

HOW TO SING
AN ENGLISH BALLAD.

BY
ELIZABETH PHILP

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INCLUDING

SIXTY SONGS BY EMINENT AUTHORS.

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"It is universally agreed that of all music that of the human voice is the sweetest."—SIR JOHN HAWKINS.

IN these days, when to sing is the rule and to sing well is still the exception, a few words on the art of interpreting an English ballad may not be generally unacceptable. That it is indeed an art, and an art by no means easy of acquisition, must be taken for granted by every beginner who desires to steer clear of incompetency and error. It is not enough that the aspirant should have a good voice, a good ear, and a fair knowledge of the pianoforte; it is not enough that she should have acquired a correct French and Italian accent,

and pronounce her own language with delicacy and precision. These things are but raw material; and it depends not only upon the master, but also greatly upon the pupil, to what account this raw material is employed. For the singer, unlike the poet, is "made," not "born." And the singer can hardly be even "*self-made*." She must be taught many things which it is all but impossible she should discover for herself. She must be taught how to take breath; how to unite song artistically with speech; how to avoid the harshness of certain consonants; how to make the most of certain vowels; how and when to sacrifice the word to the note, and when to sacrifice the note to the word; how to make a story intelligible; how to convey the impression of certain emotions; and many other matters of the like nature and importance. And these things, we repeat, must for the most part be imparted; for they are the result of method, and of experience, and cannot, like reading and writing, be expected to come, as Dogberry has it, "by nature." The best singer in any society is, as a rule, the one who has been best taught; and she who attempts to "warble her native wood-notes wild" in a London drawing-

room may be assured that, however sweet her voice and however excellent her intentions, she can only hope to give pleasure to those among her hearers who know as little about singing as herself.

As singing is the most universally popular of modern accomplishments, so it is precisely that on which the least money and attention would seem generally to be lavished. For a percentage of ninety young Englishwomen who play tolerably, and even brilliantly, upon the piano-forte, we scarcely find ten whose singing of an English ballad is even commonly inoffensive to a cultivated ear. The amateur vocalist, if she has been taught at all, prefers, indeed, for the most part an easy Italian cavatina by some popular music-master, "because," as she admits, "the words are all vowels, and so easy to sing." Also, let us add, because the Italian cavatina leaves her more at liberty to treat both words and music in whatever way is most convenient to herself. Starting with the assumption that "nobody will know what it is all about," she is fettered by no consideration of fitness as to time and expression. She can sing the difficult passages as slowly, and the easy ones

as rapidly as she pleases. She can take breath in the middle of a word. The poem may be joyous ; but if it suits her to drawl the melody in a touching and sentimental style, she is at liberty to do so. Or, on the other hand, she may render the saddest of lyrics in the cheerfulest manner, and at the giddiest pace ; and the incongruity which would startle even the least critical hearer, if the fair vocalist were so tampering with an English ballad, passes unnoticed. And then, only too often, she is herself ignorant of the language in which she is singing.

Now these things, we submit, are abuses—abuses derogatory alike to the singer and the art. They represent a false condition of things. They partake of the nature of “shams.” They evidence a vitiated taste; and it is time they were abolished. *How* to abolish them is another matter. Reforms are ever slow of pace, and those who would introduce them into questions of taste, can but reason, advise, and leave the rest to time.

Whatever is worth doing at all, is worth doing well ; therefore we should say, in the first place, let all who wish or attempt to sing, submit to be taught. In the next place, we are an English

people, rich in English poetry, in an English school of music, in domestic and historical associations ; and therefore let our daughters at least *begin* by learning to sing songs in their own language. To be intelligible, is always something gained ; and the singer whose efforts are aided by the poetry of a Kingsley or a Browning has, at all events, a powerful coadjutor to lean upon.

