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John Tullidge: Utah's First Music Critic

WILLIAM WILKES*

A cultivated English gentleman, who only a few days before had trod the Mormon pioneer trail to the Zion of his recently espoused religion, wrote to the editor of the *Deseret News* the following:

Sir: On entering the city on Saturday, October 31, I was much pleased in seeing, per advertisement, that a concert was to be given by the Deseret Musical Association on the Wednesday following; and not withstanding the debility occasioned by the long journey across the plains on "shank's pony," I would not miss the opportunity of hearing for myself of the progress made in vocal music by that Association, and at the request of several friends, I will endeavor to give my honest opinion of the performances of that concert.¹

Thus in 1863 John E. Tullidge (1807-1873), "Professor of Harmony" from Liverpool, penned the first published music criticism in a Rocky Mountain frontier town only sixteen years old.

If it surprised Remy and Benchly and other early visitors to find music and the arts flourishing among the pioneer folk of the first Mormon communities in the West, it should be all the more surprising that in the second decade of the new colony music criticism began to appear in the periodical press. Although it was true that the Mormon movement had its roots in the East, its migrant focus of community was never in close contact with the large cultural centers of eastern United States. But even in eastern America serious music criticism had only recently found its beginnings in John Sullivan Dwight's *Music Journal* in 1858.

In their frontier city of Nauvoo, Illinois, Mormons had enjoyed a rich musical life. Transplanted to the Salt Lake Valley,

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their interest soon germinated a round of community bands, church choirs, singing and dramatic societies. Many homes had reed organs. Several had pianos, hauled by wagon all the way from St. Louis. This lively musical activity mingled the sacred and secular, side by side. And since the effort to produce music for worship, recreation, and pleasure seems to have satisfied the peoples' taste and aesthetic need, what place was there for criticism, which is the analytical grading of the musical experience, the evaluation of its success or failure?

The motive for criticism is not hard to find. For, as always, the imaginative capacity of the human spirit sooner or later outruns the practical means for satisfying its imagined ideals, leaving a gap between the actual experience and its wished-for perfection. Certain spirits among us sense this keenly enough to tell us when we should do better than we are doing. And they also praise us when we do satisfyingly well enough. These mandarins are a thorn in complacent societies, but a spur to the progressive. Although as humans they often err, mistaking the subjective for the objective, the specific for the universal, prejudice for taste, and pessimism for incorruptibility, still the effect of their critique in the long run is healthy, for they provoke hunger for more music and sharpen our ear for aesthetic pleasure. So early Utahns invited the new immigrant's critique.

We can only guess whether Tullidge's friends hoped for his praise, or suspected his adverse comment for their shortcomings. In either case they got both. To continue his debut article:

The concert opened with one of Professor [Charles John] Thomas' pieces, which did him credit as a composer. The *introduction* by the Cornet was a chaste piece of rendering, and the band did well in giving the gentleman an opportunity of doing justice to that beautiful strain — in fact the gem of the piece — instead of destroying the effect by loud playing.²

Tullidge was no Pollyanna, and risked offense by describing the music as he heard it.

The horns however were out of tune at the finale, but it may be here parenthetically observed that I have since then heard the same gentlemen play with fine expression.³

Later, faults are laid bare, then nursed with advice on how

to improve them:

The duet "Hark 'tis music stealing," by Mrs. Trosper and Mrs. Horseley, would have been, for they both have good voices, a favorable performance, but for the non-conception of the piece, and the stiff execution of one of the passages. In the first place it was a "leetle" too slow, and in the second the triplets were unskillfully treated. The first fault can easily be remedied, and the second also. To avoid the second, the mouth should be kept moderately opened and the tongue still and horizontal. The passage would then be of easy execution, while the moving of the tongue causes a stiff and uncouth delivery of the notes.⁴

Turning from criticism of the performance to the music itself, Tullidge gives way to his penchant for technical analysis, mixed freely with authoritative musical jargon:

