

## MUSICAL TEACHING.

At the last P.N.E.U. Conference some of us had the privilege of hearing Professor Niecks' paper on the "Place of Music in Education," and others saw the condensed report of it in the *Parents' Review*, for August, 1904. Professor Niecks says that "the only sound foundation of a musical education is vocal training."

But I refer to this only in order to explain that I have no intention of expatiating feebly on the same big theme.

The problem which presents itself to us teachers is: How am I to teach music? It may therefore be of practical use to us to consider the principles by which we are guided. Those of you who have had special training, and are familiar with other instruments than the piano, must excuse me for taking for granted that the majority, like myself, have no special qualifications for the task.

Probably many of us have pupils who had been learning the piano for several years before they came to us. They are doubtless of merely average ability, because talented children get lessons from an expert. What method are we pursuing in teaching these, for a method we must have if we are to succeed?

Occupied daily with the consideration of irritating details, inculcating the accuracy and patience necessary in practising, we are apt to forget that *music is an art*.

It is not merely a handicraft, though the piano gives most valuable manual training. Neither is it a science alone, though it consists of sounds. Music is a means of expression, and unless we can make our pupils feel this, by our own playing and our evident aim for them, we are degrading music to mere disciplinary uses, and not only failing to inspire the children, but possibly giving them a distaste for music.

Mr. Bates once said that there was always time enough

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later on to get technical knowledge of drawing and painting, but that childhood was the time for learning to observe and appreciate. I think this may be true of music too. And a teacher can do much by sharing her enthusiasm with her pupils.

Last winter I joined a musical club, most of the members of which had attended a certain day school. When I talked to a teacher, long connected with the school, of the remarkable amount of musical ability evinced in the town, she ascribed it to the credit of the teacher of music, under whose influence all of those girls had been, and who had inspired them early with a love of music. Some of them have since had lessons from celebrities. But to her they owe the interest which has made one or two unusually good players and a large number above the average. This is success worth aiming at.

To begin with, we can talk about music to the children, and tell them of the great performers we have heard, or long to hear. They may not have opportunities of going to concerts; but for all that, their ideas of music need not be confined to the brief singing lesson, two or three times a week, and the piano they find it such drudgery to them. Perhaps they have a friend who plays the violin, and they hear the organ in church, though a whole orchestra is a revelation still in store for them. Just as realising the connection between the different branches of mathematics enlarges the mind, so the conception of music is elevated, when we come to look upon the piano, and our study of it, as a very humble branch of a sublime art. I say

humble, because we have not to pitch our notes on the piano as on the violin, nor to produce them, as the human voice must do. But a piano is to be found in every house, and it has this value in addition to the intrinsic beauty of its music—quantities of the most famous oratorios, operas, symphonies, songs, etc., have been arranged for the piano, and can well be used as a preparation for hearing the ideal performances of any of these. How delicious it is, at a first rate concert, to hear a piece of which you know every note, and to have it interpreted for you! Then why not prepare this pleasure for the children, exactly as we use the Perry Pictures to acquaint them with famous pictures?

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For example, Augener's edition of the *Elijah* for the pianoforte is most satisfactory. Out of 39 pieces there are not half-a-dozen which you cannot attempt to play. The majority become familiar and beloved, and the knowledge of them increases the rare pleasure of hearing the oratorio to quite an inestimable extent. The same might be said of a Beethoven symphony, the *Tannhauser* overture, or *William Tell*.

Such arrangements, of course, all make one feel the inadequacy of the piano. To come to its proper use, and the music composed for it, how helpful it is that the *Parents' Review* now suggests pieces suitable for playing to children, or for our more advanced pupils to study themselves. The children do enjoy them immensely, are ready to listen again and again, know clearly which they prefer, and like to hear about the composers and their characteristics. I think this will all help them to take advantage of good lessons later on, as well as to enjoy great artists. But, of course, appreciation comes best of all through trying oneself. And this brings us to the music lesson, and how it is to be conducted.

