

CHAPTER XIV

POEMS ON MUSIC

POEMS on music did not occupy an important place in English literature until within our own day. I do not mean that poems on this subject were few in number, or that some of them were not famous even a hundred years ago. But such poems as that of Milton, "At a Solemn Music," were not famous at all because of the subject, but because of some thought or some beauty of expression not dependent upon the subject. Many Elizabethan poems referred to music; but they are not admired for that reason; they are simply love poems, and the connection of them with music in itself is very slight indeed. As a matter of fact, not only is musical development a very modern growth; but the sense of music, the ability to understand and to enjoy harmony is something new in the world. It is as if men were getting a sixth sense in addition to the five which they originally possessed. Gifted as they were in other ways, the old Greeks knew nothing of music in the sense of modern harmony. They had melody, and books of musical philosophy; but they had no conception of music based upon a combination of the different notes sounded at the same time. Only at their great games were there any vocal performances which made even an approach to real harmony; then boys and men sang together certain hymns; and the treble voices of the boys blending with the deeper voices of the men may have produced a very simple kind of harmony. But of instrumental harmony they had no real knowledge.

Even in modern Europe the art of music developed only in recent times; and therefore it is only to recent times that we can look for any remarkable English poems on the sub-

ject. Very modern indeed are the few that we possess which can take high rank. And these were written chiefly by Robert Browning, who was himself an excellent musician. In fact nobody except a musician could have written some of his compositions; and in consequence parts are incomprehensible to anybody who is not a musician. They are technical in wording, and professional in suggestion. But some of the poems deal rather with the art and the philosophy of music than with the science of it. And these we can profitably study. I myself know nothing about music—not simply for want of study, but for want of something much more important, a natural ear for music. Unless born with that gift the study of music is useless—as well try to study colour if born blind. I am telling you this that you may understand that the poems which I am going to talk to you about can be liked and enjoyed without any knowledge of music at all. They are philosophical and emotional—not technical.

Well, the first piece is entitled “A Toccata of Galuppi’s.” Galuppi was an Italian musician who lived at Venice in the days of the great Venetian Republic,—in the time of luxury and splendour; and he composed a great many Toccatas, which is a name given to a kind of very joyous or whimsical or passionate music formerly played upon an instrument called a clavichord. There are no clavichords now because the piano has taken the place of such instruments; but a clavichord looked very much like a small piano.

Even if some of you, like myself, should not happen to understand harmony you all know that certain kinds of music excite within us certain kinds of emotion. Melodies do this quite as well as harmonies, though less elaborately. Have you ever asked yourselves what is the reason that a certain melody touches our hearts—makes us feel sad, while another kind will make us feel happy and smile and want to dance? Only evolutionary philosophy attempted an answer to that question in modern times. The mystery is the same as in the case of a human voice. You hear a certain very sweet voice; and the sound of it makes you wish to love

the person possessing it—even though you have not seen the face at all. On the other hand we sometimes hear a voice so disagreeable that we cannot help disliking the owner of that voice, though he has never given us any cause for offence. Now the effect of music is, after all, only the same effect as that of many voices; and the explanation of the feeling in both cases is fundamentally the same. For thousands and thousands of generations men have been accustomed to associate certain sounds with ideas of pleasure and kindness and joy, and others with ideas of sadness and pain and fear. The new born child feels such pleasures or such pains in the tones of voices heard—long before any thinking is really possible. Of all sounds music most bestirs the memory of race-experience within us. But can this art do more? Can it tell us some story of the past? Can it make us see things that happened hundreds of years ago? I do not think it can. But Browning says that it can and says this so beautifully and so weirdly that we almost believe it. Besides he was a musician and he ought to know. Listening to an old Toccata by Galuppi he sees and hears what happened in Venice hundreds of years ago and he knows from that music the character of the man that wrote it, and the story of his life:—

Oh, Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find!
 I can hardly misconceive you; it would prove me deaf and blind;
 But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!

Here you come with your old music, and here 's all the good it brings.
 What, they lived once thus at Venice where the merchants were the
 kings,

Where St. Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?