As a mere school of vocalisation, the Italian method is unquestionably the best. The Italian method develops and cultivates the voice, *as an instrument*; equalises it; strengthens it ; and gives it flexibility. No competent professor will attempt to train his pupils upon any other system. But it by no means follows that the pupil who has been trained on the Italian method is bound to pass from the exercises of Garcia and Crivelli to the cavatinas of Verdi and Rossini. As reasonably might we require the performer on the French horn to play nothing but Gounod, or limit the professor of the German flute to Beethoven and Mozart. The voice, we repeat, is but an instrument ; and as an instrument it has to be trained and developed by means of exercises. This done, the instrument is ready for use ; and the first use,

we maintain, to which it is reasonable and desirable to put it, is that which enables its possessor to sing songs in her native language. When she can do this, and do it well—when she can sing an English song, or ballad, so articulately that every word of the poem is distinctly understood by her hearers; when she has acquired the art of giving due effect and expression to the poem, as a poem; and when she has overcome the primary difficulty of singing and speaking simultaneously, in such-wise that the note sung shall be a perfect note, and the word spoken shall be an articulate word—then, and not till then, let her turn to the German Lied, the French Chanson, and the Italian Bravura. Having begun at the beginning, the rest will be easy; and we may be tolerably certain that those who do not begin at the beginning can never arrive satisfactorily at the end.

And, after all, it is the well-sung English ballad that gives the most universal pleasure in the home circle. It is the English ballad that moves the sympathies, and enchains the attention of the majority of hearers. With two Italian Opera houses in the season, and an almost daily succession of concerts supported by Italian vocalists, the

taste for foreign music gets amply gratified; and at home we turn with a sense of the keenest refreshment to the familiar accents and intelligible melodies of our own English school. Few amateurs can hope to sing Italian music in a manner that shall satisfy ears accustomed to the singing of our great operatic "Stars;" but those who, by the aid of taste, feeling, and expression, can succeed in giving full interpretation to the words of an English poet and the music of an English composer, may rely upon finding attentive and delighted listeners, even among the most zealous of opera *habitues*.

English vocal solos may be divided into two classes :—songs and ballads. Songs may be sacred or secular ; but they do not, of necessity, embody a story. It may even be questioned whether they must, of necessity, be expressed in words. The song of the nightingale calls in no aid of language ; but it is a song, and one of the best of songs, nevertheless. The famous variations to Rode's air, the glory and delight of florid vocalists, though executed upon the open sound of A with never a word in it from beginning to end, is in the same way, a song. A Song, however, in the

ordinary acception of the word is an expression of feeling or sentiment in verse, unallied to any dramatic or narrative interest. A Ballad, on the contrary, embodies some story or legend. To take two instances, familiar to every reader,—Waller's exquisite lines, beginning "Go, lovely rose," offer one of the best specimens of the *genus* Song, while Professor Kingsley's well-known "Three Fishers" may fairly stand as our representative of the Ballad.

The first step towards singing an English ballad should be a careful study of the words. These should be considered from every point of view, and read *aloud* with every effort to give them full expression, either by retarding or hurrying, raising or lowering the voice, in accordance with the sentiments of the story. When the best interpretation—or, as it is technically called, the best "reading"—of the poem has been decided upon, the singer has then to study the resources and capability of the melody, and to practise till she succeeds in singing the words with precisely those same dramatic and sensational effects of utterance which she employed when reading them aloud. But to do this is by no means easy. It is often

difficult to pronounce a harsh-sounding word on a high note. It sometimes happens that the very word which should be delivered with most power falls upon the weakest note of the singer's voice. Grating consonants must often be softened down. Vowels must sometimes be made the most of. Sibillants, above all, require the most dexterous treatment. For these, and a hundred similar emergencies, the ballad singer must be always prepared. The art of taking breath is also of considerable importance. Only the merest tyro would, of course, take breath in the middle of a word ; but to avoid this one error is not enough. The singer must be careful never to take breath in a way that breaks the flow of a sentence, or interrupts the sense of the words. The poem, whether read or sung, must be respected above all else ; for to sing, be it remembered, is but to recite vocally. A good singer punctuates by taking breath judiciously. There are, of course, passages in some ballads where, in order to give the effect of strong passion, such as hope, terror, joy, despair, the singer finds it necessary to let the breath come and go in that fluttering, intermittent way which in cases of real emotion is caused by the accelerated

action of the heart. Again, there are occasions when the voice seems to fail from emotion, and where the words are interrupted by pauses, or broken by repressed sobs. Effects of this kind, when skilfully indicated rather than broadly expressed, give immense charm to the rendering of a pathetic ballad; provided always that they are not indulged in too frequently.

