

8.30 p.m. FRIENDS' MEETING HOUSE, BULL STREET.
Mrs. HOWARD GLOVER in the Chair.

SONGS FOR CHILDREN.

With Illustrations.

BY WALTER FORD.

The time is happily past when it was necessary to plead the claims of singing to take its place as an essential part of the child's education. It has come into our system, and come to stay. The time, however, has not yet passed for serious reflection on what it is expected to do, now that it is there, and, when we have made up our minds about that, on the further question, whether the means we employ are likely to produce the results we desire. I doubt whether our legislators, who made singing a part of the elementary school curriculum, or the vast body of teachers engaged in its service, could give definite and satisfactory answers on either point.

To accept a theory, as we have confidently accepted the theory of the educational value of music, is the easiest thing in the world. It is not so easy to discover and to accept the nature of the responsibilities and difficulties which come with it. The greatness of a theory is no protection from the evils of unbalanced enthusiasm and misdirected energy. Music is not the enchanted land of the idealist, into which you have but to enter at any of its many gates and there find without any trouble all the joy and sustenance for which the highest instincts of your nature crave. On the contrary, it has its full share of malign and pernicious influences, which are none the less perilous because they are insidious and unsuspected. They lurk too, perhaps, in their worst form, on the very threshold, at the very spot, where we so tranquilly thrust our children in. It is some of these dangers that I want to confront this evening, and, if possible, to establish some plain signposts by the way, by which pitfalls may be avoided, and awkward places successfully crossed. May I warn you in advance not to expect from me anything in the nature of a reasoned or philosophical treatise; I have nothing which could be called a system, only a few ideas, which are the result, not of speculation, but of practical experience. If they appeal to you

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I hope it will be because they commend themselves to your common sense. Really my only claim to address you is, that I have had some experience of young voices, that I have loved singing all my life, and finally, that I have not yet succeeded in forgetting that I was once a child myself, a fact to which I attach infinitely greater importance than those capital letters, H.M.I., which the kindness of your secretary has inadvertently placed after my name. They do not belong to me.

You will probably agree with me that we teach our children to sing, not really because Plato and other Greek philosophers attached quite extraordinary value to the functions of music in education, but because singing is the most obvious and natural thing in the world for a child to do, as natural as its laughter and its love of playing games; partly, too, because it is a remarkably healthy exercise, and partly because it is likely to become later on a very real interest, and a most useful social accomplishment. Behind all this hover vague notions that a thing so natural, pleasurable, useful and interesting must have some educational, elevating, perhaps even moral influence as well; I certainly for one firmly believe that, given the right

conditions, it has; for this reason, that the end of education, and of art in education, is self-expression, the external realization, that is, of the best that is in us, spiritually, intellectually, physically, and in the voice nature has provided not only the most obvious, but the most complete means of self-expression imaginable. It is a gift to all normal human creatures, and to most beasts. Nothing is so abnormal and so pitiful as to be mute. Now, the instinct for self-expression is nowhere manifested more strongly than in childhood, and what the normal healthy child desires chiefly to express is its satisfaction at being alive. You have only to listen outside the nursery door, or to watch children in the street or garden at play to be convinced of this. Children shouting and singing to themselves at play are obeying one of the strongest and most natural impulses which they possess. To repress or discourage it is to stop or spoil a vital thing, to stunt their growth. But greater harm still can be done by the wrong sort of encouragement, for it takes very little to transform a natural and healthy impulse into an artificial and even harmful indulgence; this is the case, as soon as self-consciousness [p 108]

enters in, and that is, in many English homes, when the clothes are changed, the hands washed, and the hair brushed for going downstairs in the evening. I know many children, who in the nursery sing with high, clear, fresh and beautiful voices, in a way that would establish a teacher's reputation, but who bring to the grown-up people in the drawing room useless and artificial instruments, out of which all real life and virtue has departed. The serpent has entered into the Garden of Eden, and his name is Self-consciousness. His poison acts in diverse ways: it may produce nervousness, which makes the voice feeble and uncertain, or boredom, which makes it laborious, dull and probably flat, or over-conscientiousness, which has the same effect as boredom, or vanity, the desire to show off, which leads to forcing, shouting, imitating the tricks of others and the like. We want neither the merely pretty voices of self-conscious goodness, nor the strained voices of self-conscious naughtiness.