Ay, because the sea 's the street there; and 'tis arched by . . . what
 you call

. . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept the carnival:
 I was never out of England—it 's as if I saw it all!

“Oh, Baldassaro, this is a very sad thing! I cannot make any mistake about the meaning of your music—not to

understand you would prove me to be a very stupid person. But, although I know what you mean, it makes me very very sad indeed.

“There is this old music of yours, and what does it tell us? . . . Oh, that was the way—was it?—that people lived in Venice, the wonderful city where the merchants lived like kings, and where the Doge used every year to perform a marriage ceremony with the sea for spouse—dropping a ring of gold into the water.

“I know that the wonderful church of St. Mark is there, and the bridge—I forgot the name—the bridge with houses on, over which the Jew Shylock used to go, in Shakespeare’s play. Although I was never outside England—your music makes me see Venice just as if I had been there—and not the Venice of to-day, but the Venice of long ago, the gorgeous, luxurious Venice that was once the great city of pleasure. Now, what was the life of Venice when you wrote this music? I think I know.”

Did young people take their pleasure when the sea was warm in May?
Balls and masks began at midnight, burning ever to mid-day
When they made up fresh adventures for the morrow, do you say?

Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red,—
On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bell-flower on its bed,
O’er the breast’s superb abundance where a man might base his head?

“Now I see, the music says just what you saw, Galuppi—tell me, am I not guessing right? The young people of your time used to have their season of amusement from the month of May when the sea began to be warm? Then was the time of balls and the masked ball—when they began to dance at mid-night and remained dancing with all the lights burning until noon of the next day; and then they would make arrangements to meet each other the day after.

“Why, I can even see those figures—the handsome young men, in their velvet dresses, all wearing swords; and what beauties those Venetian women were! Here is one—I can see her—such a lady, cheeks rounded with the downy fullness of

youth, and her bright red lips, and her beautiful little head—looking as light upon her neck as a flower upon its stalk—and, then, what a beautiful bosom for a man to lay his head upon. Am I not right? Why, I can even hear what those people said; I can see how they conducted themselves while you were making music for them.”

Well, (and it was graceful of them) they'd break talk off and afford—She, to bite her mask's black velvet, he, to finger on his sword, While you sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord?

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminish'd, sigh on sigh, Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—'Must we die?'

Those commiserating sevenths—'Life might last! we can but try!'

'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!

“It was kind of such grand people to stop their amusement for a time to listen to your playing. The woman, she condescended to remain quiet; but she showed her emotion by biting her velvet mask between her little pearly teeth; and he stood still too; but his fingers kept beating time to your music upon the hilt of his sword;—and the two presently began whispering to each other about their last secret meeting.

“But suddenly the music began to make them sorrowful. There was something in it that murmured to them, ‘However happy you are, or think you are now—remember that you must die.’ But then did not the music also hint to them, since you must die—perhaps quickly—why not endeavour to enjoy yourselves as much as possible in the meantime?”

In the eighth verse the questions are alternately whispered by the woman and the man. It is the man who asks first, “Were you happy when we met last?” Also it is the man who asks for kisses, and the woman who answers that she never tried to prevent him from having as many as he wished for. The “dominant's persistence which must be

answered to" naturally suggests the lover as the dominant, compelling the woman to yield her lips to him. But, here the music requires some detailed explanation; for dominant signifies also the fifth note of the scale, and the *answering* musically implies that an octave is struck. The rule is that in the perfect cadence or full-cadence, the dominant must be followed by the tonic. Also we must say a word about the other notes referred to. "Lesser thirds" signify minor chords—the composition must be in the melancholy or minor key. A lesser third is composed of one tone and a semi-tone. Greater thirds are composed of two full tones—such tones would constitute music written in the major, or glad-some key. But all this is plaintive music. The effect of minor thirds is to give a feeling of tenderness or grief. "Diminished sixth" signifies sixth having one semi-tone (less than a minor sixth)—the effect is necessarily plaintive. "Suspensions" and "solutions" signify something which can not be fully explained without musical demonstration. But I will try to explain it in this way. In such music as Toccata there are many notes both low and high being played at the same time. Suppose that the higher notes are suddenly stopped while the lower notes continue: that is suspension. The result is a slightly painful feeling, which is only solved when the high notes are continued again: that is the solution.

