

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

Are We Outgrowing the Opera?

We had a season of Opera in Cincinnati this winter produced without regard to cost as to scenery and appointment with fairly good artists and a most excellent orchestra. The operas selected were of various schools. The season should have been a success; and yet it left upon many an impression of disappointment. Many people found themselves comparing this season unfavorably with some season of their younger days. The music was there, surely because Thomas made it; but why were the same voices in the same orchestra less enjoyable than when heard without pomp and circumstance in the Musical Festival. My answer would be because the dramatic environment detracted from them. Music like poetry is largely powerful as a suggestion by the aid and under the influence of which each of us must shape the pictures which are suggested according to the tone of his mind and the power of his imagination.

Poetry is less adaptable than music to the mood of the hearer because that which is written in our language is more intelligible than that which is told in music; so we are by the power of words forced to sympathize with the spirit of the poet if we would fully enjoy his work. Hence the artificial aids of the stage which supplement the imagination and represent in all its details the picture which the poet paints, cause us to enjoy theatrical representations more frequently and more certainly than operatic performances; and they always give us pleasure unless our perception of the poem or subject which is dramatized is different from that which is represented. The scenery of the stage, the properties and the costumes of the actors all fitted to the demands of the scenes of which the poet has written which they seek to portray all aid us in more fully entering into the spirit of the poet's subject and his treatment of it. When, however, the theme is refined, the environment subtle, and the touch of the artist delicate, we can often more fully enjoy our own reading of the poem where each is free to picture the scenes to suit his own contemplation of them. To those who are fully susceptible to the power of music the dramatic auxiliaries are more frequently clogs upon rather than aids to their enjoyment. This is natural because for one reason much of the pleasure which music gives us is derived from what it suggests. The harmony of sweet and concordant sounds gives pleasure even to animals; but beyond the charm which soothes the savage beast lies that deeper and higher enjoyment in which the imagination takes part. This can rarely be added to by stage effects which generally jar upon and disturb those mental pictures which the music calls up, and in the contemplation of which we thoroughly enjoy music.

Another reason for that preference which many people have for music pure and simple and without any artificial aids exists in the fact that it is not natural for people to go about singing to each other of their joys and sorrows, so that the imagination gets no aid but a shock instead when the tenor and soprano skip up and down the scale and all over the stage in their efforts to tell each other of his or her state of mind. Dramatization does not help our enjoyment of the music they sing, but rather lessens it. How much more do we enjoy the same music when we can sit with closed eyes and let its strains recall and spread out before us a love scene of our own. It matters now (*sic*) whether this picture be

a scene we have lived or one we have yet to live. In either event we picture it as we would have it, which can never be done for us by another. Take for example the love-music in the third act of Faust or in the last scene of Aida. What man or woman needs any pasteboard and tinsel to fill out his own appreciation of the meaning of that music. To a lover of music and the other sex the sight of a fat, middle-aged soprano about who's ample waist a tenor, probably young enough to be her son, is pretending to try to pass his arms while they blow into each other's faces odors of onions and garlic does much to destroy the power of the beautiful strains the meaning of which they parody. The music has elevated our ideal so that we can not enjoy the counterfeit and the action of this distracts and prevents a full enjoyment of the music; so that we enjoy neither. The unpleasant impressions which operatic performances leave upon us are added to by the further fact that very few performers can be found who have musical talent and voice as well as histrionic ability. One sense or the other is always shocked. To fully enjoy the glorious sweetness of Bongnoli's voice one has to close fast his eyes. The site of his wooden action destroy (*sic*) any spell that music ever wove.

Where music is shallow the action of the players is less likely to be discordant and often even accomplishes its nominal object and adds to the picture. This is always true of march music with the marching of the military band on the stage in the first scene of the third act of Faust for instance; the soldiers chorus gains much in effect. Another noteworthy example of this is found in the music of Offenbach or that of Sir Arthur Sullivan. Dramatization helps them both. When the music is deep enough to be without time or jingle, no person who really enjoys such music wants any thing to help on his enjoyment. My conclusion is therefore that we are growing away from the opera. The character of our everyday music is improving and the number of people who appreciate good music is growing; and my prediction is that the twentieth century will see the opera as a musical instrument placed upon the shelf with the sackbut and the tom-tom.

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