The efforts of every singer should be bounded by the capabilities of her voice. She should know her own voice thoroughly, its strong and weak points, its shoals and quicksands, its utmost limits. Those who attempt to strain the voice beyond its natural compass inevitably sacrifice expression and accentuation to an unwise ambition. The consciousness of effort is fatal to that self-possession, that ease of delivery, and that freedom of thought, without which it is impossible to express delicate shades of meaning, or the fluctuations of emotion. Nor is this all. The singer who attempts to force her voice beyond its own natural limits, can only gain compass at the expense of sweetness and strength. For every high or low note unduly acquired, the whole middle register is made to suffer. Her voice, thus impoverished, is also less

lasting. It becomes, ere long, thin, quavering, and unreliable, and finally deserts her some years sooner than it would have done with fair play and commonly careful treatment.

Finally, every singer should be able to play her own accompaniment. Granted that she has a mother or sister always at hand, trained to the work, thoroughly familiar with every song she sings, and prepared beforehand for every shade of expression ; still there must come occasions when this *alter ego* is missing, and when the singer must either play for herself, or trust to the tender mercies of an unaccustomed accompanist, or be silent altogether. That she should be able to play for herself is, of course, the one thing needful and desirable ; and, if she cannot do this, she had far better choose the latter alternative, and not sing at all. She may, however, rely upon it, that (excepting only, perhaps, the professor whose pupil she is, and who, having taught her the song, is competent to lead her) she is, at all times and under all circumstances, her own best accompanist. No one else can so well know when to bear up her voice by playing loudly, when to play softly, when to hurry, when to loiter. No one

else can be in such entire sympathy with her. There is, of course, a class of songs (as the Italian bravura or the more florid sacred song of Handel) in which the singer can only command sufficient breath by standing upright, and having nothing else to do or think of, but attack and overcome difficulties of elaborate execution; but our business on the present occasion is with the English Ballad, and not the operatic *scena*.

In songs it frequently happens—though in ballads rarely—that a verse is repeated, unchanged in either words or music. When this is the case, the singer, to avoid monotony, should vary the expression. And it is surprising how many shades of expression the simplest poem may be made to yield. So many are they, indeed, that a really good singer finds it well-nigh impossible to sing the same song twice according to the same reading. It is only the soulless singer—the mere drilled puppet into whose memory every turn and inflection has been instilled by the persevering labour of the master—who never deviates into variety. To the genuine musician, it need hardly be observed, such singing is utterly valueless; and yet there have been

public vocalists of high repute who remained all their lives mere echoes of the "coach" in the background ; whose every note, look, gesture, was dictated from without ; and who realised both fortune and fame without ever having been enlightened by a single original idea. Let not the beginner, therefore, be discouraged when we say that in order to sing a ballad well, it is necessary not only to be well taught, but—to think ; just as in the art of sketching from nature, it is necessary not only to be well taught, but—to see. In both cases the experience of the master must, in the first instance, be brought to the help of the pupil. The clever artist shows the tyro how to use his eyes ; the experienced musician guides him to the use of his brains. The time, of course, ought to come for both, when help is no longer needed ; and when that time comes for the vocalist—when her voice, as an instrument, has been developed and perfected ; when, as a singer, she has acquired full command over it ; and when, following the path into which her steps have been guided, she has learned to think, to interpret, in a word "to read"—then, and not till then, the master's work is done, and the singer is made.

If there be any who, reading these pages, are disposed to question whether it be worth while to bestow so much time, or labour, or thought, upon the mere singing of a simple English ballad, we would remind them that no art is unprofitable that refines the taste, exercises the understanding, and gives pleasure to others.

ELIZABETH PHILP.

WORDS

OF THE

SONGS AND BALLADS

SET TO MUSIC BY

ELIZABETH PHILP.

Opinions of the Press.