The point which I wish you to take to heart is that the evil of self-consciousness works for harm not merely on the child's nature but on the child's use of its voice, *i.e.*, physically, as well as morally. It makes singing valueless. An instance will make this clear. I once had to inspect a class at a large board school. It was taken by a man with a particularly high reputation as a trainer of children's voices. His specialty was that awful thing, voice-production. The care he had taken was evident. It was written plainly on the anxious and strained faces of the children. Alas! it follows that their voices were anxious and strained too, hard, ugly and often out of tune. Fortunately in the middle of a part-song something went hopelessly wrong, so wrong that even the presence of the unbending master himself could not prevent a spontaneous burst of laughter. The tension was for a moment removed, and in that moment the only natural and agreeable sounds were heard, which the boys sang that afternoon.

Is there a more pathetic thing than to hear a class of children, which might be happily singing, mechanically producing their altered and stiffened voices? It is the case in ninety-nine board schools out of a hundred. When shall we recognize that the difficulties of those, who undertake to make children sing, lie not so much in the problems of voice-production as in [p 109]

the infinitely more complicated question of combining discipline with an atmosphere of natural and unaffected happiness? Self-consciousness must be kept out of it, and especially out of the teacher, for nothing is so cruelly infectious. This part of our subject is so important that I must

dwell on it a moment longer. We all condemn self-consciousness, as a matter of course, as we condemn affectation, which is merely one form of it, but do we see clearly why? If art, of which singing is the most natural form, is reached through self-expression, its value must consist in the reality, the truth, the sincerity of that expression. Self-consciousness conceals the true self, for by a sort of paradox the true self is only revealed when the consciousness of self is absent. When a man forgets himself to a supreme degree the revelation is complete, and we speak of him as inspired, whether he be saint, poet, painter or musician. But the self-conscious man is afraid of betraying himself; our only chance of penetrating to his real self is to catch him off his guard, as that class of children was caught, when it broke down and laughed. At that moment it expressed itself. Before, it only put in the marks of expression, which is a very different thing.

This gives us plenty of food for reflection in supervising the singing of children, and in choosing songs for them to sing. Those of you, who, like myself, have been privileged to hear that great man, Mr. Tomlins, take a class of children will understand perfectly what I am trying to say, and the meaning of his phrase "to vitalize the child through song." His object, and it is triumphantly realized, is to draw out through song the best part of the child nature. Much of our modern teaching, if it does not deaden the child through song, at any rate most successfully leaves the best part of the child nature untouched.

Now, the difficulties of the problem may be minimised, if only we make a sensible start. Start with the fact that children want to sing, and want to play, that the playtime is the natural singing time, that the right place for both is the nursery or the garden. The right teacher is, if possible, the mother or the nurse. The right music is obvious, the old English traditional tunes to the nursery rhymes and games. I can think of no purpose which at the start these do not quite perfectly serve. Among these I place in the foreground rhythm.

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Musical rhythm originates with the rhythm of repeated action in bodily movements, and is best learned from games and dancing, where the play of the body and limbs is most free, natural and unself-conscious. In schools rhythm is rarely taught. We teach time instead, which is a mechanical and unrhythmical thing, best left to the metronome. Have we not all suffered from dance music played in strict time, but without rhythm? Another advantage is that by associating playing and singing together, the one becomes as natural as the other. To forget yourself, when you sing, that hardest of all things to the artist, is easy for children when they are happily playing—and left alone. For quieter moments the simpler English folk-songs will be wanted—there are dozens of them—the best for the purpose are those which have a story, for after its games storytelling holds the highest place among the child's pleasures.