One more phrase requires explanation. "Commiserating seventh." The poet means minor seventh, or rather minor and diminished seventh which makes the most pleasing of all musical dissonances, or artistic discords. The discord of a minor seventh is almost as sweet as a concord and has a very penetrating effect of gentle sounds. But remember that in Browning's wonderful seventh verse every musical term has a double meaning—the technical meaning and the emotional meaning also, referring to the feeling of the man and the woman whispering together.

So an octave struck the answer. Oh, they praised you, I dare say!
'Brave Galuppi! that was music! good alike at grave and gay!
I can always leave off talking, when I hear a master play.'

Then they left you for their pleasure: till in due time, one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,
Death came tacitly and took them where they never see the sun.

“And so the answer came—an octave—an octave of kisses.
And of course they praised your music—especially. ‘Brave,
well done, Galuppi—that music of yours was really great
music. You are just as clever at serious music as at merry
music. And I can always stop talking to listen to such music
as you play.’ That is just what that foolish woman said, I
suppose.

“And then they went away from you to enjoy them-
selves; and they enjoyed themselves until they died. Some
of those people might as well never have lived at all—because
they did nothing either good or bad. Others did a great
many things which had better not have been done. But a
day came when death quietly took them where the light of
day never shines. That is the story which your music tells
me. But now why did you write it?”

But when I sit down to reason, think to take my stand nor swerve,
While I triumph o’er a secret wrung from nature’s close reserve,
In you come with your cold music, till I creep thro’ every nerve.

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.

‘Yours for instance, you know physics, something of geology,
Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their degree;
Butterflies may dread extinction,—you’ll not die, it can not be!

‘As for Venice and its people, merely born to bloom and drop,
Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop:
What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?

‘Dust and ashes!’ So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair, too—what’s become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old.

Towards the end of the Toccata the music has suddenly
changed—has become, not passionately but coldly melan-
choly;—and this is what puzzles the poet hearing it. “Of

course I understand—but why do you make me suddenly feel so chilly, so weirdly unhappy? You tell me that all this gay life of old Venice was folly and selfishness; and that the penalty of folly and lust and selfishness is death and oblivion. Yet those people had souls—did they not? Your music answers—certainly very little—when there was no more pleasure for them. The souls probably dried up and disappeared. The spirit of a man or of a woman endures according to its power of effort for good, for truth, for something useful,—for whatever distinguishes the soul of a man from the soul of a beast. A person who knows mathematical science, any branch of knowledge that develops the mind, such a man or woman might live on after death. But those silly people of Venice! No! That is what your music tells me, O Galuppi, and I suppose it is true—and I cannot find the heart to dispute with you as to whether it is all true. Yet—when I think of those beautiful women,—all those women with their golden hair, painted by Titian or Tintoretto,—and ask myself what has become of their beauty and that hair of gold—I feel very sad and chilly, like an old man!”

The above poem is very weird. I think you will recognize that. But the next poem which I am going to read to you is of a very different kind; it is perhaps the grandest thing that Browning has written, and it is not a thought of sadness, but a thought of joy,—an outcry of deep faith in the order of the universe and the immortality of everything good. It will require a great deal of explanation; but it is so beautiful that I am sure you will not be tired. The title is “Abt Vogler.” Abt Vogler was a great German musician, especially famous as an improviser. To improvise, in a musical sense, means to compose music instantaneously without study,—to sit down and produce perfect music that nobody ever heard before, and to do this as easily as a bird sings. Any musician who is a real master of his instrument can improvise a little; with some men the gift is magical and extraordinary. There have been men who drove their audience half mad with pleasure by improvising:—women

would tear the ornaments out of their hair, and out of their ears, and from their necks, and throw them around the stage as gifts to the musician. But, of course, what is only improvised cannot be preserved. Neither can it be reproduced—unless indeed one should employ a phonograph for that especial purpose. The musician himself cannot exactly repeat what he has suddenly composed while sitting before his instrument, inspired only by his heart. Now Browning imagines the feeling of a great musician who regrets the evanescence of some wonderful piece of music that he has just improvised. What he played was so beautiful that it brought tears to his own eyes; but it will never be heard again in this world, never. He could not possibly repeat it. And he asks himself why anything so beautiful should be allowed by Heaven to die. Now you know the subject. The poem begins thus :

