

BROWNING'S TREATMENT OF MUSIC.

By Robert A Jelliffe.

The scope of the present study is deliberately narrowed in order to bring into focus the essential function of music in Browning's poetry. What relationship did he think might properly exist between poetry and music? This is the question now before us. And its answer is important in so far as it serves to expound Browning's theory of art in general. The answer may be most expeditiously reached, perhaps, by analysing those poems in which music is itself the theme, or in which the primary theme and the musical accompaniment are perfectly harmonized.

The most significant of the poems of this sort are *Pippa Passes*, *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, *Saul*, *Master Hugues of Saxe Gotha*, and *Abt Vogler*. All of these fulfil one or the other of the stipulations proposed above. They are poems in which the theme is inextricably bound up with a musical context, or in which a musical type is itself the theme. Two of them deal primarily with the technique of music. Two are concerned with the emotional effect produced by music on sensitive natures. And the fifth represents the mood induced in the musician while improvising.

Of the first group, those dealing with technique and form, the representatives are *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, and *Master Hugues*. Both of them are based on types of musical composition, the one a "touch piece", as the title indicates—light, capricious, staccato; the other intricate and heavy, a fugue.

A toccata, as a form of musical composition, touches its theme lightly and rapidly. Unlike a sonata, it aims at no measured elaboration of some musical motif. It is rather to be likened to a wayward improvisation, irresponsible, superficial, indeterminate. Such was the toccata in its simplest form. But when Galuppi employed it he introduced several important innovations. He made free use of chords. for instance, and gave it a more intelligible

theme. Certainly that one of his compositions which Browning had in mind must have been more highly developed than the earlier examples would imply. For if its true character is reflected in the poem, it must have contained much shading, thrilling and tender cadences, and even occasional dissonances.

In order to suggest something of the brilliant, hard technique of such a composition, Browning has written the poem in a form to correspond. The three-line stanza with its single rhyme does reproduce, so far as verse may, the spirit of its musical prototype. Each stanza, so far as the rhyme-scheme is concerned, is independent of every other. There is consequently an absence of that suave coherence which might be expected, for instance, of a sonata-poem. We are made to feel that at any moment the theme may digress; each phrase is an independent entity. But the precision and definiteness of the individual phrase are accentuated by the single rhyme. Take one of these phrase-stanzas as an example :

Did young people take their pleasure when the sea was warm
in May?

Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to mid-day,
When they made up fresh adventures for the morrow, as you
say?

This stanza illustrates as well another feature of the poem. For *A Toccata of Galuppi's* might be called an epitome of the period in which it is placed. The characteristics of eighteenth century Venetian life were those of a highly civilized, highly sophisticated age : brilliancy, superficiality, a tendency toward cynicism. These qualities are paraphrased in the poem. On the surface we find an apparent spirit of gaiety and exuberance. But underneath, there runs an undertone of brooding disquietude. It is this complexity of mood which gives the poem its emotional unity. Another single stanza will serve to illustrate it :

Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was
burned :

Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.

The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be discerned.

In a word, then, the poem attempts to perform a double office. It endeavors to represent a musical composition which itself reflects a particular period and environment. The life which it aims to reflect, moreover, is represented by detached and intermittent glimpses of its typical society. And to this extent, if we may venture for a moment to identify music and poem, we may think of this toccata as a piece of "programme music". It tells a story by hints and implications. And since the poem aims primarily at reproducing the music, we may, perhaps, supply the programme. Breathless with the dance, this gay company have lingered in the ball-room, inattentively listening to the musician. Despite themselves, they are moved by his playing. But they resolutely repel these more sincere emotions, that they may not become critical of their own thoughtless gaiety. Athwart the music we hear their fragmentary whispering—a polite love-duet against the plaintive musical background:

"Were you happy?"—"Yes."—"And are you still as happy?"—"Yes. And you?"—"Then, more kisses!"—"Did I stop them, when a million seemed so few?" Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!

Such music is no fitting accompaniment to light repartee, however graceful. For the "dominant's persistence" comes to an inevitable close—a certainty without appeal. An octave struck the answer. So, with patronizing and conventional praise for the performer, they stroll away from the too-eloquent music, and lose themselves in the less disturbing dance.