The question of *how* to sing may largely be left to itself for the very young. Children should be accustomed very early to hear singing, first, because the natural impulse is helped by example, and because it is in the earlier years that the imitative faculty is most active; secondly, because it is important that children should regard singing as an obvious thing for their elders to do as well as themselves. A nurse that can sing quantities of old songs deserves at least double wages. It is better to hear indifferent singing, so long as it comes from the heart, than no singing at all; for I am convinced that the difficulties of learning to sing later on are far more closely connected with the deadening of a natural instinct, almost universal in children, than with purely vocal disabilities. Good voices are common, it is the instinct how to use them naturally that is rare, and that I believe mostly to be lost in childhood, or spoiled at school.

I said that the imitative faculty was most alive in the earlier years. This is equally true of the memory. It seems an obvious thing to take full advantage of it: yet many earnest people seem to act on the principle that this must be wrong because it is so easy. Can there be any better foundation for musical taste, and for some other qualities, which we are only just beginning to suspect that music can give us, than a memory stored with quantities of really fine attractive and

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wholesome tunes? And the memory retains things learned by ear far more tenaciously than those which it has learned from print. Germany acts on this principle, and keeps sight-singing (and voice-production) out of the early part of school life. We should learn wisdom and do the same: for the main thing at starting is not to understand music, but to love it, and the one indispensable quality in a teacher is not his skill in making children read at sight and take their intervals correctly, but the love of music for its own sake, love born of a real and inward knowledge of its power and influence. If he has not this love, how can he give it to others? The ease with which cleverly taught children pass through the tests of examiners impress me very little, indeed, not at all, if the spirit of music is not there. The fault of systems, however good, is that they make it fatally easy for patient and intelligent but unmusical persons to turn out results, which score high marks at examinations and competitions, but which are musically and educationally, in the higher sense of the words music and education, valueless.

It is a terrible mistake to think that, if you attend to the letter, the spirit can be put in later on. The spirit is apt to be most effectually killed in the process. To pursue this part of the subject would carry me too far. I will only add that excellent books exist, from which the necessary technical knowledge about singing can be learned, but that the way in which it is presented is rarely the way in which it should be presented to the young.

Two practical hints may be given here: Unwilling children should not be *urged* to sing. Be content to put the temptation in their way; if others are singing and enjoying themselves, they will soon join in. Children often sing best when during a pause the teacher begins, as if by accident, to play on the piano some tune they are fond of: without thinking they join in one by one, till all are singing. In these moments, when he has caught them off their guard, quite unsuspected qualities may appear.

It may now refresh your ears to hear some of the nursery rhyme tunes. You will not find that familiarity has bred contempt. Indeed, you will be surprised at their fresh and dainty beauty. And if you do not also love the delicious

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nonsense of the words, well, I should not trust you to choose your children's songs.

(Here a small choir sang a string of nursery rhymes.)

These songs have some obvious points to recommend them. They are musically good tunes, classics in fact, which have been tried and proved by the severest and only final test, the test of time. They are English, and should be regarded as part of the birthright of every English boy and girl. Children love them instinctively, as you would expect. (No support is here intended to the comfortable doctrine, that, because children should like what they sing, they should be allowed to sing whatever they like). Lastly there is the final recommendation that in teaching them grown-up people have nothing in the way of shame or contempt to conceal. You cannot properly teach that which you inwardly despise.

I should like to have also had some children's games played and sung. Musically they are simpler still and entirely charming. Two small volumes, by Mrs. Gomme and Mr. Cecil Sharp, have just appeared in Novello's well-known school series. There are two good volumes of Nursery Rhymes, etc., by Messrs. Kidson and Moffat, published by Augener & Co. For those who want suitable folksongs, no better books could be recommended than *Folksongs for Schools*, by Messrs. Baring Gould and Sharp (Curwen & Co.), and the four small volumes in Novello's school series, collected and edited by Mr. Sharp.

