

RHYTHM IN MUSIC.¹

BY D. L. WALKER, M.A.

It is with great diffidence that I venture to speak upon this subject, and I must beg your indulgence at the very outset, for music is my hobby and not my profession, and my plea for more definite training of the rhythmic sense is based chiefly upon my own observation of the results of the present system of musical training upon the average school girl.

The word "rhythm" means "recurring movement." It is an extraordinarily hard-worked word, and is applied in connection with everything which possesses the quality of recurring movement, from the swinging of a hammock to the roll of a funeral march. Our object at the present moment, however, is to consider rhythm as an educative factor in *music*: let us, therefore, begin by considering the opinions held on this subject by the Greeks, whose educational ideas were so sound and so sane.

Aristotle considered music to be the most imitative, or, in other words, the most closely representative of Truth, of all the arts. He believed music to be the direct image of the life of the Soul; and to have the power, by representing character, to form and influence character. "In rhythms and melodies," he says, "we have the most realistic imitations of anger and mildness, as well as of courage, temperance and all their opposites." He looked upon music as an *activity*; and, as such, to be the direct image of the activities of the soul. He, therefore, classified all music into three classes, the educational, the recreative, and the curative: the first including all music which has the power to form character; the second, that kind of music which gives the relaxation of pure pleasure; while the last includes those forms of music which act as a kind of homœopathic treatment for disturbances of the soul. Aristotle believed that internal disquietude or restlessness could be cured by music of a wild restless rhythm and violent movement. Plato expresses the same idea in his "Laws" where he recommends that babies should be kept in a state of continual motion, like ships tossing at sea.

The term "rhythm" can be applied to words, sounds, and movements of the body. Music as conceived by the Greeks consisted of all these three elements, a fact which partly helps [p 869] to explain their belief in it as an influence in forming moral character.

Poetry, music and dancing among the Greeks, therefore, formed a group united into a single art: or, to put the matter in Plato's words, "song has three parts, words, melody and rhythm."

According to the Greek idea, the poet who wrote the words must also be a master of music, and possess in addition a practical knowledge of all the steps and gestures and attitudes which constitute rhythmical movement, and were included by the Greeks under the term "dancing."

Under the separative influence of modern modes of thought, the three elements which made up ancient music have become three separate arts. This is partly to be accounted for by the fact that as harmony developed and became more complex, the human voice, the chief factor in the melody of the ancients, became merely one of a number of other instruments, and thus *words* became unnecessary to music, and poetry became an art in itself.

But the idea of the connection between *sound* and movement we find turning up again and again throughout history. Hebrew poetry and singing, if we may judge by the instances of

Miriam and David, was illustrated and illuminated by suitable movement. Homer tells us how Nausicaa and her maidens accompanied their ball play with a kind of rhythmical chant.

Milton seems to have the same idea:—

“Ring out, ye crystal spheres,
Once bless our human ears,
If ye have power to touch our senses so;
And let your silver chime
Move in melodious time,
And let the bass of Heaven’s deep organ blow:
And let your ninefold harmony
Make up full consort to the angelic symphony.”

And again:—

“That we on earth with undiscording voice
May rightly answer that melodious noise:
As once we did, till disproportioned sin
Jarred against Nature’s chime, and with harsh din
Broke the fair music that all creatures made
To their great Lord, Whose love their *motion* swayed
In perfect diapason.”

The ancient chanties (properly songs sung at the winding of the capstan), seem to show that sailors have always instinctively felt that music and movement had a natural connection. Mr. Cecil Sharp tells us how the old fiddlers cannot dissociate the tune from the dance even in their minds.

[p 870]

If they have forgotten the dance they are quite incapable of recalling the tune. On the other hand they think that if they play you the tune, you then know all about the dance. He tells of a concertina-player, who, after having played him a Morris dance tune, remarked innocently at the end, “Now, sir, you know all about the dance.” And when he was further questioned it was discovered that he really did think that the two sorts of knowledge went together.

We are told how in Ireland, one day, a whole market-place full of people, young and old, all apparently intent on the buying and selling of pigs, on catching sight of a blind fiddler and a ragamuffin boy dancing a jig, were at once infected and soon were all capering for dear life.

