

THE MUSIC OF THE PSALMS.

BY J. F. ROWNOTHAM.

It is a curious question to set oneself to answer—What sort of music accompanied the Psalms in the Temple services of the Hebrews? The time was long ago, the indications in the Bible itself are few, and the collateral information on the point in the way of comparison and analogy strikingly meagre. Yet, by making use of the slender materials at our hand to the very uttermost, some light of an interesting nature may be shed upon an obscure subject; and our own appreciation of the Psalms, whether as objects for musical delivery in our churches or as themes for meditation and exposition, may thereby be considerably extended and illuminated.

What sort of music accompanied the Psalms? What sort of tunes were those divine hymns of praise sung to, in ancient days? What was the original and earliest form of delivery to which they were subjected? These three questions bear upon one another, and may very well be considered together.

In the first place, we may be very sure that there were regular and recognised tunes to the Psalms, for the inscriptions of several of the Psalms themselves are an evidence to this. When we find, for instance, the title of a Psalm quite at variance with the subject of the Psalm itself—of this there are many examples, e.g. the title of the 34th Psalm relates to David's behavior before Abimelech, while there is not a word on that subject in the whole hymn that follows—in such cases as these we have no option but to imagine that the title indicates the tune to which the psalm was to be sung. If so, its variance from the subject of the psalm becomes very reasonable and natural indeed. The same phenomenon may thus be studied in the Psalms of David which meets us in the poetry of Burns, where we find, for instance, the title of the tune "Lady Macdonald's Lament," and immediately following it a sonnet of passionate attachment from the poet to some dear friend, a song of happiness and rejoicing.

The Psalms, then, had regular tunes, some of which became so thoroughly identified with certain canticles that there was no way of alluding to them except by quoting the subject of the tune with which they were generally associated.

In addition to being sung to regular tunes, the singing was accompanied by the sound of various musical instruments. The instrumentalists were some priests some Levites, both of whom had their peculiar instruments. By allusion to the twenty-fifth chapter of the First Book of Chronicles, to the twelfth chapter of Nehemiah, and elsewhere, we shall find that the priests played the trumpet exclusively, while the Levites performed on cymbals, psalteries, and harps. The use of the trumpet by the priests seems to have been their peculiar privilege, of which they were perhaps somewhat jealous. The trumpet in its oldest form was made of ram's horn, but later in Israelitish history it was constructed of brass and even of gold. There were many traditions connected with the instrument. It was the trumpet which had caused the walls of Jerico to fall, and had struck the Midianites with panic. Doubtless a peculiar sacred character attached to the trumpet, which marked it out as *par excellence* the priests' instrument.

We are not to think of any elaborate harmony in the Hebrew Temple services such as probably characterised the performances of the Egyptians. To the Hebrews, music was not an art, but a voice in which they poured forth their soul to Him that "inhabited the praises of Israel." To dally with the musical relations of notes, to seek to enhance the effect of the composition by graceful combinations of instruments or sounds, were thoughts very far from the earnest minds of the genuine Hebrews.

"The singers and the trumpeters were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord," runs the passage in the Second Book of Chronicles; and earlier in the same chapter we read of "One hundred and twenty priests blowing with trumpets"—a scream of sound! Harshness is forgiven to that enthusiasm which wrestles for expression and sees heaven open before its eye. "For when they lifted up their voice," continues the sacred narrative, "with the trumpets and the cymbals and the instruments of music, and praised the Lord saying, For He is good; for His mercy endureth forever, behold then, the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the Lord; so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud. For the glory of the Lord had filled the house of God."

In this swallowing up of all into enthusiasm, this contempt of mere beauty and the fair outside of music, we may see the contrast between the sacred music of the Hebrews and that of the Egyptians. In the Egyptian temples there were the priestesses singing and rattling their aistrums, flutes playing, lyres and lutes swept by the hands of women—all beautiful and melodious in sound. The Hebrews, on the contrary, would not tolerate women within the Temples precincts; their choruses were composed entirely of men-singers; even boy's voices they were careless to take advantage of; and the national instrument of the land, the harp, was made to give way in the enthusiasm of devotion to the trumpet.

