

AN HOUR WITH ROBERT FRANZ.



In the quiet Prussian university town of Halle, where Handel was born two hundred and eight years ago, there lived until October 24, 1892, one of the greatest song-composers the world has ever seen — in some respects the greatest of them all. Like Beethoven, who never heard a note of music from his thirty-second year to his death at the age of fifty-seven, Robert Franz had been deaf almost a quarter of a century. The muscles of his hands also were partly paralyzed, and it was with difficulty that he could write a note, while he ceased composing years ago. There he lived in a modest house in the large university town, seventy-seven years old, yet almost completely ignored by his countrymen.

The life of Robert Franz was almost as uneventful as that of his idol Bach. As in the case of so many other great composers, his parents refused to recognize or encourage the musical talent which he showed in his childhood, and at school he was punished severely and repeatedly for yielding to his impulse to add a harmonic part to the choral melodies sung by the other children! He reached his fourteenth year before he himself or any one else suspected that he was destined to be a musician. One day he accidentally came across an old-fashioned piano, or spinet, in the house of a relative, and, as he relates in an autobiographic sketch, this decided his fate. He now went to work, unaided, to unravel the mysteries of musical notation. His devotion finally softened the heart of his father, who bought the old piano for him, and put him under a cheap teacher. Neither this rickety instrument, however, nor his incompetent teacher satisfied him long, and he soon found himself going from church to church on Sundays to hear his favorite chorals, and perchance to get permission from a friendly organist to take his place for a few minutes.

His next step was to try his hand at composing, again unaided; the result being such that, as he remarked in later years, if any youth should come to him with similar productions he would advise him to choose anything but music for a profession. He neglected his other studies at the same time, and at twenty his father sent him to pursue his beloved art under Friedrich Schneider at Dessau. Two years later he re-

turned with a number of compositions for piano and for voice, to which he continued to add, although his father's fears that music would prove a profitless art for him were shown to have been well founded, for he was unable to get a position or remunerative employment. For this disappointment he found consolation in a loving study of the scores of Bach and Handel, and especially of the songs of Schubert, which made an overwhelming impression on him, and kindled an enthusiasm for that form of art that definitively decided his fate and his vocation.

One result of these studies was that he pitilessly destroyed all his own compositions, and for five years did not again venture to write anything, devoting much of his time to a study of philosophy and esthetics at the university. It required the magic power of love to arouse his creative faculties from their torpor; and just as Schumann, in the year of his marriage, turned to song, and in that twelvemonth wrote over a hundred of his inspired *lieder*, so Franz, though in a more modest measure, came forward as a song-composer, and published a collection of twelve *lieder*, which he dedicated to Schumann. At that time Schumann was approaching the end of his career as critic and professional discoverer of musical geniuses, and his trained eye immediately saw that here was a new light piercing the darkness of Philistinism. These songs, he declared, belonged to the noble modern style which shows what great progress the *lied*—and the *lied* alone—has made since the days of Beethoven. "Poetic singers only can do them justice; they are best if sung in solitude and in the twilight." And so on for a whole page, culminating in the remark, "Were I to dwell on all the exquisite details, I should never come to an end." Subsequent volumes were dedicated to Mendelssohn and to Liszt, who were no more obtuse than Schumann. Mendelssohn wrote to him: "May you give us many, many more works like this, as beautiful in conception, as refined in style, and as original and euphonious." And Liszt wrote his well-known and admirable essay, which, proportionately, did as much to establish Franz's fame as his Weimar essays on Wagner's early opera did for that exiled and unappreciated composer four decades ago.

But while those geniuses, with Chopin, Gade, Henselt, and others, thus recognized and appreciated a fellow-genius, the critics and the public were slow in following suit, and poor Franz



ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON.

FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY C. HÜPFNER.

ROBERT FRANZ.

shared the fate of Schubert — his *lieder* sold for a mere song, and he had to earn his scant daily bread as organist, director of the academy of singing, and lecturer on music at the university. The trouble with his ears, which began as early as 1841, and was aggravated by the whistle of a locomotive, gradually became more and more serious, and in 1868 it reached such a point that he was obliged to give up all his duties. As the income from his songs was a mere trifle, he would have been obliged literally to starve, or become an inmate of a poorhouse, had it not been for the generosity of Liszt, Joachim, and Frau Magnus, who gave a series of concerts in Germany, England, and Austria-Hungary which yielded \$22,000, on the income from which Franz was able to subsist modestly but comfortably for the last twenty years of his life.