The Association commenced with one of my old favorite Glee's, "Awake Aeolian Lyre, Awake." The opening strain is not one of easy rendering, and without great attention to the largo movement with its first grand close on the *dominant*, that cautious awakening so necessary to the slumbering lyre is entirely lost. In order to preserve the full effect of this movement, a *tremolo vibrato* should be employed to awake its drowsy strings from its forgetfulness with nature's simple ease.⁵

The Professor's pedantic descriptions of "executorial unisonic passages" and "contrapuntic harmonical beauties" must have seemed arcanum to countryside musicians and newspaper readers in early Utah.

This brings to mind Bernard Shaw's scorn for Heathcote Statham's most learned analysis of the Mozart G Minor Symphony:

How succulent is this; and how full of Mesopotamian words like the "dominant of D minor"! I will now, ladies and gentlemen, give you my celebrated "analysis" of Hamlet's soliloquy on suicide, in the same scientific style. "Shakespeare, dispensing with the customary exordium, announces his subject at once in the infinitive, in which, brief as it is, we recognize the alternative and negative forms on which so much of the significance of repetition depends. Here we reach a colon; and a pointed pository phrase, in which the accent falls decisively on the relative pronoun, brings us to the first full stop."⁶

Tullidge pontificates further:

It appears by the author's working of the second period on the dominant "and give to rapture" that he had reserved for the *finale* of his first subject the thorough awakening of the instrument so descriptive of its joyous arousing. "From Helicon's Harmonious Springs," is a lively imitation of parts, which produces a fine tonic termination. "The laughing flowers around them blow, Drink life and fragrance as they flow" is too far fetched, and the author has not succeeded in a good interpretation of the poetry. The first line is truthful enough, but the second one "Drink life as they flow" is too gloomy with its termination on the submediant.⁷

As he goes on in this vein, it becomes apparent that his analysis of form and content, of texture and details, in fact his whole aesthetic inquiry is reduced to a question of harmony, the use of this chord or that—just as we might expect from this mid-Victorian of the English conservatory. The harmonic ingredient seems in fact so primary to Tullidge that he infers that without this understanding great music cannot be enjoyed. Comparing his present day England to a past generation, he says:

Class teaching [then] was not known or most only in its infancy Theory of sounds belonged to the Germans and Italians only; and the varied mixtures of harmony was a perfect secret, . . . except to the above people. When the professors of music in England knew but little of harmony; it could not be expected that an English audience could understand classical works. But times are changed and in England the choruses of Handel and other great masters, are becoming familiar to the mass, and the grand Hallelujah chorus of the immortal Handel is almost as popular as "I wish I was in Dixie." Take heart, therefore, good teacher, and never tire until the like glorious consummation is reached in the land of the saints.⁸

But Tullidge knew that greatness was not determined by crass popularity alone. Of another composition he says:

"In Jewry God is known" is a great favorite in all cathedral cities in the old country, and it is a favorite through its excellence and not from any capricious popularity; for it has stood the test of much trial.⁹

Although he is generally pleased with the performance, Tullidge is disappointed in the audience, in which he perceives insensitivity denoting a lack of culture:

The class . . . sang with marked expression and good enun-

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ciation and precision. If fault there were, it was that the latter strain lacked energy; but upon the whole it was rendered with great credit. Indeed I expected from the manner in which it was sung that an encore would have followed; but such was not the case, and only a solitary echo of applause was heard throughout that gorgeous building.

This, at first would seem discouraging; but a maturer reflection would not expect, only from a highly cultivated musical audience, full appreciation of classical compositions.¹⁰

Was this judgmental attitude well taken by the public? Without all the information to reconstruct the picture, we can guess that Tullidge's criticism hurt the pride of some, but that it also was received in a climate of considerable receptiveness and bore several advantages that must have given it an attentive hearing. He was of course new in the community and arrived with reputation attached. Training and status in the "dear old England" of which so many immigrant saints could sing were the credentials of authority, difficult to challenge. It must be considered also that his criticism was not read by a frontier culture of the usual level in western America of the sixties, but in reality an island colony of eastern American and European life which was not unaccustomed to performance and discussion of the arts. Too, this was early in the development of Mormon society. The variety of thought and individualistic expression of Yankee independence characteristic of early Mormon creativity had not yet congealed into group conformity. Dissenting criticism could be tolerated and even valued in the secular fields of music and art.