Would that the structure brave, the manifold music I build,
 Bidding my organ obey, calling its keys to their work,
 Claiming each slave of the sound, at a touch, as when Solomon willed
 Armies of angels that soar, legions of demons that lurk,
 Man, brute, reptile, fly,—alien of end and of aim,
 Adverse, each from the other heaven-high, hell-deep removed,—
 Should rush into sight at once as he named the ineffable Name,
 And pile him a palace straight, to pleasure the princess he loved!

The reference is, of course, to “The Arabian Nights,” and to the Oriental legend of how King Solomon built a palace in a moment in order to please the Queen of Sheba. He uttered the name of God, or perhaps, touched that magical ring he wore which had the name of God engraved upon it; and immediately there came in answer to the Almighty Word, millions of angels from Heaven, millions of devils from Hell, countless spirits of the elements. And these said with one voice like the roar of the sea, “What does our Lord desire?” And Solomon answered, “Build me a palace immediately to please this fair one by my side.” Thereupon those innumerable spirits instantly began the labour—needing no instruction—requiring no plan;—the demons, accustomed to the depth

of the earth over and under the hell, laid the tremendous foundation in a moment;—the myriad spirits of air built up the walls of marvellous substance;—and the spirits of heaven completed the glittering roof, with its numberless domes and pinnacles and shimmering points of gold. There is the story that occurred to the mind of the musician. “O,” he says, “how I wish that I could, like Solomon, make the keys of my organ build up for me a palace of sound that would not pass away—solid music that would endure to the sight and memory of men for ever. Now indeed, I am building, with these fingers of mine, a marvellous palace of sound; but in another moment it will have passed away for ever!”

Would it might tarry like his, the beautiful building of mine,

This which my keys in a crowd pressed and importuned to raise!

Ah, one and all, how they helped, would dispart now and now combine,

Zealous to hasten the work, heighten their master his praise!

And one would bury his brow with a blind plunge down to hell,

Burrow awhile and build, broad on the roots of things,

Then up again swim into sight, having based me my palace well,

Founded it, fearless of flame, flat on the nether springs.

Here the symbolism is still that of the Oriental legend,—describing the work of the demons and the Jinn (Djinn). “O,” the poet says, “how I wish that this beautiful palace of sound could remain, like the palace of Solomon,—this beautiful palace which the keys of my organ, white and black, like the Djinn and Demons, built so quickly and so eagerly thronged and so eagerly hurried to build, and how wonderfully did all of them help me,—sometimes separately, sometimes combining together,—all zealous to finish the work quickly and to glorify the greatness of their master by making it beautiful. Here, these deep base notes were like Demons, diving down under the earth—down even to the roof of hell to make the foundation. There they burrowed a moment and built the foundation, broad and enormous upon the very roots of the world. And then they would come up again, swimming through the air, having laid it upon the very fire-centres of the earth, where no one else

could have laid it—only those accustomed to live in fire!”

Now we see the walls rising, then the roof, and after the roof is complete, miracles happen.

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.

In sight? Not half! for it seemed, it was certain, to match man's birth.
 Nature in turn conceived, obeying an impulse as I;
 And the emulous heaven yearned down, made effort to reach the earth,
 As the earth had done her best, in my passion, to scale the sky:
 Novel splendours burst forth, grew familiar and dwelt with mine,
 Not a point nor peak but found and fixed its wandering star;
 Meteor-moons, balls of blaze: and they did not pale nor pine,
 For earth had attained to heaven, there was no more near nor far.

