

The Times

Y, SEPTEMBER 4, 1912.

PROMENADE CONCERTS.

AN ESSAY IN DISSONANCE.

The concert at Queen's Hall last night began with the Overture to *Hänsel und Gretel* and a suite composed of incidental pieces from *Carmen*. Gounod's "Hymne à Sainte-Cécile," for solo violin, harp, and organ, followed; five orchestral pieces by Arnold Schönberg, Mendelssohn's Concerto in G minor, two Hungarian dances of Brahms, and two Shakespearian songs by W. A. Aikin.

To the full rich harmonies and solid counterpoint of the Overture to *Hänsel und Gretel* the audience settled down really to enjoy the evening. The feeling of quiet satisfaction which this induced was in no way broken into by the wildly different mood of *Carmen*; "very French," they said, and prepared for the next. This was Saint-Saëns's "Amour! viens aider," in which the musician overpowers the Frenchman, followed by Gounod's "Hymne à Sainte-Cécile," in which the cosmopolitan overpowers the musician. There are some to whom the introduction of the organ among orchestral instruments is like flaring advertisements posted on the rocks of Killarney. Without going quite so far as this, we must confess to a certain weariness of soul when the vox humana with tremolo echoes the solo violin, like an automaton imitating a human being. The organ hardly seems to have been built for this cheap effect. Nothing but broad diapasons, that is, the noblest tone it possesses, seems the right reply to the noblest instrument known to man.

Five orchestral pieces by Arnold Schönberg form an essay in dissonance—no, we did not say discord. There seems to be no good reason why a composer should not select dissonance as a medium, if he pleases, as an artist might state his problem in terms of magenta, or any other colour. Only he puts off the day of his appeal to the world at large. It was like a poem in Tibetan; not one single soul in the room could possibly have understood it at a first hearing. We can, after all, only progress from the known to the unknown; and as the programme writer, who had every reason to know, said, there was not a single consonance from beginning to end. Under such circumstances the listener was like a dweller in Flatland straining his mind to understand the ways of that mysterious occupant of three dimensions, man. As far, however, as it was possible to transcend one's limitations, the music seemed to be a study in textures. Considered as that alone there were some extremely interesting moments; and things were done with out-of-the-way combinations of instruments which were rare, at any rate, if not new. At some moments the music seemed more French than the Frenchmen, but at others a little heavy-handed, as if it was not quite certain that *esprit* had been got in exchange for *geist*. Whether it has a real message it is simply too early to say. At the conclusion half the audience hissed. That seems a too decisive judgment, for after all they may turn out to be wrong; the other half applauded, more vehemently than the case warranted, for it could hardly have been from understanding.

Whatever else this music may have achieved, it had the effect of making Mendelssohn's Concerto sound terribly empty. One hardly wonders that Berlioz, after judging in a competition where it was played 54 times, found that the piano insisted in going on playing it, even after workmen had been had in to take it to pieces. Some such surgical operation would have been necessary before the instrument on which it was played could have sounded well; any tone above a *mezzo-forte* was almost unendurably harsh.

The Shakespearian songs are not worthy of the poetry; indeed, it may be doubted if the best composer in the world would be wise to try to set Sonnet XVIII. But they were beautifully sung by Mr. Gervase Elwes, who seemed to be in especially good voice.