

HANDEL'S SACRED ORATORIO,  
"THE MESSIAH."

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IT may be said that nothing can adorn or elevate the history of the Incarnation, yet perhaps Handel's immortal oratorio may in some measure help us to feel its import and its power. For whatever expands and refines the mind, increases our power of appreciating the highest truths; and true music has in this way an incalculable influence. That is a very erroneous idea of music which regards it as a mere trivial amusement. That Handel, its greatest master, did not think it so, is evident from the severe study he gave to it; and from the fact that when he was complimented by Lord Kinnoul upon the entertainment he had given his audience by the performance of his oratorio *Messiah*, he said, "My lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wish to make them better." The Chinese say that the heart, finding neither words nor signs adequate to express its emotions, at last burst forth into music. And we must admire the truth as well as the beauty of that idea; for music is that lofty language which in its exquisite strains expresses the deepest feelings and arouses the most tender sympathies of the soul. It is a most valuable adjunct to poetry; for often the ideas expressed in true music are too profound even for the rich language of poetry, unassisted, to embody. The poet borrows its name for some of his finest ideas, its time to give beauty to his metres, and its tune to give harmony to his rhymes. The most perfect music is poetry expressed in sound.

Germany, the land of deep thought, has produced the greatest musicians that have ever lived; and their works are best appreciated in England, the birthplace of a Shakspeare, a Newton, and a Bacon. Even the finest poetry is only thoroughly understood in the language in which it is written; but true music is comprehended by the aesthetic mind of any nation, age, or tongue. Some of the greatest philosophers as well as poets have admired and cultivated music. Pythagoras discovered the ratio of its sounds, and added the eighth string to the lyre; Euclid turned to it his wondrous intellect, and reduced the ratios of Pythagoras to mathematical demonstration; Plato refreshed his giant mind by listening to its sounds and studying its beauties; Ptolemy, the astronomer, found time from his grand contemplation of the orbs of infinitude, to write upon it; and Vitruvius in his architectural works could not pass it over. Homer, Shakspeare, and Milton, have testified to its marvellous influence and power. Every one knows what Shakspeare (who had no mean knowledge of human nature) said of it,—

"The man that hath no music in himself,  
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,  
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;  
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,  
And his affections dark as Erebus;  
Let no such man be trusted."

St. Augustine, speaking of St. Ambrose's music, said, "How did I weep on thy hymns and canticles, touched to the quick by the voices of thy sweet-attuned choir! The voices flowed in mine ear, and the truth distilled into my heart, whence the affections of my devotions overflowed, and tears ran down, and happy was I therein." Bishop Beveridge said,

"Music calls in my spirit, composes my thoughts, delights mine ear, re-creates my mind; and so not only fits me for the after business, but fills my heart at the present with pure and useful thoughts; so that when music sounds the sweetliest in mine ears, truth commonly flows the clearest into my mind." And who has not felt the influence of nature's music? What more joyful than the song of lark or thrush, or sweeter than the "cheerful tender strain" of that "messenger of calm decay," the redbreast? Or what more conducive to calm and earnest thought, than to wander amongst the stately pines in the quiet of evening, when the wind, bringing upon its wings, the sweetest perfumes of the flowers, plays amongst the branches its solemn chant; and the nightingale breathes upon the air its exquisite soprano, whilst the murmuring of distant streams and the gentle rustling of leaves form the low and soft accompaniment? If there were more attention given to nature's music, and if the great masters were more studied, we should hear less of the fashionable drawingroom combinations of meaningless scales, trills, and finger-trickery, and more of true music. The compositions which seem to possess such extraordinary attractions for so many of the fair pianists of the present day leave one in doubt, at first, whether the performer is trying the instrument previously to commencing; then we think that a very badly arranged manual exercise is being played; next we form the conclusion that the first note having been given, the whole instrument has to be ransacked and drummed upon to find the second, until at last, as we listen in painful perplexity, the end is announced to us by the loud bang of a very doubtful chord. Of all compositions of this class, those styled so aptly "variations" are the most objectionable. They seem as if some melody is vainly endeavoring to struggle forth, but is prevented on all sides by the discords, irregularities, and anile inventions by which it is overwhelmed. They are like many of the commentaries on "The Pilgrim's Progress," or Shakspeare's works; some one, for want of better employment or an original idea of his own, seizing on some master's work, and mutilating and defacing it with constant interruptions, or thrusting it into a cloud of ignorance and absurdity. It should be remembered also that manual dexterity alone, no more makes a musician, than the ability to mix colours does a painter, or the quantity of paint used, a picture. And although all must admit how much the musical art originally owed to Italy, I confess to the opinion that the music of Italy is mostly very superficial in its effect, and greatly inferior to that which Germany has given us. For although some of the Italian operatic airs are very pretty, yet they do not bear often repeating, for after a few hearings they lose their attractions and animation; whereas one of Handel's or Beethoven's melodies we could listen to almost for ever, and then not tire of it, but only see fresh beauties by its repetition. One of Handel's oratorios is as infinitely superior to the most finished Italian opera, as Canterbury Cathedral is to a lady's boudoir.

It is notable also that the greatest musicians have exerted their most matured genius, and utmost powers, upon sacred music, evidently from a sense of its superiority to any other kind. Thus Handel, during the last years of his life, composed, with one exception, no more than sacred music; his operas are scarce-