We shall all be agreed that the ultimate bases of music in every age are tone and rhythm. The Greeks called them melos and rhythmos. Of these two elements melos was called “feminine” as giving grace and beauty to the rhythmos, while rhythmos called “masculine” as giving form and vigour to the melos. Both of these appeal to us through the ear, but the second appeals through the ear to the whole nervous system. Now, whatever be the reason for it, there certainly is, at the present day, a most lamentable lack of rhythm in the music produced, not only by young people, but by many of the so-called musicians of the present generation. It has been my experience for some years past, and a source of continuous perplexity to me, to

find that, out of a large number of girls who have gone through the usual musical training, scarcely one here and there could play a Morris dance tune in such a way that anyone could dance to it, or who could accompany a school song in such a way that a class could sing it with any spirit, while if one happens to be a violinist and is dependent on others to produce a piano part, there are many to be found who can read and play correctly and in time, but comparatively few who can grasp the symmetry, balance and swing of a piece in such a way as to make it a living thing.

What is the reason of this?

It has been suggested that it is partly due to the influence of modern music, the rhythm of which is often so extremely complicated as to be indistinguishable except to the specially trained ear. We have also been told that the British nation has lost its sense of rhythm. This is, I think, to a great extent true. That the rhythmic sense has, in the past, existed in a very marked form in the British nation is shown not only by the folk-music, where the more uncommon 5-time and 7-time rhythms occur more frequently than in the folk-music of any [p 871]

other nation, but also by the existence of the old English dances, which are a specially British production. Cornwall and Wales produced the hornpipe, Ireland the jig, Scotland the reel, in which the Highlanders depend not only upon their feet but also upon the action of the arms and movements of the upper part of the body. The Round was at first a country dance, and originated in places where an instrument would have been too expensive, and where the music of the dance was therefore sung. [Illustration: Sellinger's Round, harmonized by Byrde in the ancient Virginal Book called *Queen Elizabeth's*, now in the Fitz-William Museum, Cambridge.]

I believe that one of the reasons why the sense of rhythm is so lacking at the present day is because the old Morris dances have died out. Mr. Cecil Sharp tells us that in the Midland Counties Morris dancing was kept up until fifty years ago; and that, when he enquired the reason, he was told that "people had got so proud"; "no one would give anything, and it got like begging, and we didn't like"; "we weren't patternized enough, and that was why we stopped." The reason for the lack of patronage and the sudden decline of the dance may very probably be found in the enclosure of lands and the breaking up of village life by the flocking of men to the towns in search of industrial employment.

A cause which led to the abandonment of the folk-music may also perhaps have tended to the discontinuance of the Morris dancing,—I mean the unappreciative attitude of professional musicians to the folk-music. Until about a hundred years ago music was an art considered suitable only for the aristocracy, or for the specially gifted. The result was that the schools of music trained those only who had a specially keen sense of sound and rhythm, who became complete musicians, able to create as well as to interpret.

Locke shows great disapproval of music as an art for ordinary people. He says: "Music is thought to have some affinity with dancing, and a good hand upon some instruments is by many people mightily valued. But it wastes so much of a young man's time to gain but a moderate skill in it; and engages often in such odd company, that many think it much better spared: and I have, among men of parts and business, so seldom heard anyone commended or esteemed for having an excellency in music, that amongst all those things that ever came into the list of accomplishments, I think I may give it the last place."

We are still feeling the effects of the idea that music is the privilege of the gifted few in this way: though of late years
[p 872]

music has certainly begun to regain its old position in regard to education, and musical training has been brought within the reach of the majority of people, we have lost sight of some of the chief elements in an all-round musicianship.

We have been satisfied to give our main attention to technique and to the imitation or interpretation of the works of others; we have largely neglected the creative side of music, and we have lost sight of the connection between music and movement, and the necessity for special training of the rhythmic sense.

It has been widely felt for the last few years that this state of things cries out for a remedy. There has been a general feeling that music has not been the power in education that it ought to be. This feeling has shown itself in movements of various kinds; the increasing importance laid by educational authorities upon school singing; the revival of the folk-song and the Morris dance; the efforts of leaders, like M. Jacques Dalcroze and Dr. Yorke Trotter, towards a definite training of the rhythm-sense: all these are illustrative of a widely-spread feeling which voices itself in the insistent question: "What is the aim of music in education?"

