

What is the Greatest Achievement in Music?

(WITH THE OPINIONS OF DR. JOACHIM, M. JEAN DE RESZKE, SIR ALEXANDER MACKENZIE, MADAME ALBANI, DR. FREDERIC H. COWEN, SIR HUBERT PARRY, SIR WALTER PARRATT, MR. BEN DAVIES, MISS CLARA BUTT, MISS ADA CROSSLEY, AND MR. HENRY J. WOOD.)

BY FREDERICK DOLMAN.



From a Photo by DR. JOACHIM. [Elliott & Fry.]



PROBABLY in no sphere of art is there so much conflict of opinion as in music. Putting aside the controversy of connoisseurs, to what extent does popular taste correspond with the expert judgment of professional artistes? With the hope of determining, in part at least, this very interesting question, I have been in communication with our most distinguished composers and interpreters of music. The answers I have received are sufficiently representative to serve this purpose, although in one or two cases they are somewhat embarrassingly comprehensive.



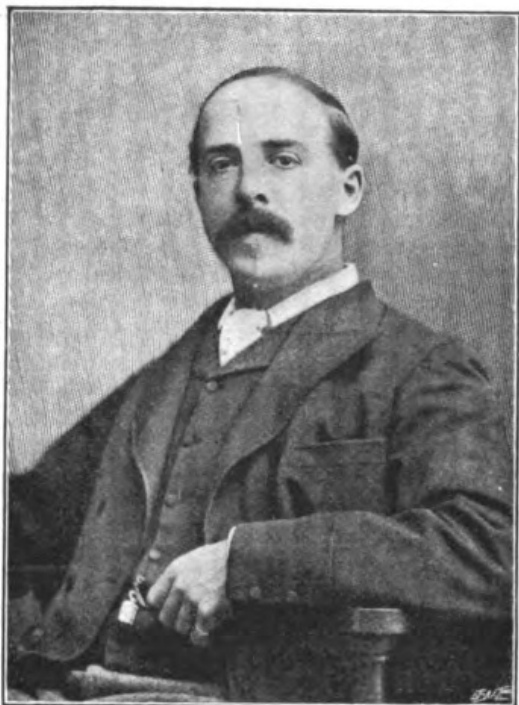
SIR WALTER PARRATT.
From a Photo, by Elliott & Fry.

Dr. Joachim, to begin with, replied to my leading question—"Which piece of musical composition would you quote as an example of the most perfect art?"—with a list which comprised the following:—

All Bach's; Beethoven's nine symphonies, his quartets, sonatas, and concertos, and his "Fidelio"; many of Handel's Oratorios; Mozart's "Don Giovanni," "Figaro," and "Zauberflöté," four great symphonies, quartets, and quintets; Haydn's "Seasons," "Creation," symphonies, and quartets; Mendelssohn's overtures and "Elias"; Schubert's songs; Schumann's songs; Brahms's songs, his "German Requiem," and chamber music. It will be noticed that the choice of the greatest of living violinists is confined to German music, but it covers a period of nearly 200 years.

Sir Walter Parratt, the distinguished organist, treated my question in a similar spirit, although he was able to impose a greater restriction upon his selection. Sir Walter, who is Master of the King's Music, wrote to me from Windsor Castle as follows:—

"In varying moods I should give you different answers. Beethoven's C Minor Symphony, Bach's B Minor Mass, Brahms's 'Schieksalied,' even a far-off Palestrina would each at the psychological moment stir me most deeply." The "far-off Palestrina," it may be added, lived through the greater part of the sixteenth century and is sometimes referred to as "Princeps Musicæ"; whilst the three works specially mentioned by Sir Walter were written at long intervals from each other during the past two centuries. Bach's Mass in B Minor dates from about 1734, but with the rest of this master's work had to wait many years before its genius was appreciated. Brahms's "Schieksalied" was composed some years before his death in 1894.



DR. F. H. COWEN.
From a Photo. by Alfred Ellis & Walery.

Beethoven's Symphony in C Minor (No. 5), which was written in 1805, is also suggested by Dr. F. H. Cowen.