Such, in brief, is the story of Robert Franz's life. My wife and I had been for many years ardent admirers of his compositions, and in July, 1891, on our way from Berlin to Bayreuth, we took the opportunity of stopping for a few hours at Halle, in order to make his acquaintance. As we walked up the handsome Leipziger-strasse to the market-place, we were confronted by the Handel statue — a sight which harmonized perfectly with our quest of the great restorer and writer of Handel's scores. It was lunch-time, and, espying a restaurant on one side of the square, we had something to eat, and then asked the waiter to bring us the city directory. Imagine yourself looking in a city directory for Mozart, or Beethoven, or Schubert, with the intention of calling on him! The name was soon found, and quite imposing did it look with all the appendages — Franz, Dr. Robert, Universitäts-Musikdirector, Königlich Bairischer Maximilian Orden für Kunst und Wissenschaft, Herzoglich Sächsisches Coburg-Gothaer Verdienstkreuz für Kunst und Wissenschaft; König-strasse 38, I. The "Dr." prefixed to his name recalled the fact that the University of Halle had made him an honorary doctor for his valuable services to art in editing the scores of Bach, Handel, and other old masters.

So König-strasse 38, I. was to be our goal. It was found without any difficulty, and it was a pleasure to reflect that, thanks to the generosity of Liszt, Joachim, and Frau Magnus, we did not have to search for the great song-writer in a garret, but found him occupying spacious rooms on the second floor of a large apartment-house on one of the main streets, facing an open place with trees and shrubbery. We had been told in Berlin that his wife had died only three months before, so we did not know whether he would receive a visit from strangers. The parlor was furnished in the usual simple German style. The door presently opened, and in walked the immortal tone-poet, a rather large man, with

a broad face, square chin, and in a certain way resembling Liszt. His forehead receded more than Liszt's, but there was much the same expression of firmness about his mouth. He was somewhat bald, but his hair was still only iron-gray, although he had passed his seventy-seventh birthday. He held out his hand with a cordial gesture and greeting, but not a cordial pressure, for, alas! of each of his hands all but the first two fingers are paralyzed.

"Do you understand German?" was his first question, and, without waiting for an answer, — for the best and saddest of reasons, — he continued, "I, alas! am absolutely deaf, and if you wish to say anything to me I must beg you to write it on one of those slates."

Two ordinary school-slates, with moist sponges attached, lay on the piano. I wrote a few words on one of them.

"America again!" he exclaimed, after reading what I had written. "Most of my friends seem to be Americans. I do not say this as a mere polite phrase, but because it is actually true. I assure you that of every six letters I receive five are from America or England. The Germans do not seem to be aware of my existence. You know how it is in this country. Envy and jealousy are so rampant that a man who does anything that rises above the average is in danger of being torn to pieces.¹ We have hundreds of musicians, each of whom has a deskful of manuscripts which he is anxious that the world should appreciate; hence each of these men regards every one else as his natural rival and enemy, who must be belittled or ignored as much as possible. Other nations are proud of their authors and composers, — look at France, England, and Italy, — but the Germans ignore theirs till they are dead, and then they erect statues to their memory."

He arose to get a copy of the London "Musical Record," which was lying on the piano. "You have noticed, perhaps," he said, "that my name has been bandied about a good deal lately in England apropos of the use of my edition of the 'Messiah' at a music festival. It is a curious thing," — and he laughed heartily, — "but Mr. Proust has told those critics the truth. The old masters did not elaborate their scores in all the details, but filled them out at the organ during the performance. For modern purposes these missing parts have to be filled out, as far as possible, in the spirit of the old masters. Bach and Handel were my earliest masters, my friends and companions through life, and I have done my best to preserve

¹ I cannot vouch for the exact words used by Franz, which, moreover, were spoken in German. But as I noted down his remarks minutely, immediately after leaving him, I can, at least, vouch for the substantial accuracy of what is here recorded.



ENGRAVED BY R. G. TIETZE.

FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY C. HÖPFNER.