Now, there is no greater mistake than to suppose that because children's songs must be extremely simple, they are therefore easy to compose. On the contrary, nothing is more difficult. The old traditional songs are not likely to be surpassed. Moreover, children are conservative little creatures, faithful to established favourites in games and songs, as well as dolls. They do not, like their elders, crave for perpetual novelty. Yet our dear well-meaning friends of the kindergarten have been inventing new games and songs for them by dozens and dozens. I will give you a few specimens in a moment, but I first want to say why they are doomed to failure from the start,—they are made on the totally wrong assumption that nothing is educational, unless it also instructs. Positively the moral precept lesson must not be dragged into the hours of play. Did you not all resent this intrusion yourself?

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In those books by A. L. O. E., whose sermons on the Collects or other subjects were introduced into otherwise fairly entertaining tales, did you read those sermons, or skip them? Did you read the whole of *Sandford and Merton*, or *The Swiss Family Robinson*? But nothing can I recall from my own childhood so barbarous and outraging as the games I find here in a kindergarten book, by which the child is taught the Solar System ("Dancing round the Sun, O what pleasant fun!") and other useful facts. The music to them brings no compensation, it would be bad enough if it was merely dull, but it is also vulgar. If educationally it led anywhere, it could only be in a straight line to the Music Hall. Unfortunate as the subjects are, and the music, the words surpass both, not in mere fatuousness, but in their effect on the children's minds. They are forever telling us how happy they are, that they are full of mirth and glee; in one song they actually sing, "Here we go with great delight, is it not a pretty sight?" We are reminded of the pathetic picture in *Punch*, in which a mother is represented during a day's holiday at Hampstead Heath saying to her tired child, "If you don't feel happy, I'll box your ears." I once asked a little girl why she kept jumping on and off the sofa. She replied, "It gives me such a pretty colour." Was she or her elders responsible for this remark? Well, to tell a child how pretty it is, is only one degree worse than to tell it how happy it is. Nor do I think it makes for goodness to put into their little mouths words like these: "We love our master very much, we love our mistress too, etc." Let us be agreed, in leaving this dismal region of our subject, not to turn our children into prigs or hypocrites, nor to give them anything either to read or to sing, which as grown-up persons we cannot honestly appreciate ourselves.

Beyond the safe ground of traditional English song—and the addition by degrees (1) of the best of those popular English songs, of which there are many collections available, e.g., Mr. Hadow's *Songs of the British Isles*; Dr. Somervell's *Songs of Four Nations*; Mr. Sharp's *School Song Book*; *The National Song Book* (Boosey & Co.); (2) of traditional and popular songs from Scotland, Ireland and Wales (many of which are contained in the above-named collections), and (3) of similar songs from Germany, France, and other countries—I do not

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propose to make definite suggestions, my object being rather to guide your choice than to make it for you. For it must vary according to circumstances and the kind of children with whom you have to deal. But I hold very strong views as to the words which children ought to sing—or rather ought not to sing. It is hopeless to expect children to like singing if the words of their songs have no real interest for them. In this respect the words attached to many glorious Irish and Welsh melodies are singularly unfortunate. I cannot share the general feeling as to the felicity of Moore's verses for singing purposes; and I think it is a pity that his style has been imitated by others. Pretty drawing-room sentiments are especially to be shunned. We want feeling, but it must be simple, unaffected, real, not manufactured feeling. All the songs, of which the words are made by professional versifiers for "popular" composers to set to music, stand self-condemned. Let our young people sing poetry, not song-words, and poetry that is, like the music, direct and simple. The appeal should be to the imagination, and through the imagination to the feelings; the feelings can then be left to take care of themselves. Hence, for subject, a story, a picture, a situation, and at times an inspiration from one of the great masters, especially Handel, for Handel is the best corrective for a taste for washy harmony. The dangerous influence in music comes from harmony, which can minister attractively to sickly, morbid or vulgar tendencies. Modern melody, of which harmony is the basis, can do the same, whereas, folksong melodies, which know nothing of harmony, are always fresh and good. It is important therefore in using them to choose editions which in this respect can be trusted to do good, not harm.

