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THOUGHTS ON THE GREAT WORTH OF MUSIC¹

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trans. John Louis Miller

It cannot be denied, thank heaven, that in recent times the taste for music is more widespread than ever. Nowadays one might call it a requisite part of good education for children to have music lessons, and for this reason every house of any account has a piano, or at least a guitar. But there are a few persons here and there who persist in casting aspersions on the gentle art, and to give them a drubbing-good lesson is my present plan and purpose.

First, a word about the arts in general: Be it understood that their proper function is to provide pleasant entertainment, that is, to provide respite from more serious, or one could say more proper, activities, such as earning one's bread or one's rank in the State. This diversion allows one to return with renewed vigor and vigilance to the real purpose of one's life, i.e. to being an efficient cog in the mechanism of the State and (to stay with the metaphor) to mesh and turn correctly.

For this purpose no art is more appropriate than music. Reading a novel or a poem won't do, even assuming a suitable choice of reading material (nothing tastelessly fanciful, like some of the newer things--fantasy is the worst part of Original Sin, to be rooted out at all cost). Even choosing something that doesn't excite one in the least requires, in my opinion, that one think to some extent about what one

¹*Gedanken über den hohen Wert der Musik*

reads, and that is obviously antipathetical to entertainment. This last is true even in that sort of reading where the attention wanders and one dozes off, or in which one might sink into serious thought--bad because the hard-working businessman's intellectual diet must have its cycle of rest. Looking at a painting is good only for a very brief moment, since one loses interest as soon as one guesses what it's supposed to represent.

Returning to music, though, none but inveterate detractors of the art could deny that a proper composition produces the desired effect--and by proper I mean a composition which confines itself decently within certain boundaries, with one pleasant melody following another, without storming and posturing in all kinds of foolish contrapuntal ins and outs. The right kind of music has a wonderfully comfortable charm, so that one is quite relieved of thinking, or at least no *serious* thought enters one's head, but only very light, pleasant ones, which alternate gaily without one's being aware of any content. To extend this a bit: What's to prevent one from having a little conversation with one's neighbor during the music--about the politics or morals of the world--really, about any subject--and in that pleasant manner letting the occasion serve a dual purpose? Indeed, this is much to be recommended, for as one observes in all the concerts and musical gatherings, music quite definitely facilitates conversation. One can hear a pin drop during intermission, but with the resumption of the music the conversation begins in a murmur and swells as the music swells, level for level. Many a woman whose customary utterances consist of filling gaps in a conversation with "Yes, oh yes," and "No, oh no!" rises to such eloquence while music is playing that her newly discovered sweetness of expression lures a lover--or even a husband--into her befuddling snare. Heavens! How infinite are the benefits of beautiful music!

Hardened nay-sayers to the noble art, I lead you now into a cozy family circle, where the

father, tired from the serious business of the day, in robe and slippers, smokes his pipe and listens, contented and happy, to his eldest son's broken-octave exercises at the piano. And just for his sake busy little Rosy rehearsed "The Pony Trainer's March" and "Bloom, Sweet Violet" until she could play them so beautifully that tears of joy fell on the stocking her mother was darning. And that pleading, anxious yelping of the youngest, how vexing it would be without the sounds of the dear children's music to keep it in tune and rhythm!

But if your mind is unalterably closed to rewards of the simple sort, to these domestic idylls, follow me into that house where the windows shine so brightly. You walk into the ballroom. A steaming tea service is the focal point around which elegant ladies and gentlemen circulate. Game tables are brought in and the lid of the grand piano is raised, for music is also served, for general entertainment and diversion. If well chosen, the music is not in the least disturbing and even the card players--though busy with something more serious--their wins and losses--willingly put up with it.

What shall I say finally about the great public concerts, which provide the grandest opportunities to speak with this or that friend to a musical accompaniment? Or, if one is still in those sportive years, to exchange sweet words with one lady or another? Here music can even provide a suitable theme for conversation. These concerts are proper diversions for the businessman and much to be preferred to the theater, which occasionally presents a play that could cause the mind to fix on something transitory and not factual, might even inadvertently stray into the poetic. Watch out for that, if you value your civic self-respect!

As I said at the outset of these remarks, the diligence and seriousness with which music is practiced and taught today is a valid indicator of the direction the art is taking. It is now established

practice that children be forced to stick to their music whether they have the slightest shred of talent or not. It isn't a question of talent! If it turns out that they can't amount to something in society, at least they can contribute to its entertainment.

One splendid advantage of music over the other arts is that it is pure (that is, untainted by poetry) and, as such, absolutely moral and of no possible adverse effect on impressionable youth. With daring equal to that of the police chief who certified an inventor's new musical instrument as incorporating nothing detrimental to state, religion, or morality, every music teacher can assure Papa and Mama in advance that the new sonata contains not a single immoral thought. When the children are older it goes without saying that they will no longer participate in the arts, since such pursuits are not quite decent for serious men, and might cause a lady to neglect her higher duties at the tea table. As adults they will enjoy music only passively, by having children or professionals play for them.