MADAM FRANZ. (MARIE HINRICHS.)

their spirit in my additional accompaniments. Some of my 'bold changes' that the English critics have complained of were simply restorations of Handel's text which Mozart had altered! You see, there are pedants in music, as in every other department of learning—men who swear by the letter and miss the spirit. I was once present at the funeral services of a very orthodox minister. His colleague, in his eulogy of the deceased, dwelt on the fact that he had believed so firmly in the letter of the Bible that if he had read therein that the city of Halle is situated in America he would have believed it.

"Besides," he continued, "we must remember that Bach and Handel were human beings, who made errors like all other mortals, which their editors to-day must not overlook. They wrote enormous quantities of music—it would take a man forty years merely to copy what Handel or Bach wrote. Among Handel's manuscripts in England there was found a detail which neatly showed how rapidly that composer wrote. On the top of a left-hand page of a large score sand was found adhering to the notes, showing that before the ink had had time to dry on the first lines of that page Handel's pen must have reached the bottom of the next page!" He rose again, and brought us the facsimile reprint of the "Messiah" score. "Here you can see how hastily the work was done: here are a few lines canceled with a stroke of the pen, here a bar blotted out with a daub of ink, and here" (this seemed to amuse him particularly) "see how he has actually blotted out notes with his finger, too impatient to erase them." He closed the score, and continued: "Ah, but these were the greatest of all masters! To-day music appears to be manufactured; in Mozart's days it grew, and still more so in the days of Bach and Handel: their thoughts came spontaneously, and shaped themselves naturally, like crystals. To-day we have music which has neither melody nor harmony nor rhythm. Moreover, the theater has absorbed all our musical life; all the arts contribute, but not always their best. And—to use a homely simile—it is the waiter who serves the dishes that gets all the honors, while the cook, whose skill has devised them, is unseen and uncared for. You read about that opera-singer the other day—horses unhitched, drawn to hotel by enthusiasts. But the composer whom the singer used as a pedestal, who cares for him?"

He paused a moment, and I wrote on the slate, "Do you still compose songs?"

"No," was the answer; "when a man has reached his seventy-sixth year he does not care to compose any more." Then he suddenly exclaimed, "But do you know my wife's songs?"

while a sort of triumphant expression came over his face.

I had not seen them, and he brought a copy from the piano—a collection of songs by Marie Hinrichs. To the eye they looked much like his own songs. As the reader doubtless knows, there is an individual appearance about each composer's (printed) scores that makes it easy for an expert to tell at a glance the author of a piece placed before him; and as Clara Schumann's songs resemble her husband's, why should not those of Marie Hinrichs resemble Franz's?

"Ah, but those *are* songs!" he exclaimed. He placed his finger on one, and followed the melody as he hummed it. Being absolutely deaf, he could not get all the intervals of the melody correctly, but only the general drift—a point of psychologic interest, for his speaking voice was always correctly modulated, and had none of the harsh quality so common to the deaf. It was indeed uncommonly expressive, had an insinuating emotional quality, and sometimes rose to a pitch of real eloquence, especially when he was speaking of his wife. After humming the melody, he read the underlying poem by Heine to show how beautifully the two harmonized. It was most pathetic to see the deaf old master, shut out from the tone-world he had helped to create, dwelling for fifteen minutes on the songs of his wife—of his own he seemed to have no thought—with tears repeatedly rolling down his cheeks. "Her picture is in the other room—did you see it? No? Then I must get it." Placing it in my wife's hands, he exclaimed: "There, take a good look at that! Such a face you will never see again!" And we could not but reflect what an inestimable boon it must have been for the poor composer in his more than twenty years of deafness to have such a companion, whose kindness of heart is mirrored in her countenance. No wonder he worshiped her above his own works, above even his idols, Bach and Handel. "Her eyes are black," my wife whispered; "now I know why his black-eyed song is one of his best" ("Weil' auf mir, du dunkles Auge").

I asked him if he would kindly copy for me a few bars from one of his favorite songs. "I am very sorry," he replied, "but my paralyzed fingers make it so difficult for me to write that I have not even sent a letter yet to my daughter, who has been absent several weeks." Nevertheless he sat down, and copied a few bars with a pencil. I told him that I intended to write an article about him for an American magazine, and asked for permission to illustrate it with his own and his wife's portrait.