There is a suggestion of the description of heaven in “The Revelations of St. John,” where you will find the fancy of gold transparent as glass; but really the Arabs took the same idea from Christian books, or Jewish books; and Browning keeps to the Arabian legend very closely until the palace rises to the roof; even then, although he makes a reference to the dome of St. Peter's, his palace remains Arabian, with its peaks and pinnacles, and you know that the dome itself is more characteristic of Oriental than of Western architecture. But after this description, Browning's vision figures as something tremendous, unthought of by Arabian poets;—the sky itself bending down, the heaven of heavens itself stooping and glowing, to meet the astonishing structure that was soaring up to it. Then strange things appeared; stars came and fixed themselves as radiant points upon the tops of the pinnacles and the minarets,—and moons also, and meteors of wondrous brilliancy. I suppose you know that if a palace could be built to a certain height

of miles, the summits of the structure would no doubt exhibit electrical phenomena; and I think you must have read how certain attempts to climb the Himalayas were repeatedly defeated by electrical conditions. Browning very probably was thinking of such things, as a modern mind must think about them, when he imagines the real consequences of building a palace like Solomon's in the Arabian story. But his imagination goes much further than this, giving us a prodigious symbol of possible sympathy between heaven and earth, God and man. Please do not forget this suggestion, because we shall have it repeated presently. The whole idea of this poem is that music forms a kind of divine communication between God and mankind; and the palace—remember—is a palace of sound, of harmony, of music.

“Then others would proceed with the work of building the wall—these not flying, but marching in armies to the work. These were all of one kind, but there were many grades among them, ranks indicated by different crests (the poet still referring to the keys, comparing them to Jinn) and up to the sky they built the walls of transparent gold, and the ramparts, and the marvellous roof over all, a maze and splendour of light. Even so one may see, in Rome, on a night of a church festival, the dome of St. Peter illuminated, suddenly outlining itself against the sky like a structure of fire.

“And so the desire of the builder of sound, of the palace of music, seemed about to be attained. Attained? Attained—did I say? No, not half attained. For nature in her turn began to produce a structure of her own, worthy to rival the structure of man. And why not? For the earthly beginnings of humanity can have their accomplishment only in the world of the divine. Therefore the sky itself competing, bent downwards to reach the earth—just as the earthly work of music passion had striven to reach the sky. Then new splendours appeared in heaven, came down, came close, and touched the earthly summit; and every point and peak of the palace attracted a fiery star, and kept it there as a

glittering ornament. And these heavenly lights did not fade or fail—they could not. Heaven and earth had touched; distance and time were abolished. But there was even more than this: for that wonderful palace was peopled.”

Nay more; for there wanted not who walked in the glare and glow,
 Presences plain in the place; or, fresh from the Protoplast,
 Furnished for ages to come, when a kindlier wind should blow,
 Lured now to begin and live, in a house to their liking at last;
 Or else the wonderful Dead who have passed through the body and gone,
 But were back once more to breathe in an old world worth their
 new:

What never had been, was now; what was, as it shall be anon;
 And what is,—shall I say, matched both? for I was made perfect too.

“There were presences visible in that palace—wondrous beings,—superior to living men. They had come from the Protoplast—the still uncreated Essence of Life, the beginnings of formless existence. It had not been intended that these should so soon be born as men—it had been intended only that they should be born in hundreds of years to come, when the world should be more perfect than now. But they came into being when that wonderful palace appeared—thinking, ‘This place is fit for us to live in.’ And with these mingled also the wonderful dead of other ages—those who had gone to Paradise, but now came back, out of heaven, because they could find in this old earth of ours something as fair as paradise. In short, what had never happened before, happened when I made that music;—and what had been was the reflection of what will be in some heavenly future; and the present time became equal to all the past and all the future,—for even I, though only a man, felt myself infinite in that moment. Why?—”

All through my keys that gave their sounds to a wish of my soul,
 All through my soul that praised as its wish flowed visibly forth,
 All through music and me! For think, had I painted the whole,
 Why, there it had stood, to see, nor the process so wonder-worth:
 Had I written the same, made verse—still, effect proceeds from cause,

Ye know why the forms are fair, ye hear how the tale is told;
It is all triumphant art, but art in obedience to laws,
Painter and poet are proud in the artist-list enrolled:—

But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,
Existent behind all laws, that made them and, lo, they are!
And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,
That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.
Consider it well: each tone of our scale in itself is nought;
It is everywhere in the world—loud, soft, and all is said:
Give it to me to use! I mix it with two in my thought;
And, there! Ye have heard and seen: consider and bow the head!

