

A CAPRICE ON A MUSICAL THEME.

BY THE EDITOR.

MUSIC has reached its completion in Beethoven. A number of great composers have attained the same height, but no one as yet has risen above the master. The general rules of counterpoint and the standard as to the beauty of tone in both melody and harmony have been laid down, and unless we abandon entirely our gamut and whatever depends upon it, the development of music has reached its climax. It has attained to the full state of maturity as much as, for instance, the norms of plane geometry have been settled once for all in Euclid. There are composers on the same height with Beethoven who bring out the same classical type in different fields,—Mozart, Handel, Haydn, Schumann, Schubert, Brahms, etc., but they have not made new applications of the musical ideal which seems to be determined for all the ages to come.

Mankind, however, is anxious for innovations. New generations grow up bent on doing better than their predecessors, and when a certain perfection has been attained, the genius of the time ventures into unknown regions and tries to construct something quite original and novel. It was in this way that Wagner undertook to outdo Beethoven whom, however, he still recognized as his master, and no doubt he succeeded, at least so far as he actualized his ideal of having the word wedded to the tone. Though Beethoven's *Fidelio* remains grand not only in its music but also when we consider the subject-matter of his opera, we know very well how poor were the librettos which Mozart and others of his peers had to set to music. Wagner has done away with senseless texts forever by creating the tone-drama, which changes the opera into a dignified product of true art.

Richard Strauss is ensouled with a similar ambition. As Wagner set to music the philosophy of Schopenhauer which inspires his Nibelungen trilogy ending in the great Nirvana of the *Twilight of*

the Gods, so also Strauss has ventured on the presentation of philosophical subjects, and he has selected the world-conception of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Whatever good there is in Schopenhauer's philosophy, and we are far from denying him a high rank among modern thinkers, we cannot help considering his pessimism, which in misconstruing the Buddhist Nirvana greets non-existence as the ideal state, as a symptom of degeneration. When Wagner applies this theory to the Asa gods, whose leader Wotan sinks into nothingness with the hope that the world-process is now forever finished, we deem it a serious aberration, or at any rate incongruous with the character of the vigorous and life-loving Teutonic deities.

Unfortunately Richard Strauss' theme is more inadequate than Wagner's, for Nietzsche is one of the most erratic thinkers of modern times. Of the music itself, we do not venture to express an opinion because we have not been present at the performance of his *Thus spake Zarathushtra!* and we can judge only from hearsay, which, after all, is a very unreliable source of information upon which to base a judgment.

We do not deny that it would be possible to express in music, sentiments which characterize the tendencies of philosophical systems, but would prefer other themes than the vagaries of a transient meteor blazing up in a fiery eruption, to vanish as suddenly as it appeared. Would not, for instance, a new interpretation of evolution—an analogy to Haydn's *Creation*—have been a worthier theme?

After all, when we compare the product of the classical music of the past with the so-called music of the future, we have this striking difference: that the former yields with a few simple notes, melodies and harmonies which appear like a divine revelation, while the latter needs large orchestras to affect our ears with massive impressiveness, and the result is that we are stunned and overwhelmed rather than charmed or elevated.

Beethoven is still (at least to me) a philosopher in tones. His sonatas are pervaded by a logical order which is like unto a revelation of the harmony of the spheres. There is a consistency in the development of his motives as they pass through a series of variations such as is absent in the work of the more pretentious composers of modern days.

If mankind must needs have something new, why has there not yet appeared a composer whose endeavor would be to construct music based on absolutely correct mathematical relations? The development of our gamut is a matter of history. We divide the scale ir-

regularly into seven intervals, or, if we consider the more regular chromatic scale, into twelve. Of these notes the octaves and the fifth alone are the result of arithmetically accurate relations, being in the ratio of 1 to 2. The third already involves an arbitrary element and so we have a choice between what is musically called the major and the minor, which are different in their musical effects. The notes between the fifth and the octave are divided in an approximately equal proportion.

Now we can very well imagine that we might have another kind of scale with different tone-relations. As a matter of fact the Chinese divided their scale into five notes, so that they have an hexate instead of our octave, and this results in a peculiarly plaintive music. Their instrumentation would be, approximately, as if a Western musician would limit himself to the black keys on the piano. Our ears have become accustomed, perhaps even by hereditary influence, to the octave system, and all our stringed and brass instruments are under the dominion of the piano interpretation of our scale. It is true that to a Chinese ear, our music is merely a medley of noises, as much as Chinese music is unmusical to the Western ear.

Now it would be very curious to try a construction of other musical systems and see whether a purely mathematical one would be possible, and, if so, what the result would be. If man must venture into innovations, why not try an absolutely new system of music, even if it were merely an attempt to see what can be done in these lines? It would at least be an interesting analogy to the metageometry of theoretical mathematics.