This is the story. Although the music is to them a disturbing element, it is, nevertheless, very like them in character. They were unpleasantly aware of its minor cadences. It forced them momentarily to think. But it had no power to penetrate to their hearts. Of true emotional quality it had as little as they. It was a certain polished

brilliance in addition to a factitious melancholy that held them in its spell, and revealed them to themselves. When it ceased, they betook themselves again, unchanged, to their former diversions.

We may conclude, that the function of music in this poem is to represent a stage of culture. Venetian life reflected itself in the virtuosity of a toccata. Browning has transferred to the poem the characteristic features of that form of music, and has added an interpretative commentary. Form, in this instance, was more valued than spirit. The age put the stamp of its approval on technique rather than on sincerity of feeling. And in order to illustrate this temper, Browning has brought before us one of its most typical exponents.

The stately musician and his clavichord must now give place to the organ and Master Hugues. It is no longer a matter of touch that must concern us, but rather of registration. Yet considerable technical ability is again necessary, for the difficult passages demand power of execution as well as interpretation.

Here again, in so far as verse is able to do so, it reproduces the form of musical composition involved. Its intention is, plainly, to represent the formation and structure of a fugue. In order to do so, Browning has hit on the happy expedient of introducing a group of voices first separately, and then collectively affirming, disputing, denying an original proposition. By this analogy he has suggested the complex method of theme-development employed in this kind of music. The first speaker ventures his statement, whereupon the others chime in as their opinions prompt them.

The initial proposition was essentially simple. It would seem hardly competent of itself to produce so much contention. But the other speakers are apparently determined to discuss it, each one holding to his own view, and uttering it with such insistence that only the trained ear, finally, can resolve the resulting confusion into its elements. The resemblance between the fugue and the poem is furthered by the progressive complexity of the rhyme scheme. For as the theme is developed, the rhymes become double, and then triple; so that we come upon such a stanza as this:

One says his say with a difference !

More of expounding, explaining !

All now is wrangle, abuse, and vociferance !

Now there's a truce, all's subdued, self-restraining ;

Five, though, stands out all the stiffer hence.

But a fugue is rightly more than contrapuntal design, however skilful. It has some further significance than that of weaving a thematic pattern. So the organist, unsatisfied by the mere rendition of the piece, seek the animating impulse behind it. The score in front of him offers difficulties enough of execution ; but he imagines the neglected composer of the fugue as saying,

Sure you said - "good, the mere notes" !

Still, couldst thou take my intent,

* * * *

A master were lauded...

The feeling haunts him that there is more to the utterance than he has realized. The piece can be no mere exercise for the fingers ; it must have a meaning. So - honest musician as he is - he goes back to the beginning, in the endeavor to secure an intimation of this suspected but elusive import. Playing carefully, correctly, "runningly", even, through the difficult passages "where one wipes sweat from one's brow", he derives from the very fidelity of his performance, a sense of the composer back of the composition. He feels the spell of his presence, imagines the very look on his face as he stands back amid the shadows. So well has the organist rendered the substance of what he has been playing, that he has thereby re-created, as well, the spirit. Perfect execution results in sound interpretation.

By his desire to do justice to the real significance of the composition as well as to the "mere notes", the performer shows himself to be a true artist. By the very perfection of his technique he is empowered to become the spokesman of the deeper values.

But he is no automaton, precisely reproducing meaningless phrases, no sounding-board for reflected impressions. He is so absolutely in sympathy with the mood of the composer, so thoroughly absorbed by his creative enthusiasm, that he shares, for the time being, in the same inspiration which dominated him. All the power and the passion first felt by the composer is experienced anew by the organist. He has entered into a comradeship of the emotions with his predecessor. Nevertheless, he is an altogether different type of man. He has gone thus thoroughly into the fugue, not because it was a favorite work of his, but because his conscientious nature refused to leave it half understood. As soon as he has mastered it, he turns with more enthusiasm to something else. For its meaning was irritatingly obscured by its mechanism.

Fundamentally, therefore, this poem also devotes itself to the exposition of a musical form. At least, the consideration of composition in this, as in *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, precedes the discussion of significance. In the *Toccata*, the musical type was all-essential, both in the music itself and in what it implied. In *Master Hugues*, the type was analyzed in the effort to discover its meaning. In both poems Browning has treated the technical side of music.

