



Art and Music

by

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Chapter 14

It is said that art generally and music particularly imitates Nature. Without doubt this principle is true if correctly understood but whatever good purpose it serves can be completely undone by a harmful interpretation of its meaning. This nature, of which art is said to be an imitation is not alone that physical appearance apparent to the senses, but includes the inherent marvel of which phenomena become the manifested expression. That is to say, to be oneself down to modeling particular physical nature is to become a servile imitator, but to seize upon and to project the intellectual beauties hidden within it is to become a creator and to raise oneself to the realm of the sublime, whatever the chosen medium of expression. Among the arts, if there be one to which we may apply the principle in question, that art but imitates nature, we may say without fear of contradiction it is that of painting.

How ordinary and unfortunate would that artist be who held himself to faithfully reproducing on his canvas the form and color spread before his eyes! His pictures lacking sentiment and life, confined within the narrow circle of portraiture and landscape would be but little better than caricature. The greatest mental effort could scarcely raise them to art. It is true that nature might be exactly imitated in a tree, a rock or a flower: by the glance of an eye one might recognize such a man, animal or thing; but this nature certainly would not be that which inspired Raphael to the composition of the "Transfiguration" nor Angelo to the drawings from which superb monumental architecture has been raised; and tell me where in nature are to be found the models of the Basilica of St. Peter's or the colonnades of the Louvre? The triumph of art is not to imitate nature but to sublimate, and to improve upon nature, to give to it that which it does not possess by raising it out of its proper sphere into one less circumscribed and more elevated. Music, of all the arts, can be most easily understood as triumphing in this manner. A strict imitation of nature in music not only disfigures but destroys music; that is to say, makes of it something that it is not. Anyone may prove this by a very simple experiment.

Listen to an accomplished singer or flutist accompanied by a great orchestra, portraying the warbling of birds. You will be ravished, not in proportion to the perfection of the imitation, but in proportion to the emotion which the combined talent of composer and orchestra is able to awaken in your soul. Nothing less resembles the song of the nightingale than these harmonious movements which delight the ear; moreover you discover within them that which you have felt and that which you would feel. Suddenly introduce the brusque trill from one of the little water-filled weeds upon which children so cleverly imitate the warbling which you are supposed to have heard. You will scarcely recognize this miserable imitation from which all charm has disappeared.

What disgust and weariness will follow the pleasure which delusion has caused you! The truth of my statement has now been demonstrated. It is clear enough that animals attracted by sweet sounds and children charmed by the chant of the lullaby seek no imitations therein. Savages chant their simple or warlike songs with no thought of imitating nature. Their melodies are drawn from the deepest emotions of the human heart, and express themselves through action. The model, which the musical composer strived to imitate, dwells within his own soul. Who seeks there will find there. If this model lacks in anything it is vain to believe that it may be found elsewhere. All that may be drawn from matter will be inanimate and sterile. Having no sentiment it will be lifeless. The most perfect images will be skeletons, and borrowed embellishments, which are believed to clothe their starkness, if not but plagiarisms will be at best ill placed.

Listen to the secret my young friend who seeks to perfect musical art. Know that an intercourse exists between souls through a hidden and sympathetic fluid, an unrecognized current putting them into communication with one another and music of all methods offers the most potent means of setting these forces into action. Would you convey a sentiment, a passion to those who listen to you? Would you awaken within them a memory or the poetry which constitutes the spirit of prophecy? Then work! And what you desire shall be brought about. To the extent that you awaken feeling in yourself, you will awaken feeling in your auditions.

They will experience, unknown to themselves, in proportion to your strength and to their susceptibility, the electrical disturbance which you will have communicated to the fluid of which I have already spoken. Don't trouble yourself to understand how this takes place, nor ask how this activity transmits itself to paper and to the muscular power used to interpret it. These deep metaphysics have no present concerns with you. Do as I tell you if you are able to do it. But perhaps you will ask me is the deep experiencing of a feeling sufficient to enable its communication? Is it enough to strongly conceive an idea to enable me to inspire it in others? Must one not know technique? Assuredly, it is most necessary; do not get wrong ideas about that! Your inspiration will produce nothing lacking knowledge to bring it forth. Before attempting to paint one must have brushes, a palette charged with colors, and knowledge of drawing. To attempt musical composition without musical understanding would be the height of folly. The brushes, etc., do not make the painter but they serve him. The perfected knowledge of musical science, rules of harmony and melody, do not make the composer, but without these he could do nothing. In vain would a flutist show his talent lacking an instrument? So, know your art! Be possessed of all its resources! Bring together and hoard up such materials as will serve your purposes. These are the mediums through which the will operates to produce masterpieces. Believe that through strength of will the talent is born which, if directed by genius, knows no obstacle. Genius gives to production that life which is lacking in itself and talent shows how to employ it. Taste will be born through the reaction of circumstances under which the individual finds himself placed, for taste is always relative.