"My own pictures," he explained, after resuming his seat, "are all bad; I have never

succeeded in getting a good one. My face is so completely changed by expression that when I sit down before that infernal machine I am not myself. This picture, which you will get, is the only tolerable one—note the amused expression on it. It happened in this way. All the university professors were to be photographed. I sat eleven times, and was about to give up in despair, when, as a final attempt, the photographer suggested that I should sit down at the table. There was a book on it and a piece of music. The book contained Heine's poems, and the song was that barrel-organ piece, 'The Little Fisher Girl.' The contrast struck me as being so ludicrous that a smile crept over my face, and the wary photographer took this opportunity to fix it, as you see. I have another picture which is better than this, but it is taken from behind. It is a sketch of me made by a young lady." It showed him walking in the woods, with his overcoat on, and his umbrella under his left arm. There is no grace in it, but very much character—every inch a German savant, reminding one somewhat of that well-known semi-caricature of Beethoven by Lyser. "See what life there is in all those lines," he commented; "there you see a real picture, although the face is not visible. Some Berlin critics, by the way, have a theory that I do not compose my own songs, but hire a somnambulist, who dictates them to me, and that I then hypnotize him again to correct the manuscript,—the cruelest cut of all! Perhaps my picture is to blame; no one in looking at it would believe that I had written those songs." This reminded me of a little Gounod anecdote a young lady once told me. She met Gounod at a Viardot-Garcia soirée, and in a course of chat with him remarked that one would hardly suspect from his appearance that he could have written such an inspired work as "Faust." Whereupon Gounod replied with a smile, "Il faut être Américaine pour dire cela!"

Fearing that we might fatigue our entertaining host, we now rose to leave. His last words were a request to greet certain of his American friends cordially. He directed the maid to accompany us to the photographer, and on the way we learned from her some interesting particulars regarding her master's habits and daily doings. She said that he was still quite robust, and took a four-hour walk every day when the weather permitted, his hours being from 3 to 7 P. M., and his favorite haunts the woods. One of his eccentricities, she said, was the habit of stopping to crush every cherry-stone he saw on the sidewalks. For this she could give no reason except that, being unable to converse with any one during his walks, he sought diversion in that way. It reminds one of

Dr. Johnson's habit of touching every picket of a fence he passed, and even stepping back if he had accidentally missed one. Franz always retired at nine, got up at ten, and often read in bed. Sometimes he played a few bars on the piano; but with only three fingers on each hand, and no ears to guide them, the result was usually not as pleasant as it might have been. His daughter, as already stated, was away on a visit, and he had a son who was a professor at Leipsic. He was always pleased, the maid said, when visitors called on him; but they were few and far between.

Strange people, these Germans, thus to neglect their men of genius during their lifetime. Now that Robert Franz is dead a monument will no doubt be erected to him on the marketplace at Halle, facing the Handel statue; critics and antiquarians will spend days and weeks in searching old newspapers and letters for the tiniest bits of information regarding his habits, his appearance, his work, and his opinions; while as long as he lived among them, a very treasure-house of information and esthetic suggestion, no one even took the trouble to ring his door-bell! The plain truth is that the Germans, as a nation, do not even yet realize what a great genius Robert Franz was, although other men of genius—Liszt, especially, and Schumann—told them all about it several decades ago. In Liszt's admirable brochure on Franz there is a passage which Americans will always read with pride, for it points out the fact that it was in America that Robert Franz's genius was first recognized generally, and his songs frequently heard in concert-halls, thanks largely to the missionary work of Mr. Otto Dresel in Boston.

This is something to be grateful for, but it is not a tithe of what is due to Franz. It must be said that in no branch of music are there so many gems of the purest water unknown to the public at large as in that of the *lied*, or lyric song, from Schubert to the present day. When Schubert died only two or three of his six hundred songs were generally known, and to the present day many of his most inspired *lieder* are utterly unknown to the public. As regards Franz, I have often been amazed to find even enthusiastic amateurs, who know almost every opera and piano piece by heart, utterly ignorant of his immortal songs. After I had made them procure the collections published in the Peters and the Breitkopf and Härtel editions, their amazement at their oversight was soon as great as mine had been, and was equaled only by their ardent gratitude. They wondered with considerable indignation why the great vocalists of the day had been so remiss in making them acquainted with these songs. The answer to this is very simple; the singers ignore the Franz songs because they do not consider them