Pippa Passes and *Saul*, on the contrary, do not concern themselves with form, or technique, but with the influence exerted by music upon the spirit of those who hear it. In these two poems, that is to say, music is accorded a new function. The effect it produces is of more importance than its method of construction, or its characterizing power.

The story of *Pippa Passes* is familiar. At daybreak, Pippa, the little silk-winder, wakes to the joyous prospect of a holiday. She has decided to pretend to herself that, for this one day, she is to be, successively, the four persons whose situation she most envies. Her day is to become a royal "progress" to their respective dwelling places. It so happens that on this very day each one of her idols is called upon to make a decision of vital bearing on his whole life. And each one, through hearing her song as she passes, is influenced

aright at the crucial moment. The poem, therefore, resolves itself, structurally, into four scenes, the fabric of which assumes such unity of tone and meaning as it possesses, by reason of the design woven into it by the golden thread of Pippa's personality.

Her songs are pleasing, and, because of their inspiring strain, deservedly popular; but they are of no great intrinsic excellence. Nor is it probable that her voice, however fresh and sweet, has received much cultivation. Whatever influence her singing might possess, therefore, would be due to some other cause than either of these. It would result, perhaps, from a sincerity of feeling; or from such half-realized associations as the song might summon up in the heart of the listener; or it might result from the impressionable state of the listener's nature at the moment. The influence exerted would not be due, that is, to the sheer artistic merit of the melody. For one's sensitiveness to purely aesthetic stimuli is not particularly acute in moments of great mental or spiritual stress.

From gladness of heart because the day is so fair and free, Pippa raises her young voice in song as she makes ready for the day's enjoyment. Coming to the shrub-house, up the hillside where lives the queenly Ottima, she breaks forth again in upremeditated singing. Life itself, for her, is at the spring. Untroubled as yet by perplexity or care, she voices her happiness as spontaneously as a disembodied joy. All the sunny innocence of her life is echoed in what she sings. All's right with her world.

Within the house, meanwhile, Ottima, "magnificent in sin", strives desperately to banish her lover's remorse. They have killed her aged husband; but she would have Sebald remember nothing but their mutual love. His conscience, beguiled by her seductive pleading, subsides. He is almost won over. Pippa passes.

So simple, so entirely unconscious of any deliberate effect, is her singing; yet it comes to Sebald as a piercing voice of accusation. "Did you hear that?" he asks, in terror. "Who spoke? You spoke!" It must have been Ottima: she was the only one there; and he knows that some compelling voice addressed him. She only, he

thinks, could have roused him from the drowsy quiescence into which he had sunk. Out of the abyss of frustrate conscience he begins straightway to rise, in response to that summoning call.

For Sebald himself can sing, He knows a drinking song, at least, as good as the best. Doubtless he knows other songs as well, some of them of a gentler sort. With his German comrades he has sung many times for pure love of life and of country. Then life was pleasant and carefree. This snatch of song he has just heard recalls to him that forfeited right to happiness. Ottima has held him in her spell; but now sense and conscience are once more responsive to the slightest excitation. The voice of innocence has been of power to rouse him from threatened apathy of spirit.

In each of the other situations of the poem, also, Pippa's singing is heard at moments of supreme decision. And in each case it tends to influence the decision aright. Those who overhear her songs are in a specially receptive condition; but the real source of power is Pippa's personality conveyed, as it is, through the medium of music.

Another poet of this period had said, lamenting the difficulty of making ourselves understood to one another,

Only - but this is rare -

When a beloved hand is laid in ours,

* * * *

The eye sinks inward and the heart lies plain,

And what we mean, we say, and what we would, we know.

Browning extends the possibility. It was not the melody or the words of the song, that changed Jules' hesitation into purpose, or stiffened Luigi's faltering intention. It was the singing of the song, the intimate correspondence of spirit inaugurated by music in the persons of singer and auditor. Of all the arts music has the most immediate access to the emotions, and is the most universally understood. The decisions to be made, moreover, could be affected most surely by an emotional appeal. So, by a kind of musical telepathy, Pippa's innate purity and joyousness communicated itself

to one after another of those who heard her voice. It was her individuality, expressing itself in musical utterance, that stirred them. And this persuasion of personality, according to Browning, could have been effected in no other way.