Mr. Stewart McPherson, speaking at the recent Conference on Musical Education on "The Problems confronting the Music Teacher of to-day," said, "The fundamental problem confronting the teacher is, Why do I teach music at all? What end have I in view? Is the end to be the 'genteel accomplishment' or is my aim to be the imparting to the pupil a new means of self-expression, a new bracing of the intelligence, a means by which he may get into touch with the achievements of great men who have chosen to use the more subtle medium of musical sound to express—and often to express more wonderfully—thoughts for which others would use the language of words, or the colours of the palette?"

"It should be clear that the aim of the music teacher should be, first and foremost,—long before the more specific question of teaching him to play—that of preparing his mind to understand and appreciate."

"We hear much talk—(at prize distributions, public dinners, and the like)—of the *humanising* influence of music. I often wonder whether they really know what they mean. Do they refer to the works of Schönberg or the French modernists, or have they in mind the sentimental barcarolles and chants sans paroles of the purveyor of drawing-room pieces? Much twaddle is talked on this head, and the proof of the 'humanizing' influence of music is to be found in a different way than these worthy speakers dream of. Music is a human
[p 873]

activity, but it is not to be approached in a spirit of mental idleness as a soporific; it is not a species of vapour-bath, in which our senses may wallow; but it is an *art* to be understood and appreciated (*i.e.*, valued) by the alert use of our mind and the exercise of our intelligence. Let us see to it that the foundations of this true appreciation are laid securely at the time of all others when mind and heart are responsive to pure and healthy impressions—I mean in childhood."

We need, then, to make children *realize* music: otherwise they are like people who know the vocabulary of a language and are able to read the writings of others, but have no power themselves to express the simplest thought of their own. This can only be done by developing the latent faculty for musical expression which exists in almost every normal child.

Some understanding and response must be awakened, else all the music which he ever produces will be pure imitation.

“The two physical agents,” says Dalcroze, “by which we appreciate music are the ear as regards sound, and the whole nervous system as regards rhythm. Experience has shown me that the training of these two agents cannot be carried on simultaneously.”

Of the two, the rhythm-sense is, I believe, the one which usually develops the earlier. It is not the same as the *time*-sense. Any machine can move in time, but no machine ever yet constructed can move rhythmically. Nature is the only thing which is capable of rhythmic movement. Nothing brings home the essential difference between time and rhythm so truly as an attempt to march to a metronome or to dance to a musical-box. The rhythm-sense is more or less inherent in every human being, because Nature itself is rhythmic: our whole lives are ordered by rhythmic movement throughout the universe—nights, days, seasons, tides, comets;—we ourselves breathe and walk rhythmically, our pulses beat rhythmically, and psychologists tell us that the development both mental and physical of children is rhythmical, periods of rapid growth being succeeded by periods of comparative quiescence and vice versa.

From history we know that the earliest attempts of nations at self-expression take a rhythmic form. All early literature is in metre. The Ballad dance is said to be the very earliest form of literature, and Mr. Cecil Sharp believes that folk-song had its beginnings in rhythmic monotone. A traveler who spent many years in the Australian bush tells how one day he saw a small black boy sitting on a log, chanting away to himself in a sort of monotone punctuated by rhythmic blows on the

[p 874]

log. When he was asked what he was doing, he explained that he was recounting an exciting chase they had had that day after a runaway horse.

As the growth of a child is in some respects parallel to the growth of a nation, so I believe that the earliest form of musical sense in the average child is the rhythm-sense, and that it should therefore be the first to be trained. I think this partly because self-expression in this form is possible so much earlier, and if the children’s music is to be to them a living means of expression, it must, to some extent at least, have found a response within them sufficient to make them capable of using it to express something of their own. Surely, the instinct which makes the baby love to beat a tattoo with his spoon upon his plate is the same as that which in our riper years makes us tap our umbrellas to the strains of a barrel-organ. Even in Plato’s time, nurses lulled babies to sleep not by silence but by singing, not by holding them quiet but by rocking them in their arms, and though I know that the modern scientifically-trained nurse decrees that baby shall neither be rocked nor sung to, for the sake of his morals, yet, I am old-fashioned enough—and ignorant enough—to believe that there was some grain of truth in the instinct of our grandmothers.