"There is so much music," remarks the composer of "The Better Land" and many other well-known songs, "which, at least in parts, deserves to be called great. But, in my opinion, the work which, taken as a whole, best embodies all the elements of perfect art is undoubtedly the C Minor Symphony of Beethoven."

The symphony was produced by Beethoven when he was about thirty-five—the composer himself was never certain on the subject of his age—and is usually regarded as the first work in which his genius freely expressed itself. As was the case with nearly all his other works, it was produced when Beethoven had lost the sense of hearing, and consequently he himself never knew its beauties. The symphony was written moreover in the country near Vienna—at Heiligenstadt, now a suburb of the Austrian capital—during a French invasion. On its first production in a Vienna theatre, on December 22nd, 1808, the symphony failed to please. This may be fully explained, however, by the theatre being unwarmed in intensely cold weather, and by the inefficiency of the performers, who actually broke down in another part of the concert.

To Beethoven Miss Ada Crossley, the famous Australian contralto, likewise goes.

"I hardly know," says Miss Crossley, "how to reply to your question! In relation to the public! The demands and associations of a singer's life are in the main of such a direct and personal character that I have long since ceased to marvel at the undesirable reputation vocalists possess of being the least catholic section in the whole world of art. The request for an opinion as to the most perfect example of musical composition is on that account, I fear, of far greater breadth than popular tradition will allow a singer to answer. None of us enter the circle of our own activities wholly without prejudice, and that is why I deliberately go outside it and devote my brief reply to a phase of music in which I now take no direct part. As a student of sixteen—fresh from the Australian backwoods—I first heard Beethoven's "Emperor Concerto." In its absorbing unity there was much to remind me of the great forest fastnesses I had recently left, and the riper knowledge that has come in the intervening decade has but deepened my youthful impression of its inspiring glory. By reason of its sublimity, vigour, melodic perfection, lofty thought, exquisite balance, and simple grandeur it appeals to me as an ideal work. And I also share the opinion that its composer's influence has been the most potent in the whole development of music during the century just closed."



MISS ADA CROSSLEY.
From a Photo. by Elliott & Fry.

The concerto, like the symphony, was written by Beethoven during war's harsh discords. Whilst he was at work upon it in Vienna in 1809 the French were actually bombarding the city. Beethoven's lodging was unfortunately on the wall, and it is recorded that on one occasion, disturbed by the firing, he took refuge in a cellar at his brother's house.

M. Jean de Reszke wrote to me from New York, stating simply that his favourite composition is the prelude of "Parsifal," by Richard Wagner, a work which is not yet twenty years old. "Parsifal," it will be remembered, was the last work which Wagner produced, and, as with his other operas, he wrote both words and music. The score was begun at Bayreuth in 1877, when Wagner was sixty-five, and was finished five years later at Palermo, whither he had gone to recover from an attack of erysipelas.

The opera was first produced at Bayreuth on July 26th, 1882, when it aroused among Wagner's admirers the enthusiasm with which it has ever since been regarded, sixteen performances being given. The opera has never been given on the English stage, it being thought that its mystically-religious character—the story is the legend of the Holy Grail—would be offensive to our national feelings.

The prelude itself, which is singled out by the renowned operatic artiste as the greatest achievement in music, was first played at a family gathering in



M. JEAN DE RESZKE.
From a Photograph.



MR. HENRY J. WOOD.
From a Photo. by the London Stereoscopic Co.

Wagner's house at Bayreuth, the Villa Wahnfried, on Christmas Day, 1878, the Duke of Meiningen lending his own private orchestra for the purpose. The prelude has been described by a distinguished musical critic as "a foretaste of the solemn and ecstatic emotions inspired by the Grail, and of the sorrows of the sinful Amortas. Love, Faith, and Hope are its themes, and it is built up principally of the Holy Supper, the Grail, and the Faith motives."

"In my opinion," declares Mr. Henry J. Wood, the admirable conductor of the Queen's Hall Concerts, "the greatest musical art work is Richard Wagner's 'Ring des Nibelungen.'"