Any attempt to revive the actual melodies of the Hebrew music to which the Psalms were sung, seems predisposed to failure. One method of approaching such a result is to be particularly guarded against, and that is by reference to the music of modern Jews, who sing the Psalms at the present day in their synagogues with the same earnestness of tradition as ever, so far as concerns the words, but with respect to the music with complete alienation from primitive forms. So far from being of a primitive cast, the music of the psalmody in modern Jewish synagogues is of the

most florid and often the most meretricious order. Full of turns, trills, and unexpected runs, it possesses so to speak, a trivial character, instead of that pomp and sublimity which we should naturally look for in so exalted a musical sphere. In addition to this defect, there is very little common ground for comparison, even were an inquirer to adopt this means of reconstructing the past. The chants used by the German Jews are entirely different in complexion, style, and tune to those employed by the Italian Jews, and these latter in their turn are in striking contrast to the music which the Spanish Jews employ. Thus the attempt to make a *refacimento* of the old Hebrew Psalms by allusion to the chants of the modern Jews can hardly be proceeded with, owing to the want of a fixed standpoint, if no other reasons were against it.

We have, however, the testimony of one witness in the past to the ancient Hebrew chants—a witness who heard them in their antique form, and was a cultivated man to boot, whose opinion is therefore a most valuable one. This was Clemens Alexandrinus, who has recorded his opinion that the chants were very much like the Dorian mode of the ancient Greek music. Now the Dorian mode was the gravest and most simple of all the modes of music in Ancient Greece, and we have authentic specimens of it surviving whereby we can test its character. It has survived also in the First Tone, as it is called, of the Gregorian Song, which is traditionally called the Dorian mode, and was almost entirely composed, or at least arranged, in Constantinople, while Greek art and Greek music still possessed vitality in that capital of the East. In comparing the old Hebrew chants to the Dorian mode, however, Clemens Alexandrinus probably intended to convey no allusion to the actual notes of the chants, and meant presumably little more than to characterise thereby the chant's simplicity and earnestness. One of the celebrated Alexandrian's commentators says, "We must take this statement of Clement to refer to the earnestness and solemnity of the chants."

Ye earnest, very solemn, very sonorous, and, we may add, probably very low in pitch, were the ancient Hebrew psalms as they were sung in the services of the Temple. This last assertion about them, as to their low pitch, must be accepted merely as an hypothesis, however, though doubtless a true one. All ancient music was very low in pitch as compared with our own. Whether it were that the voices of mankind have become higher as centuries have advanced, or that the absence of women's and boys' voices from many systems of ancient music may have affected the pitch to profundity, or finally that the accompaniment of the voices in those days, instead of being underneath the voice as at present, was above it, and therefore depressed the voice instead of raising it—whatever were the cause, the fact remains as certain that, speaking generally, ancient music was very low as compared to ours. If we would restore to our minds in a popular way a conception of ancient music in general, we have but to refer to the bass of our own modern music. In its simple progressions, in its grave and sober outlines, and finally in its depth of pitch, we have a very fair, if superficial, reproduction of much of the music of antiquity, and, as it seems to us, of the Hebrew chants among the number.

But if we cannot actually lay down in so many words the very notes which the Psalms were sung to, we can at least furnish a very tangible piece of information relative to the manner in which they were sung. From the earliest times the Hebrews were marvellously attached to that form of singing which the Greek poets used to call "Amœbean," and which consists in dividing the song or the verse between two singers or two sets of singers, and causing each to disclaim half in turn. The very earliest song which occurs in the Bible is arranged in this peculiar form—the Song of Lamech:—

"Adah and Zilla, hear my voice:
Ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech.
For I have slain a man to my wounding:
And a young man to my hurt.
If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold:
Truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold."

Lamech the poet was the father of Jubal the minstrel, and there is a certain suggestiveness even in this fact, so far as the poem we have just quoted is concerned.

When the minstrel of the old patriarchal times gave place to the choruses of city life, the division of the verse into two parts, each reflecting the other, occasioned the division of the chorus into two groups, each responding to the other. When Miriam the prophetess took a timbrel in her hand and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dancing, Miriam answered them:

"Sing ye to the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously:
The horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea."

This last phrase probably represents the response of the women. In the same way, when two choruses came out to meet David after his victory over Goliath, one chorus sang, "Saul has slain his thousands;" and the other chorus answered, "And David has ten thousands."

This method of singing probably—we say probably, for we are unwilling to commit ourselves to a complete assertion to the fact—insinuated itself into the services of the Temple, and most likely not only were there two choruses of singers who answered one another, each declaiming one half of each verse of the Psalms, but two bands of instrumentalists likewise flanking the singers and supporting them at the proper places with their music. Sometimes even three divisions of singers and instrumentalists may have been employed, as is suggested by the Psalm, "Praise the Lord, ye house of Israel: praise the Lord, ye house of Aaron: praise the Lord, ye house of Levi." There is a tradition, or a strong supposi-