In *Saul*, music has much the same office; but the application differs. The influence exerted by Pippa was wholly unintentional; David, on the contrary, consciously endeavors to assuage the distress of his afflicted king. For Saul was plunged into one of his frequent fits of melancholy.

We may dispense at once with the theory of the strictly medicinal value of music. It will be readily admitted that much benefit may undoubtedly be derived from some such purification of the emotions as music brings about. And to this extent the entire being is brought into a more healthy condition. But the use of music in a deliberate attempt to cure certain ills does not bear directly on our subject. It is sufficient to recall that this is a very early instance of a widely disseminated belief in the tonic efficacy of music. It is a recognition of its sanative, rather than its medicinal virtue. Orsino, in his turn, realized the value of music as a dull narcotic, soothing pain. His sentimental melancholy thrived on its tender cadences.

Of quite another sort, however, were the melodies David played. They drew their themes from the engendering earth, from man's connection with all life, and his sovereign place in the world. Yet these first essays provoked no response from the suffering monarch. The distance between their natures — shepherd and sovereign — was too great. For this young boy to venture into the presence of the stricken king was an awesome undertaking. He felt the seriousness of his mission, and its immense importance. Should he fail, the black agony that had shut down on Saul might never be dispersed. He must succeed! But at first, eager as he was, he could awaken no least spark of response. The necessity of the occasion paralyzed his powers.

Then timidity and self-consciousness gave way to longing.

Dread of the kind was replaced by the yearning to relieve the suffering of the man. Immediately this new spirit voiced itself in what the harpist played. And so it reached Saul. As long as the music remained impersonal or mechanical, it had no effect on him. To be sure, it might, by steady insistence, have finally beaten a way into the rock-barricaded consciousness of the king. But far more subtly and swiftly did this human relationship win its way, by displacing the earlier diffidence, and making itself heard through the instrument. Now David's playing penetrated to the very heart of the king through the armor of his agony. Mighty Saul put his hand on the boy's head in mute acknowledgment of the youth's good will.

Instantly, a dawning sense of his power to help suffused the young musician. The touch of human affection at once dissipated all differences in rank. From being shepherd lad and sovereign, they became two men mutually sympathetic. So the way was now clear for David to express himself, and thereby to succeed in his undertaking.

How, finally, the instrument gave place to the voice alone; how the yearning to dispel this grief, and to solace the king grew into an overwhelming desire to foretell a Christ, can be no part of this study. We must confine ourselves to the primary purpose of music in the poem, which is, to serve as a medium of appeal from one nature to another.

Music as the effective exponent of personality, and as the truest and most convincing expression of the deepest feeling - that is its chief office in both *Pippa Passes* and *Saul*. No one but Pippa, though singing her very songs at those very moments, could have accomplished what she did. No one but David, rapt as he became with a flaming devotion, could so have touched Saul with those simple melodies. The influence of human nature, when it can be sympathetically communicated, is almost irresistible. And music is an almost universal code. The little Italian silk-winder and Monsignor, David and Saul, ordinarily would have but little in common. Their parts on the stage of the world are not nearly enough equal in importance. Rarely could one understand the other. But fundamen-

tal passions are the same ; and music speaks a universal language of the feelings.

A third way of treating music in Browning's poetry is exemplified by *Abt Vogler*. This poem expresses in exalted verse the inspiration experienced by the musician while composing. Music is not, here, the interpreter between diverse natures, nor the expositor of form. It is the portrayal of ecstasy. In other words, *Abt Vogler*, despite its dramatic form, has in it much of the lyric quality. The musician's rapture imbues the verse with something of its own abandon.

Although the main purpose is to reproduce in poetry the inspiration of the musician, form is not entirely neglected. Like the performer of Master Hugues' mountainous fugue, The old Abbé draws a resemblance in nature to the organ piece he is improvising. He likens it to a mighty palace. Higher and higher it soars, until human power can carry it no further. There is a limitation to power of expression. In form, the music is a very crescendo of inspiration. Yet Abt Vogler, unlike the painter Andrea who was able to execute perfectly whatever his imagination could conceive, was able to conceive of harmonies beyond his power of utterance: Though music is in many ways the most satisfying of all the expressive arts, man's nature can feel more than it is able to articulate.

