

## MODERN HOMAGE TO DOCTRINE

BY WILLIAM HENDERSON

THOSE who walk in circles return always to the same place. Those who walk otherwise, even though they may proceed erratically, eventually arrive somewhere else. As Capt. Cuttle habitually remarked, "The bearings of this observation lays in the application on it." To the unprofessional spectator, it appears that at this moment the art of music is walking in a circle, tethered to a stake in the center on which are carved the runes of a growing set of conventions.

The conventionalizing of any art is a fatal disease. It is spiritually akin to the physical condition called by the scientists protoplasmic sclerosis, or progressive condensation, which arrests metabolism, produces senile atrophy and therefore death. Art has always battled bravely against the approach of senile atrophy, and music has never yet been defeated in the struggle. But at this moment the creative musicians seem to be endangering themselves by overindulgence in worship of doctrines and methods.

Let us begin with the second of these. There is a general shaking of heads in these days when a man writes a sonata or a symphony without a title or a program, just a plain, old-fashioned symphony, say, in B-flat. He is rebuked for being a reactionary. Some helpful friend is likely to tell him what he meant when he composed, what tragic or pathetic program he had in mind. One recalls the apt reply of a local composer to such a friend, who said, "When you wrote that work you were thinking of"—and then a flood of metaphysics. "Oh, no," answered the composer, "I was not thinking of anything of that kind. I was thinking only of just what I wrote."

The methods of this moment are founded chiefly on the abolition of the sonata and its derivatives. They presuppose the finish of the venerable proposition, discussion, and recapitulation of musical

themes as merely musical roots from which musical flowers are to be grown. Now, in the opinion of the writer, what the art of music needs today far more than it needs anything else is to return to the creation of beautiful music without any other purpose.

Such a return does not carry with it any necessity of a restoration of the sonata form to supremacy. Neither does it forbid the employment of that form when it is best for the composer's purpose, which might not infrequently be the case. When a man is tied to a poem, a philosophical work, (Nietzsche, for example), or a legend, the chances are a hundred to one that no classic form will answer his requirements. It is also and equally inevitable that his creative imagination is just as tightly bound to the chariot wheels of his literary structure as it possibly would be to the antiquated structure of Beethoven. Furthermore, it cannot be denied that in the working out portion of a first movement form, a composer may write with complete freedom, thinking of nothing whatever but music. There are no limitations to a free fantasia.



I am not offering an argument in favor of the sonata form. I hold no brief for any particular pattern, only for musical form in the large and fundamental sense. The musician, not the theoretician or the commentator, is the creator of forms. The structural achievements of Strauss and Stravinsky are entitled to the laudation of every music lover, just as surely as those of Berlioz and Liszt. But what seems to me to be the difficulty in the path of musical art at this time is the enslavement of the art to titles. Every piece of music has to be referred to something outside of music and hesitates to introduce itself to the world as music and nothing else.

As far as methods are concerned, they are immaterial, provided they afford the composer means for the full and free expression of his idea. Stravinsky's *Sinfonies pour Instruments de Vent* has prac-

tically no form in the sense in which form is taught in conservatories, but its structure is perfectly fitted to its content. Beyond that form cannot go.



Nothing in all this forbids the use of suggestive titles for compositions. The composer who elects to reproduce in music the emotions aroused in him by a masterpiece of literature or of painting or an episode in history, needs only to feel that no authority of the past or present can command his selection of means, manner or method. He must speak independently out of the fulness of his own soul. He may survey with equanimity the whole field of romantic music and declare that it offers nothing of value to him. He will start where the others left off. Or if it is more suitable for his purpose, he will go back to the point at which the others began. Progress in art does not mean that the search for what is not includes the abandonment of all that has been. There should be neither abandonment nor search. The method of expression should be dictated by the work itself.

Technique must of necessity occupy much of the artist's attention. The method of execution is frequently far more difficult of attainment than the conception of an idea. But every movement toward prescribing limits to technique is fundamentally wrong. If simple diatonic harmonies are essential to the expression of a composer's idea, he should not be condemned for using them. Yet in this day it takes courage to write fundamental harmonies. It requires a certain degree of bravery to write plain English, or to paint a picture of which the subject is immediately identifiable. It is a period of neurasthenia. Men will not rest so long as they can find excitement. Musical compositions developed upon the basis of a doctrine that everything created down to the death of Brahms should be relegated to the rubbish heap, are absolutely certain to be without the vital principle of art.

The composer should not be controlled by any doctrine or enslaved by any method. He should promulgate his own doctrines and create his own methods. If he finds old ways suited to his

tread, let him tread them boldly and confidently and without doubt he will enter a promised land. If he cannot embody his conceptions without using the means developed by the modern school, then let him use them without fear or favor. In other words, all that the artist is bound to consider in method is how he shall best produce his effects.

His own artistic soul must be his guide. If he wins the approval of the world, that is good. If he does it by sacrificing his own, that is bad. But when the lions of doctrine growl across his path, let him remember the pregnant words of Hector Berlioz: "It is now generally accepted that in harmony, melody and modulation, whatever produces a good effect is good, and whatever produces a bad effect is bad; and that the authority of a hundred old men, even if they were each a hundred and twenty years of age, cannot make ugly that which is beautiful nor beautiful that which is ugly."

