

HUMPERDINCK'S «HÄNSEL UND GRETEL.»

IT is seldom that a musical stage-play achieves so marked a success as «Hänsel und Gretel,» by Engelbert Humperdinck; more seldom still that a success is so richly deserved. The reason for its triumphal tour through the theaters is obvious: the public were weary, not only of Norse-Germanic god and hero operas done in alliterative verse, but also of adultery dramas in one or two acts, with dagger-stabs and intermezzi obbligato. This being so, of a sudden appeared an opera showing masterly workmanship on its musical side, and on its poetical a fine appreciation of the naïve character of the popular German fairy-tale—the *Volksmärchen*. «Hänsel und Gretel,» a fairy-play in three scenes, by Adelheid Wette, music by Engelbert Humperdinck—thus ran the title. The author of the libretto is the sister of the writer of the music, who is known as a gifted composer and an admirable teacher of counterpoint and composition. He was born at Mayence, but has lived for some years at Frankfort-on-the-Main. Siegfried Wagner, son of Richard Wagner, is one of his pupils.

It will be two years next Christmas since Humperdinck's fairy-opera received its first performance at Weimar. Richard Strauss, one of the most talented of modern composers, directed its production, a sympathetic management gave generous assistance in the task of staging, and the work achieved an emphatic success. Naturally enough, «Hänsel und Gretel» is a growth from the soil created by Richard Wagner's lyric dramas. Its more particular habitat might be said to be the style of «Die Meistersinger.» Like the prelude to that drama, the introduction in C major is built out of the principal *motivi* of the opus. Already in this prelude Humperdinck displays his brilliant talents in the invention of characteristic themes and masterly counterpoints, which, in spite of complexity of treatment, never show a paucity of sensuous beauty. The prelude begins with the theme of the «Evening Blessing,» first intoned by four horns and then echoed by the stringed instruments and wood-winds. The composer has assigned an important part to this theme, which runs like a scarlet thread

through the whole opera, and brings it to a brilliant conclusion.

It is not the purpose of this writing to give a detailed analysis of the opera. I shall confine myself to a condensed résumé of the libretto, with a few side glances at particularly characteristic passages in the music. The first scene, «At Home,» discloses a small, poverty-stricken room. According to the stage directions, there is a low door in the background, and beside it a tiny window, which offers a glimpse of the woods beyond. Brooms of various sizes hang on the wall. Hänsel, occupied with broom-making, and Gretel, with stocking-knitting, sit facing each other. Gretel sings a child's song, the familiar «Suse, liebe Suse, was raschelt im Stroh,» the melody of which Hansel takes up to give expression to his hunger. Gretel seeks to cheer and divert her brother by playing and dancing. Their lark is at its height when their mother enters, and after upbraiding the children for their neglect of work, sends them into the forest to gather berries. Overcome by hunger and weariness, she falls asleep beside the hearth, when from the distance comes the voice of the returning father, who, having been lucky enough to sell out his entire stock, is bringing home potatoes, eggs, sausages, and even a quarter of a pound of coffee. Great is the rejoicing over this unexpected wealth; but when the father asks after the children, the mother becomes embarrassed, and hesitatingly confesses that she has driven them into the wood to pick berries. The father upbraids her, and calls to mind that the wood is the home of the wicked Gingerbread Witch, whose practice it is to catch children, put them in her oven, and eat them after they have been baked into tasty gingerbread. Wringing her hands the while, the mother rushes into the forest to seek her children, the father after her.

Thus closes the first scene, which is followed without interruption by «The Witch's Ride,» an extremely characteristic piece of music, which gradually leads into the second scene—a dense forest near the Ilstein. Gretel is making a wreath of posies, Hänsel hunting strawberries. It is evening. This



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ENGELBERT HUMPERDINCK.

forest scene is musically one of the gems of the work. The mood of the gathering twilight has been marvelously caught. There is a rustling in the tops of the pines, and from a thicket a solitary cuckoo sends forth its call. The children have lost their way, and in their terror fancy they see and hear all manner of dreadful things. Suddenly a little gray man appears—the Sandman. He puts sleep into the eyes of the children, who kneel, fold their hands, repeat the evening blessing, and fall asleep lying in each other's arms. A ray of light now pierces the darkness. Fourteen angels, in long, light, flowing garments, descend a cloudy staircase in pairs,

and group themselves around the sleeping children. The music which accompanies this pantomime, chiefly built up on the theme of the «Evening Blessing,» is developed into a superb climax, and then brings the scene to a solemn close. Few living composers, perhaps, are able to write so euphonious and fitting a symphonic piece as Humperdinck has created here—certainly the musical high-water mark of the opera. The stage-setting of the third scene is the same as the preceding, save that the angels have disappeared. The background is still wrapped in mist. Morning dawns. The Dewman appears, and from a bell-flower sprinkles drops of dew upon the sleeping children.

They awake, and tell each other of their dreams, in which they have seen the fourteen angels who watched over their sleep. The mists in the background are gradually dissipated, and instead of the pine-trees there appears glittering in the sun the house of the Gingerbread Witch. At first the children are overwhelmed with amazement; but they recover their wits, curiosity gets the better of their discretion, and amidst the strains of an ingratiating waltz they creep up to the house a-tiptoe and break off a bit of the gingerbread. Immediately there is heard the voice of the witch:

«Munching, crunching, munching,—
Who 's eating up my house?»

The children start back in alarm, but answer timidly:

«The wind, the wind,—
Only the wind.»

Then they grow bolder, and help themselves to another piece. Suddenly the witch steps out of the door, and throws a rope over the head of the unsuspecting, greedily munching Hänsel. He is now put into the stable to be fattened up a bit, but chubby Gretel is destined to be roasted at once. The children, however, frustrate the plans of the witch, and push her into the oven in their stead. Through the death of the witch other gingerbread children are released from enchantment, and with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for having preserved the children the opera ends. Thus the action of the piece.

«Hänsel und Gretel» is a German fairy-tale—one that has been familiar to us all from childhood; and in this new guise it awakens in us recollections of our earliest youth. To it how many of us owe rare hours of enjoyment! Humperdinck's next work is eagerly awaited. «Die Königs-kinder,» also a fairy-opera, will have its first performance this fall [1895] in Munich. It will be difficult for it to hold its own against the older «Hänsel und Gretel»; but whatever Humperdinck produces will surely rejoice the soul of the musician. He is not only one who knows how to do a thing, but also one to whom something occurs. The melodic fount flows within him without effort, and his great contrapuntal knowledge is not used as a substitute for a weak fancy. Everything in his score exhales life, and is accepted as spontaneously and warmly as it was conceived and created.