If one has understood the tendencies in art delineated above it is clear that artists (those persons foolish enough to devote their lives to the "relaxation and diversion business") are to be considered quite subordinate subjects, to be tolerated only because they serve to illustrate *miscere utili dulce*. No person of sound judgment and mature insight will value even the best artist as highly as he would a diligent government clerk or even the workman who stuffs the chair on which the tax accountant or merchant sits, for on the one hand we're dealing with the necessary, on the other with the merely pleasant. Therefore when one is polite and friendly in one's dealings with artists it is only because our civilization and *bonhomie* deem it seemly, as it sanctions association with children and other people who behave nicely and make pretty things. Some unfortunate art enthusiasts realize their error too late and therefore fall into actual insanity, which one can readily recognize from their statements about art.

They claim, namely, that the arts allow one to divine one's higher purpose, that they lead one out of the senseless scurrying and worrying of the mundane life into the temple of Isis, where nature speaks in holy, esoteric but fully comprehensible tones. These deranged people reserve their oddest opinions for music. They call music the most romantic of all the arts, since its substance is evanescence: the occult Sanskrit of nature made perceptible in tones, filling the human heart with infinite longing. Only in music, they say, can one interpret the exalted song of trees, flowers, animals, stones, water!

As for counterpoint, that useless dilly-dallying so at odds with the proper function of music that there's nothing cheerful in it, why, they call *that* trembling enigmatic combinations and go so far as to compare it with marvelously entangled mosses, plants and flowers. They say that a talent or, in the words of these fanatics, the *genius* for music glowing in the hearts of those who cherish and practice it will consume them in everlasting fire if some coarser ethic tries to cover the spark or divert its energy. Those who understand the actual trends in music and art are called by these madmen unwitting blasphemers, forever shut out of the sanctuary of higher existence! In so saying they provide irrefutable proof of their own madness.

Now I ask you, which is better, a bureaucrat or a merchant who has his own money, who eats and drinks well, who goes driving whenever and wherever he wishes and is greeted everywhere with respect, or the artist, eking out his living in his world of fantasy? These fools argue that there is something quite special in rising above the commonplace in poetic bliss, that this turns many a deprivation into a pleasure, but then the emperors and kings in the asylum are happy, too, with their straw crowns on their heads!

But here is the best proof that all their double-talk is just an excuse for not trying to amount to

something: You would be hard put to find anyone who became an artist of his own free will, and they always come from the poorer classes. Born of unpropertied, obscure parents (or sometimes of other artists) it is evident that the absence of any chance of success in the productive world made them what they are, and for all their day-dreaming that's the way it will always be. Should, however, a family of higher station and means be so unfortunate as to have a child apparently predisposed toward art or, in the terminology of those madmen, who carries within him the divine spark that grows and overcomes all resistance, and should the child actually envision an artist's life for himself, then quick action is called for. A conscientious tutor must immediately impose a stringent intellectual diet: avoidance of all fanciful, imaginative fare (poetry and the so-called better compositions of Mozart, Beethoven, etc.), together with continual emphasis on the subordinate station of art and the servile rank of the artist: without title, without position, without property, etc. The erring young subject will soon be brought back to the right path and will eventually feel the proper contempt for the artist and for art. This tried and true remedy for such aberration cannot be too rigorously applied.

To those poor artists who have not yet succumbed to the madness here described, I say that you would not be ill-advised to pull away from this fruitless path and learn some simple handwork, which might divert you from your present inclinations and make you a worthwhile citizen. An expert told me he thought I had good hands for making slippers, and I'm not disinclined to serve as a model for this retraining process, apprenticing with the local shoemaker (his name is Schnabler, and he happens to be my godfather).

Reading back what I've written, I find the derangement of many musicians quite accurately depicted, yet I wince as I realize a certain kinship with them, and Satan whispers into my ear that much of what I have tried to say so straightforwardly might be interpreted by my reader as mischievous irony. So I say once again:

My words are directed to you, who scorn music, who call the edifying singing and playing of children idle tinkling, who say that music is a mysterious, exalted art understood only by those worthy of it. Earnestly and with the best weapons at my disposal I have shown you that music is a fine, practical invention of an enlightened Tubalcain,² the noblest impulse of cultivated people, whose purpose is to cheer and distract and to enhance domestic happiness in a pleasant and soothing manner.

²Translator's note): Paul Friedrich Scherber (*Goldmans gelbe Taschenbücher. Bd.1356*) suggests that Hoffmann confused Tubalcain, the "craftsman in every work of brass and iron," with Jubal, the "father of all those who play the guitar and harp" (*Genesis 4:21-22*). It is also possible that Hoffmann was fully aware of the "mistake" and intended it as a sly comment on the "erudition" of his fictitious polemicist.