri produced the first oratorio, "La Rappresentazione di Anima e di Corpo," which was performed at Rome in the Oratory of St Philip Neri. In general structure Cavalieri's work resembles that of his Florentine contemporaries, but it has decidedly more musical interest. The solo parts and the choruses are more expressive, and the instrumental sections are considerably more elaborate. Unfortunately Cavalieri died in the year in which his oratorio was produced, and little attempt seems to have been made to follow up his initial success until the time of Carissimi, whose oratorios are an interesting attempt to graft the new dramatic style upon the rich and solid polyphony of past ages. At Florence, on the other hand, the seed fell upon good ground. Several composers arose who produced works conceived upon the lines suggested by Peri, but no definite advance can be traced until the appearance on the scene of Claudio Monteverde.

Monteverde was the first trained musician who devoted himself to the new music. He had been thoroughly grounded in the traditions of the contrapuntal school. He had written madrigals

and church music in the manner of Palestrina, though even in these there are many traces of a desire to overstep the narrow boundaries within which composers of that epoch were cabined and confined. He was also an accomplished instrumentalist, having played for many years in the Duke of Mantua's private band. He was thus equipped for conquest in a manner to which his predecessors in the new field could lay no claim, and when his chance came he was able at once to put a fresh complexion upon the prospects of opera. It is only necessary to glance at the score of Monteverde's "Orfeo," the principal work of his which is available for study in an edition accessible to English students, to realise how great was the step that he made from the first tentative efforts of the Florentine amateurs. Their few tinkling lutes have given place to an orchestra of viols, contrabassi, organ, harpsichord, chitarroni, flutes, cornetti, and trumpets—in fact, strings, wood and brass complete —used with a surprising instinct for instrumental effect; their shapeless dialogue is transformed into often highly expressive recitative rising at times almost to the dignity of an aria; their childish harmonies are superseded by novel and daring experiments in discord, which, though they may sound ordinary enough to ears trained upon Richard Strauss, must have made the hair of conservative musicians in those days stand upon end. When we consider what Monteverde actually accomplished, how, working with practically no models, he pro-

duced a new art-form, founded upon a convention till then unknown to the world, how he equipped it with a new theory of harmony, a new method of vocal writing and a new system of orchestration, we cannot but admit that his was one of the greatest creative intellects that the world of art has ever known. But something must be said for the people of his own day, for the audiences which made his success possible. Had he fallen upon a dull, pedantic era like our own, when everything that has a tinge of novelty in it is hooted and derided by a compact phalanx of Philistines sworn to the extermination of all that ventures beyond the radius of their own bleared eyesight, he would have accomplished little or nothing. Fortunately for him he was born into an age of life and movement, an age when men's minds turned lightly to things new and beautiful. The Renaissance and the Reformation had struck blows from which the Church was still reeling. Old links were shattered, old formulas cast aside. The air throbbed with the passion of revolt. A new spring-time had burst upon the world. Just at the right moment a fortunate appointment drew Monteverde to Venice, of all the cities in Italy the most favourable for his work. The Venetians, among whom his lot was cast for the last thirty years of his life, were the Athenians of their time. In music and painting they had been the leaders of Italy for the best part of a century. Their quick wit, their restless ingenuity, their love of variety were proverbial. They welcomed the new art with