At the word “there” in the last line, you must understand the musician suddenly striking his hand upon the organ producing three different notes at the same time, so as to produce a harmony. The thought is this: If man has a strange power in anything it is music. Every note in music is only the common sound itself. You can hear it anywhere—in the voices of animals, birds or men, in the echoes of city life, in the noise of wood and shore. But let the musician take any one sound and mix it with two other sounds and out of those three sounds combined, what does he make? Not a sound, but something so much finer than any single sound that it may be called a star. If you mix blue and yellow together you get green; but green is only a colour, like yellow or blue. But mix three musical tones together, and you can hear something incomparably beyond the quality of any pure tone. Still, is this human? No, that is the work of God himself; and man—the musician—is only the instrument, the agent.

In the preceding verse, the musician says that if he had painted his conception, or made verses about it, then indeed people might have admired it as very artistic. But art is only, at best, a matter of obedience to laws—human laws, laws of passion. Music is not. Man does not make music—music is the work of the divine power only.

But, just because man does not make music—there is a possibility that it may last for ever.

Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I reared;
 Gone! and the good tears start, the praises that come too slow;
 For one is assured at first, one scarce can say that he feared,
 That he even gave it a thought, the gone thing was to go.
 Never to be again! But many more of the kind
 As good, nay, better perchance: is this your comfort to me?
 To me, who must be saved because I cling with my mind
 To the same, same self, same love, same God: ay, what was shall be.

Therefore to whom turn I but to Thee, the ineffable Name?
 Builder and maker, Thou, of houses not made with hands!
 What, have fear of change from Thee who art ever the same?
 Doubt that Thy power can fill the heart that Thy power expands?
 There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall live as before;
 The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound;
 What was good, shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more;
 On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round.

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good, shall exist;
 Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
 Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
 When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
 The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
 The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
 Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
 Enough that He heard it once: we shall hear it by and by.

“Ah!—now it is gone, this beautiful palace of music which I composed;—and I know that it was good, because it made the tears come to my eyes, and to the eyes of those who listened.” That is the highest praise that you can give to the artist, to let him see the tears that he makes to flow;—and he finds that such praise, in this case, comes too slow. Of course one who improvises us music, knows from the very first, that he cannot preserve it—he does not even think about that. “But it is gone. It will never be heard again, you say, and you also say that I should not regret it because I can make just as beautiful or better music in the future. But that is no comfort to me. I am a priest, you know—I hope for the future, because I do not believe that things pass away for ever,—I do not believe in vanishings.

No, I believe that the soul, the self, is for ever, and love and God;—I do not believe that even the past is dead: all that has been, which was good, shall be again.”

“Yes, my music is gone, but only for a moment. I turn to the ineffable Name—He who makes houses that are built without hands;—for he knows what music that was, and whether it was worth preserving. How can I doubt that it shall be preserved, being good? Whatever is good never can be lost. Evil will be lost, only because evil in itself is nothing. It is like the silence between the notes of music—the silences that make music possible. But in itself it is only hush and void; and it will go. The good will not go. Of course in this world we have no perfect good—only fragments—only parts of a circle, broken arcs. But those broken arcs will make the Perfect Circle in the heaven to come.”

“And everything that men have wished for, or hoped for or dreamed of good must live again in that heaven. I do not believe a reflection or likeness of it, but the very thing itself. There never has been any beauty or any good or any strength but will exist through all infinite time, if it has existed but once in the past. Yes, even for the musician, his improvisations, approved by the Lord of Eternity, will continue throughout that eternity, though they were composed in an hour only. And many other things with them—noble acts that were too noble for this world, brave acts that were too brave, love that was too great and too deep for this life, and so turned itself to heaven: all such things are but music to the ear of God. If he once heard any lover or any poet utter such beautiful music: that is sufficient proof that we shall hear of it also in the Eternity which is to come.”