Now, if still unsure of yourself, you further ask me how does one learn the way of giving to melody its character of gayness, or sadness, or sweetness of strength? I reply that that depends upon the clarity of the vision and the will to express it. To paint sadness one must become one with sadness and then the methods of characterization will present themselves to the mind; and will puts them into action according to the extent of the talent. This is true of gayety and all concepts. The arousing of mental images is not more difficult than the awakening of feelings. The reproduction of these will always depend upon the individual's aptitude for seizing and projecting them.

When the direct methods fails for the expression of ideas, and scientific modes bring a poverty of defects, there it may be seen that the will is able to supply through indirect means, and often one will be surprised to learn that what ordinarily passes itself as sadness, lends itself to an expression of gladness.

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Feel strongly that which you wish to make felt. I assure you that there is no other mode of musical attainment. It is the only way for the composer as well as for the musician himself. The conception of the composer passes into the execution of the musician. One becomes cause, the other becomes effect. One speaks the mood and the other spreads the message. When a piece of vocal or instrumental music has been well put together, that is to say conceals within itself a special sentiment, it is rare that an artist however mediocre his talent, fails to feel it. In fact the execution becomes the test of his talent. You may be sure that any musician often executing noteworthy compositions under diverse circumstances who constantly fails to catch the spirit of these masterpieces suffers within himself a defect of moral elasticity which will prevent him from ever becoming a distinguished artist. It is by attentive examination and great study of the masters, credited by musicians generally as being representative, that a direct knowledge of method is attainable.

Whereby the science is developed which perfects the expression of your own thought. You will find these modes most simply and clearly disclosed in the folk songs of the people, in national airs, and in the precious fragments of antique music. But it is very harmful to believe that methods, however perfect, will serve you in place of true feeling, that they can produce an effect greater than the cause lying within yourself. Once more let me impress upon you that there is no effect without cause, that nothing can be born of nothing and that it will be impossible to find in your creation that which you have not put there. It is sometimes said that music is a universal language. This is true in a sense. It is possible to communicate ideas, affections, and even emotions by means of music, and this is noteworthy, that its appeal is general and not particular.

Music, intellectual in essence, best expresses itself through the medium of poetry. Without poetical language to fix ideas they remain vague and indeterminate. So these two arts were never separated in the olden times and they added to them the dance, that is to say, that a kind of art under the name of mimicry regulated bodily movement and what we call gesture and elocution. It is certain that no perfect music can exist without these three things—that is, without speech to determine the idea, chant to communicate the feeling, and rhythmic motion to characterize the whole. It is true when we say that music separated from speech and become purely instrumental is far from enjoying its best advantages. It is then a sort of soul deprived of bodily form, fallen into fantasy and lacking a means to sustain it—it cannot long resist the monotony which indecision lends to a subject. Perfection of movement can in a moment, fix the attention; but attention too is soon fatigued and curiosity should be more and more piqued to prevent dullness and sleepiness. Composers and symphonizers make great effort to embrace dull music but all their tricks and whimsicalities lead to failure. It becomes necessary to return to poetry and to let simplicity take the place of ornamentation.

Follow the advice, which I give you, and never separate these three sisters who love each other ardently, and reciprocate equally. Alternate poetry, music, and elocution, and if circumstances force you to work for instruments alone; at least commence by a study of the chant where poetry has left its ineradicable mark. It is only in this way that your melody will obtain a musical style peculiar to your individuality. Leave all other methods to those who grope on some instrument for the motions for songs which poetry denies them. Motions evolving out of nothing do not outlive the caprice, which produces them. Read old music, follow the works of the Masters.

Seek! Work! Be untiring!