"grateful" (*dankbar*, as the Germans say); that is, because they were not written mainly with a view to showing off the singer's best notes, but were inspired by purely musical motives. What annoys the singers especially is that in these songs the voice so often dies away in the last few bars of the piano part, instead of soaring up to a few final high, loud notes, which are so provocative of cheap applause. But these singers forget one thing: they forget that while the applause of the illiterate in music can always be cheaply bought with a loud, high note, a trill, or a run up and down the scale, musical people, who after all are occasionally seen at concerts, are only disgusted by such claptrap, and would have more respect for singers if they remembered that the interpreter is of less importance than the creator. What these musical people want to hear is a Franz or other song honestly sung, and the poem to which it is wedded distinctly declaimed. It might surprise those singers to find what a great "effect" they could produce by allowing the poet and the composer to speak directly to the audience, keeping their vocalistic egotism and vanity entirely in the background.

It is, no doubt, true that lyric songs, like lyric poems, are better suited for home enjoyment than for a public place. In a concert-hall it is the dramatic songs, like Schubert's "Erl King" or Schumann's "The Two Grenadiers," that are most applauded; but in Franz's songs there is little of the dramatic element. They are usually true lyrics—expressions of moods and personal feelings which only a hearer of poetic temperament can fully appreciate. Dramatic moods are easily imposed on a large audience by acting or reciting stirring events, but lyric moods are as subtle and evanescent as the fragrance of a violet, and only an artist of rare magnetism can impose them on a multitude. Such singers are not abundant at present; hence Franz's lyrics will not, perhaps, be in great vogue in our concert-halls for some time to come. But for the home circle nothing is better suited than these songs; familiarity with them invariably leads to enthusiastic admiration. Lovers of lyric poetry will especially relish them. It would be hardly an exaggeration to say that those who know well the poetic style and physiognomy of Heine, Goethe, Burns, Mirza Schaffy, Lenau, Eichendorff, and Osterwald well could often tell from the color and atmosphere of a Franz song (without having heard the words) to what poet it belongs, so wonderfully does he individualize in his style, as Liszt has shown in his masterful analysis. And, even more than Schubert, Franz has proved by his clinging, tender melodies that Wagner was right in describing the union of poetry and music as a marriage in which music is the feminine element. Only two other com-

posers—Chopin and Schubert—have shown such a refined and tender feminine spirit in their music as Franz.

In the home circle Franz's songs are a source of endless delight even to those who cannot sing; for it is one of their most striking peculiarities that the vocal and the piano parts are so closely interwoven that it is easy to play both parts together, and thus make a complete "song without words"; indeed, in not a few cases, the "accompaniment" contains the whole of the vocal melody, so that the voice-part need not even be played along. This is one of the points in which Franz resembles Wagner, of many parts of whose operas the same might be said. So far from being a shortcoming, as some have maintained, this is the very perfection of musico-poetic art; for in this last and highest development of modern music the voice is no longer the only bearer of the melody, but every harmonic part of the accompaniment is a melody. Such accompaniments are termed polyphonic, or many-melodied, and with these the chief function of the voice becomes the distinct melodious declamation and interpretation of the poetry. Franz is as conscientious as Wagner in never sacrificing the poet to the musician. In Wagner's operas the singer is primarily an actor representing the dramatic poet, and in Franz's songs he represents the lyric poet, toward whom is his first duty, while the orchestra or the piano represents the claims of the musician. It was not a mere accident, but a common artistic instinct, that made Franz, in 1850, an enthusiastic convert to Wagnerism, after hearing "Lohengrin," and that led Wagner to keep Franz's songs, by the side of Bach, constantly on his piano during the period in which he was composing his Nibelung Trilogy in Switzerland.