Foremost in every lesson must come reading at sight. Surely to be able to read fluently and tastefully is the first thing to be desired. What pleasure we give and get in accompanying a singer or a violinist! Brilliant execution is not so much required of an accompanist as accuracy, a quick grasp of the subject, and subordination. Some girls could attain to this art, who are not talented enough to perform alone on the piano, and would find a demand for their special gift. Again, is it not contemptible how few people can play a hymn tune with confidence? How often they decline to supply a vacant place at a harmonium because they have not practised the hymns? A good reader, then, is a boon to the community, and success is on the whole a matter of practice.

Talking of hymn tunes, they give excellent training in reading various keys, while the rhythm is usually simple, and allows the reader to give attention to the notes, and these terrible sharps and flats, without much trouble about the time. I have found it answer to take the same key for several weeks running before going on to the next in order.

By making a habit of invariably asking for the key, and time, of every new piece read, we can give the child some

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necessary practice in theory. Theory of music must be taught by concrete examples, like the grammar at a Gouin lesson, and I fancy very little will be left out if we teach it as we come to it, in study or piece.

Now our aim, both in reading at sight and performing, must be *perfection*. But as this is impossible, we must begin correctly in everything but speed. A wrong note or wrong time must

never be passed over, but invariably corrected. And I believe this is quite possible if we begin slowly, and only increase the speed gradually, by dint of practice.

Bearing in mind that music is a means of expression, what is to be done if the child's whole attention is so absorbed by notes and time that she cannot give the expression on a first reading? Well, I think we should always insist on soft playing, and then the notion of a tentative preliminary playing would be preserved. Even a thrush tries his voice in spring, before launching boldly into song. This reminds me of how someone said to me, years ago, "You should try to play softly; anybody can play loud." And I often pass it on. For the youthful performer is attracted by the volume of sound in loud chords, and needs to be taught the beauty of strength restrained. Inspiring ideas are potent in the realms of music.

If we expect our pupil to play perfectly, we must choose something which she *can* play. And therefore studies must be given to practice just those difficulties which the teacher's foresight has discovered in the piece. Most technical difficulties are to be found in a good book of studies, but the order need not be rigidly followed. Each might be mastered as the need arose, and perhaps the reason for it would be a consolation to the learner, that might balance the labour demanded. There is a series of classics, edited by Charles Hallé, in which "the pieces succeed each other in such progressive order that students, after having mastered one number, may safely proceed to the next. Each piece is prefaced by a certain number of exercises . . . having some bearing upon the difficulties of the composition which they introduce." This is, of course, one of Mrs. Curwen's principles, and such exercises answer the purpose of studies.

The chosen piece then, suited to the child's attainments, simple but melodious, is to become to her a means of

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expression. To this end it must be studied. What did the composer intend, and how does he show us his intentions? we must ask. We must be guided by the feeling produced in us. If it be but a simple one, then let the charm lie in its simplicity. But the feeling must be there, or there will be no *music*. The child who has this idea, and will let the music influence her, will play it tastefully, almost unconsciously. We need not dissect music in an endeavour to make it intelligible to the extent that some popular concert programmes do. Where were the use of expressing oneself in music if it could all be put into words? We must let the children come into contact with the great minds of the past, and leave the rest to them.

For music, that is to be studied, and is to influence the student, must assuredly be by worthy composers. While we agree that it is important not to give too difficult music, we must choose simple pieces by the best musicians. And let us not think that our older pupils may not learn certain pieces until they can understand them. We should not hesitate to let them learn a poem by heart, because they could not wholly understand it, but rather wish to plant in their minds words, the meaning of which would one day dawn upon them. And so it is with music. And my belief is that, to a passionate girl, the ability to storm out her feelings in music occasionally is a valuable outlet, and more soothing than confiding them to a sympathetic friend. Nevertheless, the true exponent must seek to express the mind of the composer, not his own feelings.

This has become a most indefinite account of a music lesson, omitting all mention of scales, and learning by heart. But I wish most to dwell on the certainty that we can set an ideal before our pupils in spite of our own limitations in the art.

We can see to it that they have broad views of the scope and power of music. By a careful choice of the material they study, we can save them from confusion and discouragement. And we can, if we will, patiently aim at perfection always.

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