Possessed by the beauty of his improvisation, the Abbé is led to meditate over the grandeur of his art, and its mystery. Of all the arts it alone is subject to no explicable system. It is, rather, the immediate revelation of divine inspiration. The marvel of the twofold unity of a chord strikes the organist with fresh amazement. He might say, as Browning says of himself in *The Ring and the Book*, "I fused my soul and that inert stuff"; for, given a note out of nature, he adds two more from his own consciousness, and has thereby produced a blend with an individuality quite apart from its elements.

All the thrilling rapture of self-expression is reflected in the spirit of the poem. Every true artist rejoices at such moments of creative activity. But the painter adds a touch to his canvas, and then must

stand back to judge of the effect. The poet cudgels his brains for a rhyme, and in the effort he may draw meaningless lines on his blotter. While the musician extemporises directly, his medium of expression responding perfectly to the surge and sway of the creative impulse. This progressive continuity of sound echoing thought is reproduced by the exalted strain of the verse. The spirit of the composer transpires through the poem. One stanza may serve to illustrate this correspondence :

And another would mount and march, like the excellent minion
he was,

Ay, another and yet another, one crowd but with many a crest,
Raising my rampired walls of gold as transparent as glass,

Eager to do and die, yield each his place to the rest :
For higher still and higher (as a runner tips with fire,

When a great illumination surprises a festal night -
Outlining round and round Rome's dome from space to spire)

Up, the pinnacled glory reached, and the pride of my soul
was in sight.

Since the arbitrary divisions into which we grouped these poems at the beginning have served their purpose, let us now look for a moment at those inherent qualities common to all five. Taken collectively, they would indicate that Browning's conception of the value of music was exceedingly high: that he looked upon it as specially suited, by reason of its form, or its interpretative quality, or its lofty tone, to give most adequate expression to the highest emotions of mankind. Each one of the poems links music, whatever special office it may fulfil, and life itself. No one of them is content to treat of music apart from humanity: they all concern themselves with its employment in some worthy cause.

In *Abt Vogler*, when inspiration transcends execution, when it becomes aspiration, music serves to combine the passion of the musician and the spiritual ardor of the man himself. It was music that led him to aspire, that disclosed to him deeper and purer conceptions. But it was nevertheless by reason of music as compared

with man's whole nature, that Abt Vogler longed for a rapture that should not lose itself in air, but should be based on a more substantial foundation than shifting sound. "The pride of my soul was in sight", he exclaims at the height of his enthusiasm; but the next stanza begins, "In sight? Not half!" Music opened his heart to the assurance that "All we have willed or dreamed of good shall exist". He would not admit that the highest aim of music was to immortalize evanescent moods. For him there was no consolation even in the knowledge of his ability to create new harmonies. The creator of beauty would have his most perfect image of art endure, by securing its re-admission to heaven. He attains to the surety that this shall take place. "There shall never be one lost good!" Music has brought him to this faith. So we may conclude that the function of music has been to relate his highest aspiration to highest belief in a perfection of goodness. The very failure of music to fulfil all the desires of his heart is to him an earnest of a greater success to follow.

David is thrilled by the same sudden wistfulness to surpass himself, to go beyond the confines of mortal limitations. It was in his case music, which, by attuning his spirit to the Creator's purpose, bred in him this longing. Whereupon, putting the harp aside, he broke forth into that tumultuous prophecy that is the summit and glory of his love for Saul. As music proved insufficient to reveal the wealth of his love, so his love must fall short of the love of God. The intensity of his emotion inspires his faith. Again it was the duty of music to bring him to the pitch of conviction, to connect his prophecy with his aspiration.

Master Hugues' stubborn fugue, furthermore, is not all technique, as we have seen. When the fingers grow accustomed to the difficulties of the score, the player appreciates the latent significance. It means something; it represents life itself. So does Galuppi's toccata. The deduction, therefore, is imperative that music as an accomplishment, merely, or as an aesthetic enjoyment, is not in accord with Browning's understanding of it. He would have us consider it as the art which interprets the truest, most revealing, and most ennobling qualities of man's nature.