Now the Greeks believed in the important moral effects of rhythmic training. Plato says: “Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace. He who has received this true education of the inner being will most shrewdly perceive omissions or faults in art and Nature, with a true taste.” “Grace or absence of grace is an effect of good or bad rhythm.”

“They (the schoolmasters) set to music the lyric poets, and make their harmonies and rhythms quite familiar to the children’s souls, that they may learn to be more gentle, and harmonious, and rhythmical, and so more fitted for speech and action.”

“Beauty of style and harmony and grace and good rhythm depend on simplicity. Socrates mentions dactylic and anapæstic rhythms, iambic and trochaic rhythms.”

Although, as we have seen, the Greek idea, as expressed by Plato and Aristotle, was that music with its three elements should influence character by representing character, yet this idea seems not devoid of meaning for our own day. It is true that certain rhythms have certain *mental* effects: the dotted quaver, for instance, in a slow tempo, gives the impression of [sic] [p 875]

sadness; in a quick tempo, the impression of cheerfulness; while reversed, with the short note first, it gives the impression of almost rollicking gaiety. [Illustrations: “Scots wha’ hae” (slow); “Charlie is my darling” (quick); “Rigs o’ Marlow” (reversed).]

Yet we may look for moral effects on rather different lines. Surely, we may expect that the training of the rhythmic sense—which is in music what the sense of symmetry is in sculpture—will inculcate a love of balance and proportion, and will help to bring both body and mind under the control of the will.

What, then, can be done?

In the first place, all children should have some training in the expression of rhythm by bodily movement. This is the easiest and most straightforward method of awakening the feeling for rhythm, and it can be done in many ways. A great variety of exercises can quite easily be invented; among others I have tried letting the children conduct themselves when singing; or playing a piece of entirely new music to them and setting them to conduct it; or, with little children, letting them discover and mark with feet or hands, the strong and the weak pulses.

The eye can be made to help. In the tonic sol-fa notation every separate pulse, whether sounded or silent, is represented and can be traced by the eye. This is of especial importance in teaching the value of rests as being part of the rhythm. The ear can also be made to help. The system I have mentioned also includes a system of time-names which are being more and more widely used by teachers of both the pianoforte and school singing. This system, again, gives names not only to the sounded pulses but also to the silent ones; the only difference being that the names for the silent pulses are whispered. As each of the time-names begins with a consonant, it is absolutely impossible to continue a note beyond its proper length, therefore the rests get their full values.

Morris dancing is one of the very best means of training the sense of rhythm. I have constantly noticed that those children who practice Morris dancing have a keener sense of rhythm, generally speaking, than the others.

Further, children should be encouraged to realize time-values and rhythms by trying to express them. Even the smallest of them can invent rhythms on one note, and the older ones frequently take a pride and pleasure in inventing tunes to which the others can march.

Children should *hear* as much rhythmically played music as [p 876]

possible and the music which they themselves learn should have a fairly strongly-marked rhythm and a good “swing” about it. [Illustration: one of Brahms’ “Nursery Rhymes.”]

But whatever method of training be adopted, I am convinced that rhythmical playing or singing absolutely depends on the inner feeling and realization of *movement*.

We have seen that in ancient times music, poetry and dancing were all parts of one united whole, and that poetry became separated from melody and rhythm partly through the development of harmony and the consequent decline in importance of the human voice, and melody became separated from rhythm partly through the spreading of the aristocratic art of music to all and sundry, and partly through the scorn of professional musicians for the folk-music. It is curious to note how two at least of these branches of musical art are tending to reunite,—not because we are going back to the Greek point of view, but because the aim in modern education is the development of individuality by means of self-expression.

My hearty thanks are due to Miss Johnson, of the Leeds Girls' High School, who very kindly consented to play all the illustrative music.

¹ Lecture given to the Leeds Branch of the P.N.E.U.