Many of Franz's songs, as I have just said, are beautiful if played on the piano alone, unaltered or with slight changes. Liszt, besides providing for Franz financially, and pleading his cause eloquently in a brochure (which should be translated into English), also translated a number of Franz's best songs into the most elegant pianistic idiom, and in some instances even improved on Franz in a justifiable way, as in the wonderful "Das ist ein Brausen und Heulen," where the introductory bars have a more realistic stormy effect than in the original version. But, however delightful these songs may be as simple piano pieces, to get their full beauty the vocal part must be added. Without the voice they will charm, with the voice they will move to tears. Read one of the poems alone, play the music alone, and then perform them both together; and you will realize that poetry and music combined are a greater emotional power than

either of them alone. Rubinstein has recently proclaimed that pure instrumental music is superior to music united with poetry; but I think most of my readers will agree with Wagner on this point, and feel with Schumann when he wrote to a friend, in 1840: "I can hardly tell you how delightful it is to write for the voice as compared with instrumental composition, and what a stir and tumult I feel within me when I sit down to it."

A whole number of this magazine, and scores of illustrations in musical type, would be required to point out all the peculiarities and evidences of original genius in Franz's songs. Considerations of space permit me to dwell on only two of their principal characteristics; namely, their relations to the German choral and to the German folk-song. It is to the melodious folk-songs which they hear at home from their infancy, and to the superb harmonic chorals which they hear constantly in church,—and formerly played by trombones on church towers thrice a day,—that the Germans owe the fact that they have become the most musical of nations. The choral and the *volkslied* are the basis of what is most German in music, from Bach to Franz; and in no other composer are these two elements more conspicuous than in the last-named. The choral was Franz's first love. His earliest recollection is of hearing, as a child of three years, Luther's famous choral, "A mighty fortress is our God," blown by trombones on a church tower. His father also was fond of chorals, and often had them sung in his house. Later in life Robert learned to love and worship the grandest chorals ever written, those of Bach,¹ which he himself pronounced the most potent of the forces which molded his style. Many of Franz's best songs might be simply defined as melodious chorals in modern harmonic garb, in which romantic love and religious devotion are exquisitely blended.

Among the best of these choral-like songs are "O danke nicht für diese Lieder," "Schemen erloschener Lieder," "Weil' auf mir, du dunkles Auge," "Leise zieht durch mein Gemüth." In the melodies of these songs the same varied harmonies are latent as in the old chorals, and Franz has enriched them with all the exquisite modulations of the modern German schools, which prove that harmony and modulation have even a greater emotional power than mel-

¹ A collection of these is published by Breitkopf and Härtel. I know of nothing else in music so well calculated to develop a taste for the higher harmonic side of music in young minds as a daily playing of these chorals.

ody itself. And besides mingling the major and minor modes in that delightful brotherly fashion which Schubert first taught the world, Franz has enriched modern music by reviving the medieval church modes in his harmonies, which adds still greater variety to the emotional tints, and points out one of the paths in which the music of the future will develop.

But the most remarkable thing about Franz's songs is that while thus embodying all that is best and most artistic and advanced in modern music, they have at the same time many of the characteristics of the simplest and most primitive form of genuine music—namely, the folk-song. Some of his songs, like "Mei Mutter mag mi net," and "Lieber Schatz sei wieder gut mir," might have originated among the people, so far as the melody and tone are concerned; and very many of his other songs have the charming naïveté, simplicity, and spontaneity of the folk-song. Here, then, we have a most remarkable phenomenon. Folk-songs, as everybody knows, spring up among the people like proverbs, one man originating them, another improving on them, until, like pebbles in the bed of a brook, they have become smoothed and polished to perfection. Such songs, we are inclined to think, were made only in the good old times; but here we have had among us a genius who not only originated scores of them, but with his own hand polished them until they surpassed in brilliancy the oldest of the song-pebbles.

Franz has written no fewer than 267 pieces, and among them there are fewer imperfect or uninteresting ones than among the collections of any other song-writer, thanks to his habit of self-criticism. The other day I went through the first volume of the Peters edition of these *lieder* with a pencil, marking those I considered especially good. When I got through, I found I had marked all but two or three in a collection of forty! The second volume has not so many of the best, while the third and fourth have perhaps even more. Many good ones not included in these volumes are contained in the Breitkopf and Härtel issue. These five volumes embrace about one half of the Franz songs. The other half are not yet printed in an English edition. When they are, it is to be hoped that they will be supplied with less villainous English translations than many of the poems in the above collection. A good poetic and musical translation of the Franz songs is a task worthy of one of our greatest lyric poets,—a task which would add many a leaf to his laurels,—for these are the lyric songs of the future.

Henry T. Finck.