"Among the numerous contemporary composers Miss Elizabeth Philp has been long and favourably known to the ballad-loving public. Her music is always intelligent, melodious, and unforced. She selects her poetry with taste, and interprets it with respect. A poem in her hands remains a poem, and does not become a mere peg on which to hang a melody. Adding the graces of her own art to the verses of her authors, Miss Philp is scrupulously careful never to lose sight of those beauties which are exclusively theirs. She illustrates, but never obliterates. She adorns without endeavouring to eclipse. This is both true art and true feeling, and is a quality as invaluable to the balladist as it is unfortunately rare."—*Morning Post*.

"Miss Elizabeth Philp is rising to a distinguished place among our female composers. We have more than once expressed our opinion of this young lady's talent for musical composition, and it has been strengthened with each succeeding work that has come under our observation. They are all vocal pieces in the ballad style, simple, unpretending, void of elaborate technical display, but full of those touches of nature which, flowing from the heart, always reach the heart. Miss Philp, moreover, shows a refined and delicate taste in the choice of the words to which she unites her melodies. She has recourse to the pens of real poets, and their verses never fail to inspire her with sympathetic feeling."—*Illustrated London News*.

"Miss Philp shows in her songs, how art of no mean order can be conspicuous in the form of artlessness."—*Musical World*.

"Miss Philp is something more than a ballad maker. She has always ideas of her own, and the capacity of expressing them."—*Musical Standard*.

"Miss Elizabeth Philp promises to become one of the most popular of modern song composers, a position to which her merits fairly entitle her. Some of her songs are marked by an originality, either in rhythm or in their general treatment, which is very refreshing in these days, when, with slight variation, the same mould seems to serve for all."—*Sunday Times*.

"Miss Philp's recent productions evince the fine qualities which have given her a claim to distinction. They are full of imagination, feeling, and that inventive faculty which belongs to genius, and which art cannot bestow."—*The Globe*.

"The songs by Miss Philp we can recommend to our readers' notice from their superiority over the effusions generally offered to the public. Through all Miss Philp's compositions there is a current flowing of true and genuine musical feeling. They are simple as regards melody and accompaniment, and at the same time perfectly original."—*The Era*.

"Several new songs have appeared from the pen of Miss Elizabeth Philp, one of our best writers of English ballads. The poetry is well selected, the music thoroughly expresses the meaning of the poet, and there is a simplicity in the melody which goes at once to the heart. They are chiefly within the compass of a mezzo-soprano voice."—*Observer*.

"Miss Philp's songs are of a sentimental character, the expression in each case being pure and natural, and free from the restraint which is the inevitable concomitant of music *made* rather than *inspired*."—*Morning Herald*.

"Miss Philp is taking high ground as a composer, and her songs display an amount of talent and thought which warrant her expectation of success. It is much to say for them that they are free from triviality and affectation; there is in them the feeling of a musician, and the careful earnestness of a devoted student of art."—*News of the World*.

"At a time when the best words of the best poets are ruthlessly marred by being 'set to' atrocious music, it is pleasant to find one composer who enters thoroughly into the spirit of the writer, and whose graceful melodies are thoroughly in harmony with the words with which they are allied. Miss Elizabeth Philp is one of the most charming composers of the day."—*Morning Star*.

Music.—A Series of Songs. By Elizabeth Philp.—"Heartily do we wish that we had sufficient space at our disposal to go into an elaborate criticism of the songs included in this series, because it is rarely that we meet with such positive proofs of native musical genius and acquirement as are apparent in every one of them."—*Bell's Weekly Messenger*.

"Miss Philp's music is always equal to her subject."—*Lady's Own Paper*.

"Miss Philp may fairly take rank amongst the most pleasing composers of ballads of the present day. The scoring of her songs is sufficiently characterised and distinct in its individual expression to justify the assertion, that to a facile flow of melodic phrases Miss Philp adds copiousness and variety of invention."—*Morning Advertiser*.

"Miss Elizabeth Philp is one of the very best song composers we have. There is that beautiful simplicity about the style of this lady's compositions peculiar to the works of the greatest masters."—*Illustrated Times*.