

SCHUBERT'S "ERLKOENIG"

AN APPRECIATION

The singing master is confronted with the necessity of emphasizing what might be called the physiological side of singing before he can devote his attention to the aesthetic. The long drudgery of breath control, enunciation, tone production, fluency and extension of range—all these things must be acquired, and can only in the latter stages be combined with artistic finish in interpretation. The emotional, the intellectual value of the composition must be subordinated to a rigid carefulness in educating that delicate product, the human voice in such a manner that it may not lose its velvety freshness and bloom. But there comes a time (welcomed by master and pupil alike) when a certain spontaneity of voice production, an unconscious yet uncareful correctness of vocal technique allows the study of song, not in its anatomical bareness, but clothed upon with all the graces of beauty, and glowing with a rich vitality.

It would be manifestly improper for me to discuss the singing of Mr. Clemens Movius merely from the technical side. There are differences of opinion among all educated men even in the same profession; the result partly of the personal equation, partly of variations in schooling. Moreover, fortunately or unfortunately as you please, there are no fixed tenets of vocal art, no irrevocable laws which by universal consent command "Thus shall you breathe, thus shall you produce a certain tone." One singer follows the Italian school, another the French or German. Each singer, if he be an artist, like the famous painter, mixes his "method" with brains. In other words he sings in the manner best adapted to his individual voice. But it may not be improper or unfruitful if I try to bring before the Lincoln public a more vivid and personal appreciation of the aesthetic value of Mr. Movius' singing of Schubert's "Erlkonig." In doing so I feel that I strike a new vein in Lincoln, that of appreciative criticism. Humorous criticism, kindly criticism, inane criticism, destructive criticism, absurd criticism we have and have had in abundance. By appreciative criticism I mean the recognition and encouragement of whatever is valuable and likely to endure, knowing that what is weak and unreal and will surely perish of itself.

Schubert's "Erlkonig" is a very difficult song. Apart from the pace of the composition, a rapid and impassioned movement, trying to both singer and accompanist, there are certain intervals which are difficult and not very singable. Thus the voice at the words "Mein Vater, mein Vater, und siehst du nicht dort" sustains C against B in the accompaniment a half step lower, and later the same discord is transported a half step higher. Moreover the range of the composition—what the Italians call "tessitura"—requires a voice which can sustain and declaim in the upper register as well as sing low notes. After a stormy introduction suggesting the galloping of a horse and charged with an indefinable throb of apprehension which continues throughout the composition the song begins with the simple query of the narrator "who rides so fast through night and wind?" The answer comes at once. "It is the father with his child." Almost immediately dropping the narrative style the poem proceeds in dramatic fashion. The voice of the father is heard, questioning the little boy whom

he holds close and warm in the stormy night. "Why do you hide your face my son?"—an interrogation not yet fraught with presentiment of coming doom. The child replies, at first quietly, afterward in terror stricken accents. He sees the king of the Elves with sceptre and crown. As the poem proceeds the voice of the Elf king is heard seductively inviting the boy to go with him to his palace. His daughters will make merry, will dance and sing for him, will rock the child to sleep. The boy does not answer the Elf king, but appeals to his father in fear—and from this point the song rushes on in impassioned dialogue among the three. The father strives to quiet the child and reassure him; the Elf king, all unheard by the father; persuades and finally threatens, the child shrieks aloud in mortal terror. Finally in a close unequaled for terse and tragic, simplicity the father reaches home, the mad gallop of the horse ends abruptly, the song in the person of the narrator announces the death of the child.

A dramatic and difficult ballad, this of Goethe's, not easy even to read aloud. Combined with the magnificent music of Schubert, music which stirs the emotions deeply and contains a thrill of the horror of the supernatural, it must be declaimed by an artist of no mean powers. He must possess besides sufficient voice, intelligence, authority, pathos, dramatic force and fervor. He must be by turn seductive and caressing, calming and tender, tragic to the top of his bent. Moreover he must depict the varied emotions solely by his powers of vocal expression without the artificial stimulus of stage and dramatic action.

I wish to say that Mr. Movius in a large measure fulfilled these requirements. He sang with repose, holding himself well in hand, even in the most impassioned passages. There was an atmosphere of reserve force—there was an abundance of—shall I say temperament? There seems to be no other word. Especially would I commend the broad and classic dignity with which Mr. Movius emphasized the sombre pathos of the close. "In Seinen Armen, das kind war tot!"

Let us not be afraid to praise that which is good. We have in Lincoln a Lied of no mean order, whose occasional appearances should be greeted with the warmth of welcome they deserve. I hope Mr. Movius will give us a recital of the songs of Schubert Schuman and Robert Franz. In this particular field his appearance would be a joy to everyone who has an interest in music, and enough education to appreciate these charming songs. With so able an assistant as Mr. Hadley (whose accompaniment must have been material aid to the singer) such a recital may be one of the musical events of the season. JOHN RANDOLPH.

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