This is the work, too, first mentioned by Sir Hubert Parry, the distinguished composer and Principal of the Royal College of Music. But Sir Hubert adds: "There are such a lot of great achievements in music that seem much on a par. I cannot decide between the claims of Wagner's 'Ring des Nibelungen' and his 'Meistersingers,' Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and his 'Fidelio,' J. S. Bach's 'Wohltemperirte Clavier' and the 'Matthew Passion' music, and Brahms's 'German Requiem.' So many things are great in different ways. Some are intrinsically great, some for the effect they have produced on the course of art; some little things are great in depth of thought, and some in style."

Wagner's well-known group of operatic compositions, "Der Ring des

Nibelungen," to which Sir Hubert Parry and Mr. H. J. Wood are thus united in giving a premier position in the art of music, were first produced at Bayreuth in August, 1876: "Das Rheingold" on the 13th of the month, "Die Walküre" on the 14th, "Siegfried" on the 16th, and "Götterdämmerung" on the 17th. Wagner meditated the theme of the work as long ago as 1850, and he published the libretto in 1863, between which date and 1876 the music was completed. The tetralogy, which embodies the old Teutonic legend of the "Nibelungenlied," was performed in the German cities 1,817 times in the course of fifteen years. Wagner himself, however, did not regard it as a work of equal merit, and he used to be much annoyed by the preference which theatre managers showed for "Die Walküre." Its initial production, which signaled the opening of the theatre specially built for Wagner at Bayreuth, resulted in a deficit of £7,500, but this was quickly made good by the profit on subsequent performances.

Wagner and Beethoven both claim the vote of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, who, since the death of Sir Arthur Sullivan, must probably be regarded as the first of living English composers. "The first three movements of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony," writes Sir Alexander from Florence, where he was recruiting his health, "have always appeared to me to be the highest achievement in purely instrumental music. In answering your question, however, I find it difficult to ignore opera, and in this art Wagner's 'Meistersingers' holds the first place in my estimation."

Beethoven's Ninth or Choral Symphony was begun in 1817, and it is said that the theme of it, Schiller's "Hymn of Joy," was contemplated in his boyhood. It was six years before the great work was finished. It occupied him incessantly during the summer of 1823, which the composer spent at Baden. At this time Beethoven was so absorbed in the work that, according to the testimony of friends, he was quite insensible to such mundane matters as the weather, his meals, and so forth, and would rush in and out of his house without a hat.

Great enthusiasm is said to have been evoked by the first performance of the symphony at a Vienna theatre, and Beethoven had to turn round on the conductor's stool to see the applause which he could not hear.

The manuscript of the Ninth Symphony, it may be interesting to add, is in the library of the London Philharmonic Society, which paid Beethoven £50 for it. The symphony, when published, was dedicated to the King of Prussia, but the MS. records the fact in Beethoven's handwriting that it was written for the London Philharmonic Society.

"The Meistersingers," which Sir Alexander Mackenzie couples with the Choral Symphony as the greatest achievement in music, was even longer maturing in its creator's mind. Wagner made the first sketches for the opera in 1845 at the age of thirty-two—and it was not completed until twenty-two years later. It was produced at Munich on June 21st, 1868, under the direction of Herr von Bülow as conductor and Herr Richter as chorus-master, and was an immediate success. Both libretto and music were Wagner's original work, although the former was founded on some



SIR HUBERT PARRY.
From a Photo. by Elliott & Fry.



SIR ALEXANDER MACKENZIE.
From a Photo. by Elliott & Fry.



MR. BEN DAVIES.
From a Photo. by Russell & Sons.

incidents in the life of Herr Sachs, the popular poet-cobbler of Nuremberg.

I saw Mr. Ben Davies on the subject at his house in Compayne Gardens, Hampstead, where the distinguished tenor was taking his ease in the interval of important provincial engagements.