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence

For the fullness of the days? Have we withered or agonized?

Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue thence?

Why rushed the discords in, but that harmony should be prized?

Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,

Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe:

But God has a few of us whom He whispers in the ear;

The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians know.

Well, it is earth with me; silence resumes her reign:

I will be patient and proud, and sobriety acquiesce.

Give me the keys. I feel for the common chord again,

Sliding by semitones, till I sink to the minor,—yes,

And I blunt it into a ninth, and I stand on alien ground,

Surveying a while the heights I rolled from into the deep;

Which, hark, I have dared and done, for my resting-place is found,

The C Major of this life: so, now I will try to sleep.

“What is the meaning of our failures, our mistakes in this world—the real meaning? They are really the proof of the victories that we shall win in that time when all things shall be made perfect in heaven—the time of ‘the fullness of the days,’ to use the Scriptural expression. If in this world our minds or bodies decay and suffer pain—why is it? What is the meaning of pain—the meaning of death? The meaning is exactly the same as the meaning of silence in relation to music,—of pause in relation to harmony. If there were not such a thing as silence there could be no music—if there were no pauses, no rests between musical tones, there could be no real music. You must try to think of death and suffering and failure and loss only as the necessary pauses or silences in the eternal music of Life. Perhaps you will not believe this—perhaps you doubt that God is only to us like a great Musician; and that we are the music which He produces. All the music is but one vast harmony—death and pain but the pauses. You do not perhaps believe this, and you reason differently—especially when you are suffering a great deal, so that the world seems to you all wrong. Reason as much as you like; but I know. Music is a language in which God himself speaks; He whispers the secret of life into the ear of his musician.”

The meaning of the last stanza is very difficult to paraphrase—indeed, to explain it properly, we ought to have an organ in the room, and a great musician to play it. So I shall try only to paraphrase it in a very general way, making notes on some technical difficulties.

“Well I must still live in this world for a time, though I would rather live in heaven. And the silence of earth—that silence which is pain and sorrow and failure, but which is only as I told you, one pause in the infinite music—now surrounds me again. A moment ago while playing, I was in heaven; but I must not complain; I must be patient, even though proud of my communication with the Divine; I must quietly submit to the will of the supreme Musician. But let me play a little more—let me now return to the ordinary music of the world. I have the ‘common chord’ again under my fingers—and I pass from it, by half notes, till I get down to the melancholy ‘minor’—yes. And now I deaden this minor key to the ‘ninth.’ Ah, far away this music seems from the other! It is as if I had fallen from the heights of heaven, and were standing on strange ground, looking back with wonder at the altitude from which I fell. And I have really done this—I really ascended to celestial altitude, and fell from it—and now I am back to rest upon earth again! Do you hear this tone? The C Major—they call it the common time keynote in music. It represents very well the commonplace of life—the commonplace of everyday existence. But that everyday existence is mine, and I must be content with it. And I am glad—now I will go to sleep.”

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The musician, splendidly improvising, suddenly regrets that his improvisation must be lost. He thinks of Solomon, and the magical power of Solomon and wishes that by such power he could preserve his composition. But after all, he thinks it may be preserved by God. Whatever is beautiful and good cannot pass away—whether it be music or anything else. Presently he expresses his belief in this.

Music, in any case, is not like any other art—the charm of colour and form can be made by man; but the charm of music is made by God only: and the musician is his mouth-piece.

Through music man may yet hold communication with the Invisible Divine. From men of science the mystery of of the Universe is hidden, but it is not hidden from the musician. He knows.

The whole mystery of life is symbolized and explained by music. Without shadows we could not see objects clearly; without silence we could not have harmony. So, without death and pain, the great harmonies of life could not exist. God is a musician; death is only a pause in the notes of his music.

A word about Abt Vogler. He was a priest, as well as a musician, and very learned, but eccentric. Because he had arms and fingers of an extraordinary length, he was able to play music in a most astonishing way. He was very ugly and fat, and with his long arms is said to have looked like an ape. He lived in the time of Mozart and invented many new things in regard to musical instruments. In this poem there are thoughts from different German philosophers, with whose works Vogler was certainly acquainted. We have no reason to doubt that his beliefs have been correctly expressed by Browning. The finest stanza of the poem is No. 10.

