

Music the Exponent of Emotion
Der Kritiker in der Kritik: Die Rezensionen zu Eduard
Hanslicks Traktat „
“ (1854–1857)
Dwight's Journal of Music: A Paper of Art and Literature
Herausgegeben von John Sullivan Dwight

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21. Juli 1855

1 Dwight's Journal of Music: A Paper of Art and Literature. Whole No. 172. Boston, Saturday, July 21, 1855. Vol. VII. No. 16.

“Every one, as a child, has experienced a pleasure in studying the changeable forms of the Kaleidoscope. Such a Kaleidoscope is Music, although of an incommensurably higher grade. It brings before us, in a constant series of new developments, beautiful forms and colors, now softly blending and now harshly contrasting, yet always full and symmetrical. The difference between the two consists in this, that whereas the tone-kaleidoscope is the immediate emanation of an Art-working mind, the other visible one is but an ingenious mechanical toy. Would we elevate the operation of colors to a level with Music, and try to illustrate that operation by begging of the latter art, we should necessarily fall upon the device of the color-piano or the eye-organ, the invention of which evinces that, as far as relates to form, the two phenomena rest upon a common basis.

“It is an extremely difficult task to describe this independent beauty, or that which is specifically musical in the Art of Tone. Since music is the representative of nothing pre-existing in Nature, and has no tangible contents, any description of it must consist either in dry, technical terms, or poetical imaginings. Her province, in fact, ‘is not of this world.’ All the fantastic descriptions, characteristics and outward views of a Tone-work are figurative or erroneous. Where another art admits of description, it is here only metaphor. It is time that Music should be imbibed, as Music, since its proper comprehension, as well as its true enjoyment, must proceed from itself.” — Dr. E. Hanslick, Vom Musikalisch Schönen.

The author from whom we extract the above remarks, in a treatise on the “Musically Beautiful,” comes forward into the arena of musical aesthetics with the assumption that music, although it be the exponent of feeling, cannot justly lay claim to all that has been attributed to it in that department. We think that, in coming into conflict with those old and established claims, he has advanced some new ideas, and that he will find a school of thought ready to give him a hearing, and follow in his footsteps. The necessity we always feel of connecting thoughts of an orchestral nature with outward forms, leads to the constant alliance between musical imagery and some counterpart sought for in nature.

We profess to describe feeling by the thousand combinations of tones, that constitute the works of musical invention, but we have never, as yet, produced tangible names for these tone-emotions. If we adopt the analogy of colors, we can make some nearer approach to a representation or detail of feeling; yet, even with this aid, we can fall upon no effective language.

If each distinct musical idea, as we are wont to term it, were a language, it should be adapted to but one set of emotions, and should belong to them alone. It would not dare to depart over into any other province of emotion, but would represent a word-language in a musical sense, by remaining the exponent of emotion in one sphere only, and extending to no other. Such are the usages of written language, every grade of thought having its distinctive phraseology and forms of expression, so that no intellectual idea can spring up, without having its special representation in written speech. The pretensions of Music, on this score, are vague, doubtful and assuming.

Where the same forms of melody are adapted to similar or congenial emotions, we have no reason to doubt the claims of the Tone-Art; but where we find the same forms of composition, or what is usually termed musical ideas, used to express opposite subjects or contrasting feelings, we may reasonably conclude that Music appears before us with entirely false pretensions. The poet is able, through his ornamental structure of word-forms, to give us a subjective picture of Niagara Falls; but when OLE BULL attempted the same thing before a credulous amateur audience, he could do no more than work their imaginations up into a false belief of what they could not actually realize. His gentle chromatic rising and falling of stringed sounds, expressive of a rising and descent of emotion, the sudden burst of bass notes and chords, intimating, perhaps, an entrance into the sublime, may do, no doubt, for the occasion represented; yet the identical combinations of tone, grouped in almost the same position, have been used to describe scenes at total variance with Niagara Falls, and acting with opposite influences to those of this great natural wonder. The noted "Crambam," the drinking-song and jovial accompaniment of the German students' carousals, is adapted to sacred melody by our American psalmists, a circumstance that would tend to show, if music were a language in the common acceptation, that there is but a shade of difference between the incitements of piety and those of the bacchanalian bowl.

This we may say in regard to the identity of tone-language to express opposite emotions; but the more difficult problem is involved in the question of the manner in which an outward scene can become the subject of a tone-composition. We are willing to admit that an outward action of Nature can give rise to a successful imitation of sounds, and thus produce an entertaining piece, the harmonious combination of the master improving upon the monotonous operations of external nature; but when instrumental music attempts to exhibit the subjective workings of the same scene, it departs, invariably, into the province of vague theory.

Before Music can become a language of emotion, in a strictly analogous sense, she must, necessarily, adapt all her tone-structures to specific purposes, allowing no one to act in the place of the other, but each to preserve its appropriate and definite class of emotional thoughts. What the exact state of the soul may be, while dwelling with mysterious and delighted gaze upon some great natural wonder, neither poet nor tonepainter has ever succeeded in revealing, let his work have been ever so loftily conceived, or his combinations ever so grandly brought together. Yet the right to that bold task can more justly be claimed by the musical composer than by any other, since the most highly wrought species of mental inspiration proceeds from the influence of modulated sounds, and the state into which they elevate the imagination is, necessarily, akin to that produced by Nature's expressive silence.

We can, however, give another construction to the term language, which would not altogether exclude it from the domain of Music, and that is when it addresses the

mind by association.

