

# THE WEEK.

Fourth Year.  
Vol. IV., No. 47.

Toronto, Thursday, October 20th, 1887.

\$3.00 per Annum.  
Single Copies, 10 Cents.

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## MUSIC IN FICTION.

THE world maintains a curiously inconsistent position with regard to music. In the abstract people look on it as a great and noble thing. Practically, they care little for it or its professors, in comparison with the estimation in which they hold other arts.

Music has fared particularly badly at the hands of novelists, which is to be regretted, because, from its emotional nature, it lends itself readily to fiction and has undeveloped capabilities in that direction. The emotional romancer is fond of introducing "gush" about music, and will, after eulogising it with the regulation terms—"heaven-born"—"soul-thrilling," etc., show on the very next page by some absurd mistake, which he would not have made about any other subject, that he has not had sufficient interest to master the commonplace details of the art. These writers usually believe that genius and feeling will enable a person to give technical displays of great difficulty through the mere exaltation of the moment. In this respect some of our best novelists have been great sinners, showing a carelessness as to musical details that they would certainly not have evinced in their treatment of any other branch of art life. In "The Hand of Ethelberta," Mr. Hardy makes his hero, a musical genius who by dint of labour and perseverance has attained the position of a cathedral organist, accept an engagement to go to the house of a provincial magnate and, accompanied by his sister on the harp, play dance music at a ball. Conceive the outraged dignity of a Mus. Bac., or F.C.O., on being offered a fee to play at a dancing party. What would the dean and chaplain, the vicars choral, even the boys in his choir, think of such a thing? Such an occurrence is so perfectly impossible that the novel is marred by its introduction, as everything in the plot which centres in it is rendered meaningless.

Another illustrious offender is William Black, who, in one of his weaker novels, causes his heroine to be so greatly affected and overcome by the representation of the storm on the Fribourg Organ as to make resolutions which greatly affect her future. There is no doubt that a highly strung person of great sensibility can be so affected by music that in the emotional excitement it arouses he is capable of an intensity of introspection by which his innermost life and motives are revealed to himself with unwonted clearness; in this mental enlightenment things are seen more plainly; the moral side of the nature is abnormally aroused, and instantaneous resolutions may be taken which have a lifelong result. But, for a novelist to bring on such a supreme moment in the life of so sensible, clearheaded, and withal intensely musical a girl as the "Beautiful Wretch" merely by listening to such a claptrap piece of charlatanism as a representation of a storm on the organ, is an insult to art and, like the case already cited, causes a weakness of the plot by assigning an inadequate cause for an important result. So far as I am aware, there are few novels in which music is treated seriously as a rational study and regular vocation of

daily life, but there are certain exceptions, foremost among which stands Elizabeth Shepherd's celebrated novel, "Charles Auchester." Amid all its faults of "gush" and exaggeration and huddling together of incongruous characters, such as the marriage of Mendelssohn and Jenny Lind, faults which are apt to make the male readers skip largely,—amid all these faults shines forth in every page the true artist's feeling, and, what is very unusual in fiction, a knowledge of the canons and details of musical art rarely attained except by well-trained musicians. In this work the character of "Seraphael" (Mendelssohn) is sketched in a masterly manner; whilst the advice to young musicians put into the mouth of "Aronach" (Zelter) is worthy of being committed to memory by all students of the art. Another delightful novel in which music is treated with truth and ability is "The First Violin," by Miss Fothergill. This is a picture of art life in Germany in which music is treated ideally as a source of beauty and delight, and a purifying factor in the lives of those who practise it earnestly and practically as a profession, whose followers are neither mountebanks nor monkeys, but people who, like any other art workmen, devote their time to an employment which has its very practical and prosaic side.

In his "Comet of a Season," Mr. Justin McCarthy has a few remarks on a somewhat subtle phase of musical feeling, showing himself more at home on the subject than are most novelists when they come in contact with this ill-used art. He says: "To the vast majority of people the feeling music inspires is far more often one of association than of art. Something suggested by the air, some connection that is in our memory with some past time or a lost friend it is, and not the nature of the strain, which touches our heart and strikes 'the electric chain with which we are darkly bound.' The village lad enlists and goes to the war and is killed, and his sweetheart is made melancholy for years after by the first sound of 'Tommy, Make Room for Your Uncle,' on the barrel organ, because he used to whistle it and he is dead. The young wife, who died long ago, used to amuse her husband by rattling off on the piano the inspiring notes of 'Champagne Charley,' and the Charley of that day, now grown a middle-aged man, is made instantly melancholy by the sound of that ridiculous air, although he could hear without any outward sign of emotion the most devotional passage of the sublimest oratorio or the soul-piercing pathos of 'Che farò senza Eurydice.'" The novelist has here hit the secret of a great deal of fictitious musical sentiment. In this country, where so large a proportion of the population is of Gaelic descent, it is easy to render a roomful of people attentive and suffused by the performance of an air whose aggravating "snap" proclaims its Scottish origin. The air or words, or both, are connected in the minds of the hearers with patriotic feelings and personal reminiscences, and the resulting excitation of their susceptibilities is quite other than artistic. Frequently an air gains its power among uneducated people by association with certain words which are dear to them, as in the case of many hymns, in which the unmusical hearers, careless at first as to what notes their favourite words are sung to, gradually become accustomed to a certain sequence and, once their dull ears have acquired it, they love and prefer it to any other. It seems a pity that those who use this association of ideas as an emotional factor in church services do not care to remember that there is in nearly every congregation Mr. Matthew Arnold's cultivated "remnant," possessing some musical taste and feeling, to whom the only association of ideas the music of Moody and Sankey, for instance, suggests, is with burnt cork and negro minstrelsy, and for whom the devotional effect of the most impressive service is destroyed the moment such a tune is heard. Cultivated musicians occasionally have the quaint experience of being touched and moved by some air which is musically quite unworthy of attention simply because of its association with feelings or events long past. He feels curiously annoyed with himself for his inartistic weakness, but cannot, and perhaps would not if he could, rid himself of it. In the musician's mind, however, the music connected with his youthful feelings and early hopes is usually of a higher type by which is attained an emotional effect of the most intense and exalted character, because it is deep feeling aroused by really pure and high art. The Beethoven Quartett, the Mendelssohn Trio, which from his earliest childhood he was accustomed to hear in his father's house at the weekly meeting, where they were performed perhaps with more enthusiasm than efficiency by assembled friends—the concerts which he heard at intervals performed in public by great artists,—these are his