The two preceding poems are unquestionably the finest compositions upon music in English literature, and though not the only ones that Browning wrote, they are certainly the best. There is another, entitled "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha." But this poem is much too technical for treatment in class. I must mention it, however, because it embodies the same artistic conception of music that we find in the previously quoted poems. Here again the writer attempts through the study of a musical composition, to understand exactly how the man felt and thought at the time when he wrote that music. He attempted to explain for us the psychological meaning of the music in its appeal to his own intellectual and moral feeling. This was a very novel, as well as a very romantic, manner of treating musical subjects. Browning therefore must be considered a great pioneer in

the treatment of musical subjects. He has set an example that will probably find many future imitators; but as yet nothing has been done in the same direction that is really worthy of notice.

I think that I cannot better conclude this rather tiresome discourse upon musical poetry than by quoting from a very light and beautiful composition by Tennyson bearing only a slight relation to the topics which we have been considering. It is entitled "Far—Far—Away (For Music)."

What sight so lured him thro' the fields he knew
As where earth's green stole into heaven's own hue,
Far—far—away?

What sound was dearest in his native dells?
The mellow lin-lan-lone of evening bells
Far—far—away?

What vague world-whisper, mystic pain or joy,
Thro' those three words would haunt him when a boy,
Far—far—away?

A whisper from his dawn of life? a breath
From some fair dawn beyond the doors of death
Far—far—away?

Far, far, how far? from o'er the gates of Birth,
The faint horizons, all the bounds of earth,
Far—far—away?

What charm in words, a charm no words could give?
O dying words, can Music make you live
Far—far—away?

In this delightful fantasy, as I may call it, we have perhaps an expression of the very same hope and doubt—a suggestion of the same wonder and of the same problems contained in these poems of Browning which we have been reading. You remember that both of the compositions suggest a possibility of divining through music the feelings of the person who has composed it at the time it was composed.

Let us now attempt a little paraphrase of the verses which I have just dictated:—

“What was it that could more strongly attract him, in the time when he was a little boy, and impel him to wander through the fields, as the mystery of the horizon—the riddle of that distance where earth and sky seemed to touch?

“What sound did he most love to hear in his childhood? It was the far-off music of the church-bell heard in the evening; and the charm of those tones was great for him because distance made them sound more sweetly.

“Distance—even the simple words ‘far—far—away’ were enough when he was a boy to give him strange feelings of joy and pain,—to fill his mind with pleasant fancies or with dim sadness.

“But why? what was the cause of these feelings,—this charm of mystery, this attraction of the remote? Were these feelings due to some more early remembered things that happened in his own earlier childhood—in the time otherwise forgotten, when he was a baby? Or, could there have been a memory yet farther back?—recollections from some other state of existence—a life before this? (The phrase ‘beyond the doors of death’ in the fourth stanza refers to past death).

“Far back in space, farther back in time—how far? From before this birth, from before this life,—beyond the dim horizon-line of all visible existence—was it thus? Could it be thus?

“But O, what a charm there was in those words ‘far—far—away’? And what a charm may become mysteriously attached to the commonest word in common use! ‘A charm no words can bear’—that is to say, the charm is not in the words themselves, but in the association in the memory attaching to the words. And, now,” concludes the poet, “these words of mine, written for music—can music make them live, by lending to them some strange charm such as the charm of which I have been speaking?”

There is a reference in the last stanza to the common

saying which is true, that words are “preserved by the music.” Even when the words of a song happen to be commonplace or stupid, if a beautiful air be written for that song, the words may live through centuries because of the melody attached to them. Well, music can certainly make words live. But the question is whether it can make thoughts and feelings live—whether the emotion experienced by a musician to-day can be felt by the person who studies his music in another two or three hundred years. It is a question worth thinking about, but it cannot be any more definitely answered at this moment, than it has been answered in that little poem by Tennyson.