This brings us for a moment to sacred music, for some modern composers of hymns are among the worst offenders; generally speaking, it is their hymns, and not the finer old ones, that are mostly heard in Churches. There is no reason why a better example should not be set at home. The modern popular sacred song is rank poison. Gounod has the unenviable reputation of having created it. The right kind of sacred song is rarely to be found outside the oratorios, but all should know the beautiful settings of Blake's "Little Lamb," by Dr. Somervell and Dr. Walford Davies, also the Christmas

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Songs of Peter Cornelius, which are to me ideal sacred music; but it is music about children rather than for children, perhaps better for them to hear than to sing.

I have here a volume of songs for the Sunday School and for home singing, of which I should like to speak, if I had time, for the same horrible attitude prevails as in those kindergarten songs, to which you have already been introduced. Complacent, self-conscious goodness, and sweetness, and happiness, are no less odious in religious than in play. It is astounding that anyone should want children to sing words like these: "School is so happy, but sweet home is best." "We are here in Sunday School, happy children every one." "We come, we come, our teacher dear, We hear the Saviour's call."

The sentiments of grown-up people about children are never the wisest things to make children utter about themselves.

I must dwell on one more point, and with all possible earnestness. We talk about songs for children to sing, but what of the songs which we let children *hear*? Practical experience in educational work makes one thing at least plain, that it is the home influence that matters most, and, if this is on the wrong side, the struggle is well nigh hopeless. It does children no

harm to hear what is quite beyond their intellectual or emotional reach; but music, which is radically bad, shallow, morbid, sickly, insincere, music deliberately manufactured to minister to the diseased tastes of a sentimental public on the one hand and of a frankly frivolous public on the other—this is what in thousands of otherwise clean and healthy households is thoughtlessly allowed to go up from the drawing-room to the nursery. On how many pianos have I not seen copies of the last up-to-date musical comedy (I do not of course refer to the delightful comedies of Gilbert and Sullivan), not only in our homes, but in our schools! And yet these productions represent the most debasing and pernicious influence of our time. To play them, or to sing them, is to breathe their atmosphere, to enjoy them is to inhale their poison. They should not be in any respectable house. We seem to have come to the odd conclusion, that, though some supervision of the literature that young people read is right and necessary, music is a happy realm, where nothing matters.

Now, consider, music is a more elemental force than speech;

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but because it speaks in a more vague and mysterious language we are apt to think of its influence as less. It is in reality greater. A moment's reflection on the part it has played, and plays ... in the more dramatic moments of ... nations, (the Marseillaise, the Reformation and Huguenot Hymns, the "Wearing of the Green," jump to one's mind at once)—should convince you that I speak the truth. Perhaps, the reason is, that, at any rate in the present stage of our musical culture, music is able to ignore the understanding and attack us on the defenceless side of our senses, our nerves, our emotions.

It must be then a matter of supreme importance, whether this potent influence, to which we submit ourselves and our children, is a sound, invigorating and healthy influence, or the reverse. Say what you will, it does matter in a very real and vital sense whether we prefer good music to bad. How to discern the one sort from the other is too big a question to enter into now, but this at least is sure, that no one is competent to pass judgment who is not thoroughly acquainted with, and genuinely fond of what is best and noblest. Though the young have often an extraordinary predilection for very inferior stuff, the only chance of keeping it out of their minds is to give something better the chance of coming in.

Finally, do not be disappointed if your children's tastes develop in directions that are not your own. Taste cannot be forced, it can only be guided. In music, moreover, as in literature, there is a necessary and useful place for the second-rate, so long as it is attractive, unpretentious and sincere. Particularly should we avoid the mistake of thinking that light music must be bad music. It may be a pity to care for nothing else, but it is worse to become a musical prig.

(Several examples of English folk-songs were here sung by the choir.)