"I think highest," said Mr. Davies, as he reflectively puffed at a pipe, "of the composition which in the smallest compass contains the greatest amount of expression. And I am naturally disposed to select something from my own *répertoire*, because it is the music with which I am necessarily most familiar. Regarding the matter in this way, I have decided after a good deal of consideration to suggest to you the air, 'Behold and See,' from 'The Messiah.' It is only a little thing," added Mr. Davies, as he brought forth a copy of "The Messiah" from his music cabinet. "There are only twelve bars, as you see—a very small part of the Passion music as a whole—and it is, of course, very soft in tone. But there is more feeling in this little thing than anything else that I know of in music. I shall never forget the intense impression 'Behold and See' made upon me when I first heard Sims Reeves sing it at the Albert

Vol. xxi.—55

Hall. Of course, I never heard Sims Reeves in his glory, but I think that on this occasion he must have sung with as much power as ever. Many musicians would doubtless look to opera for examples of the finest achievement in music, and some will deny that there is any music at all in 'The Messiah.' But in England religion is closely associated with music, and it is as an expression of religious feeling in music that I regard 'Behold and See.' On the other hand, of course, if it is not given with proper feeling, the artistic effect is lost."

After weighing the matter for some time in her mind Madame Albani also chose a song from "The Messiah," with which her own name is closely associated, "I Know that My Redeemer Liveth." "It is," in her opinion, "most musicianly, melodious, and expressive."

The great oratorio to which our leading tenor and soprano thus pay tribute is by far the most popular of all Handel's works, although "Israel in Egypt," in the frequency



From a Photo by

MADAME ALBANI.

[Elliott & Fry.]

of its performance, is a good second. The story of "The Messiah" is one of the most extraordinary in the annals of music. It was written in twenty-four days! The words were chosen from Scripture by Mr. Charles Jennens, an English friend at whose country house Handel was staying. To Dublin belongs the honour of its first production, on April 18th, 1742. Handel was on a visit that spring to the Duke of Devonshire, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and with the aid of the Viceregal influence he was able to command for the performance the best musical resources of the Irish capital, the Cathedral choir, for instance, giving the choruses. The performance was given for the benefit of three Dublin charities, and there is reason to think that the frequency with which "The Messiah" has always been utilized for philanthropic purposes is only according to the purpose with which it was written.

I cannot find any record that in the early days of "The Messiah" either solo, "I Know that My Redeemer Liveth" or "Behold and See," attracted exceptional attention. As to the impression the oratorio created on its first hearing our only source of information is *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, whose critic wrote: "Words are wanting to express the exquisite delight it afforded to the admiring crowded audience. The sublime, the grand, and the tender, adapted to the most elevated, majestic, and moving words, conspired to transport and charm the ravished heart and ear." "The Messiah" was produced in London on March 23rd, 1742, but although Handel was then at the height of his fame no reference to the oratorio is to be found in the London Press of that year. Charles Jennens, Handel's "collaborator," at any rate, can have had no suspicion of the immortality to which such airs as "I Know that My Redeemer Liveth" were destined. "I shall show you," he writes to a friend in 1745, "a collection I gave Handel called 'Messiah,' which I value highly, and he has made a fine entertainment of it, though not

near as good as he might and ought to have done. I have with great difficulty made him correct some of the grossest faults in composition."

Courage is generally required to recognise the greatest achievement in contemporary work, and Miss Clara Butt has certainly shown this quality in her reply to my question. "Of all the later works," declares the eminent singer, "Edward Elgar's 'The Dream of Gerontius' shows the highest art and genius, in my opinion."

It may be said, however, that Miss Butt has only crystallized into one sentence the

judgment generally passed by the critics on this musical setting of Cardinal Newman's well-known poem when it was first heard at the Birmingham Festival last October. In a musical review of the year 1900, too, I find this reference to the work: "The cantata made a very deep impression, and for its scholarly attributes, in union with beautiful treatment of a sublime theme, was deemed worthy to rank among the best modern productions of its kind." The cantata, which treats of the feelings and emotions of the dying Gerontius, was sung by Mr. Edward Lloyd as the Roman soldier and Miss Marie Brema as the angel.



MISS CLARA BUTT.

From a Photo. by Fellows Wilson, London, W.

Mr. Elgar, it may be added, is a Worcestershire man, residing at Malvern, who has been writing successfully for the festivals since about 1892.

My question was unfortunately misunderstood by Dr. Saint-Saëns, and before the misunderstanding could be removed the French musician was beyond reach, having left home for two or three months' travel. The reply, although not strictly within the scope of this article, will have its own interest, however, for the many admirers which Dr. Saint-Saëns has in this country, inasmuch as it indicates that of his own compositions the Third Symphony in C Minor has the first place in his own heart.