When the Ranz des Vaches is heard in distant lands by the Swiss mountainer, it recalls the memories of the past. It does ineffably more than this, by raising up before the mind's eye the whole picture of native scenery, outwardly grand and beautiful, renewing the forgotten tales of life, and recounting long-buried emotions. In effecting all this, Music is a language, addressing not only the sense, by the pictures of tangible Nature, but appealing to the soul by a power of tone-thought which nothing else could supply. In so far it is language, but becomes so only by association.

To describe a scene never beheld by the auditor of the piece, through intricate tone-combinations, is one of those erroneous assumptions alluded to by the philosophical writer, from whom we have made the foregoing extracts. Music can describe only that which the hearer has seen, and in doing this, association furnishes the key to the comprehension of the object of description. But even here it is indispensable that the hearer should have wandered amid the scenes and localities described by the tone-master, and enjoyed there with him each specific feeling. He must needs have seen the outward object as he felt the inward movement, which was intended to be fitted to that peculiar situation. This is all that descriptive music, subjectively designed, is able to perform. To attempt local description, therefore, except by the powers of association, to lead the imagination into an evening study, a woody shade, a twilight musing, is a fiction, and should be expelled from the theory of musical invention and romance. If we view it in the degree or intensity of feeling it shows forth, the analogy to language becomes more striking. Here, although, the precise situation of the soul is not exhibited, yet the degree of its elevation is so nearly reached, as to become description, in a musical sense, and for which we have no expressions in a written terminology. To display this elevation, as well as a corresponding depression, is the aim and destiny of the Tone-Art. These antipodes of human emotion have no adequate psychometer in any form of practical word-language, and it has never belonged to the attributes of Music to record the intensity of feeling by the instrumentality of a harmonious mechanism; the interpreter, if not the language, of the soul's experience.

If we inquire into the reason why the musical composer selects a visible picture in order to give a name to his composition, we can find no other explanation than in the fact that the soul's perceptions have no nomenclature. By referring the imagination of the hearer to a visible scene, a common emotion is at once called into activity; hence musings by twilight are, in some measure, identical; and if a certain theme becomes associated with this occasion, it exercises the part of language. All word description must, necessarily, be confined within the limits of sense, expressing that which is tangible and felt, only in as far as it is seen.

Upon this ground also we find the mere popularity of music to rest, in the same manner that a popular literature proceeds from the actual events of life, the descriptions of noted scenes and genre details.

The pictorial art places before us all the outward scenes of life and nature, but how deeply the soul felt in the study of those scenes it has never yet revealed. This attribute belongs to the Art of Tone, and in denying its claims to do all it pretends to, we refer more to the phraseology of description than the intensity of effect which lies in music.

What it describes it does musically, and its nature can be comprehended only musically, and by those initiated into the whole sphere of musical thought, as we are obliged to term it. When the pictorial art resigns this species of internal description to the Tone Art, the latter may be said to begin where the former leaves off, but that both can move within the same sphere, is impossible.

To the painter emotion is a sustenance which is visible in the emanations of his pencil and breathes throughout his works. Yet the emotions conceived by him and

giving character to his finest touches of lines and colors, lights and shades and proportions are described in the language of the pictorial art, which approaches the nearer to a language the more visible it becomes. The tone artist, treading upon ground which the painter cannot reach, or where he forbears to step, we think is somewhat justified in laying claims to a higher destiny than the other arts are admitted to. In the history of emotion itself we might find a clue to enable us to decide upon this disputed problem. Every one's own experience tells him the relative degrees of emotion proceeding from the study of the fraternal arts, and this degree of emotion is the true criterion by which to weigh the real worth and moral influence of Art. In judging of his own favorite branch of art each one decides according to the intensity of his feelings in its pursuit, and hence we should judge its whole value depended upon the sustenance derived from emotional influences.

It is a remarkable truth that the world of sense often leads us into the world of Tone. The most romantic localities are full of musical inspiration, and where the soul cannot discharge itself by the language of the pencil it resorts to music to express its joy. This fact has doubtless given rise to many pleasant fictions in the shape of outward scenes claimed to be represented by musical compositions. The music might have been written at the place attempted to be described, but it could not have been written of it. It exemplifies, however, very forcibly the necessity of the cultivation of the Euterpean art, leading us a step higher than the platform of Nature into the ethereal region which we term harmony of tone.

If, as we have already assumed, the composer begins where the artist ceases, if the limits of imitative art form the starting point of musical feeling, we can perceive the wide range left for its enjoyment. This lies extended over the whole world of abstraction, and the inventions of a musical fancy having no counterpart in Nature, no reality of substance to copy, but proceeding from the combinations of pure thought itself, always destroying its own harmonies in order to be able to reproduce them, and soaring far beyond the world of sense, its illimitable nature can, in some measure, be appreciated.

As this branch of human development extends we shall always be adding to our fund of musical thought, for which we have as yet but feeble expressions, and these derived from the analogies of a language which are but an indifferent substitute for that which we really need. Our nomenclature of musical thought must become more exclusively musical, before it can lay open its real meaning and designs to the mind and imagination. Every combination of tones, every group of symphonious representations, all the swells and cadences of rhythmical compositions, all those dashes of discord, which in BEETHOVEN, precede the beautiful ascents into harmony, and to which we could give no better name than the Beethovenism of tone-thought; all these and a thousand other forms should have a ready vocabulary, to render the science we are but entering upon, complete and open to the understandings of all. J. H.