Critical disapproval however was not always welcome. An anonymous writer later stated for the *Deseret News* what must have seemed to the editors a less volatile policy in writing up local music:

We have no disposition to enter into criticism upon individual performances, neither would it be just to do so, as we regard the distinctly stated objects of the [Deseret Music Association] concerts as having been exceptionally attained. . . . In justice to our own feelings, we can scarcely refrain from particularly and personally referring to the enrapturing performances of some of the ladies' association; but prudential considerations, commingled with a hearty appreciation of the whole musical performance by young and old, male and female, forbid.¹¹

John Tullidge assumed his rightful position as a musical leader in the community in writing, teaching, and conducting concerts. Six years after initiating the Utah press to the tremors of independent music criticism, Tullidge co-founded with Harrison a cultural journal called *Utah Magazine*, which during its one year of publication carried his trenchant commentary on the musical scene. In an article running three issues he chided his fellow critics (one gets the impression that there were such) for vacillating in the cause of good music.

The passing of Mozart's Overture to Figaro and Locke's celebrated Macbeth music, without special notice, would lead many to suppose that our critics were incompetent to the task of reviewing the inspirations of these two immortal composers, therefore, we cannot allow the present opportunity to go by without paying tribute to the merits of the above works.¹²

Then follows his poetic eulogy of the music interspersed with technical jargon pointing up worthy aspects of the performance.

Tullidge never seems to have altered his essential bias for rule-bound harmonic "correctness," a factor which is properly regarded as subservient to the composer's entire musical conception. Such a soulful melodist as Schubert, to whom harmony seems rarely to be crucial, is seen by Tullidge first as a harmonic craftsman. He cites Schubert as a model in defending an alteration he had made in the *Utah Magazine's* publication of one of Charles J. Thomas' compositions:

We will beg [Professor Thomas] to bear in mind that to remove the errors of consecutive fifths—a very great fault—was the cause of the necessity of changing the two notes in his choral melody, in order to render the resolutions, as well as preparations in harmonic combinations, are required for correct progression; and we will also observe that in chorale renderings the harmonics are of more importance than the melody. In fact the song compositions of the great Schubert will prove that in his songs he has bestowed more pains and produced more effect by his varied and beautiful harmonics than he has by his melodies. We will observe that notwithstanding the Professor's objection to our altering his melody to remove errors, that the correct and pointed resolution of the passage more than compensates for the changing of the passing notes in his subject, and more especially as the linking character of the second period is not altered.

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We are always much pleased with the Professor's compositions and shall always be glad to receive any favor from him and we will also say that if he would send his pieces correct we would deem it sacrilege to alter them; but if they are grammatically incorrect, we must make a change. This observation will apply to all our contributors.¹³

Four short years after publication of these criticisms, accidental death silenced this first voice of music criticism in Utah. During this brief decade, John Tullidge's uncompromising critique raised music composition and performance to the level of evaluation for their strength and weakness. Although in the following generation concerts of local and later itinerant artists were regularly written up in the Utah press, reviews were almost never critical. The kindly epithet, the appreciative response, and even flattery became the fashion. The heterogeneous texture of the earlier society soon blended into a conformity oriented about a central core which set patterns and standards in nearly all aspects of the group life. By the 1880's and 90's local music style and repertoire were stereotyped in the taste of a few leaders. The resulting culture was inimical to criticism.

No successor to John Tullidge appeared in Utah journalism of the nineteenth century. His urge for refinement, his trust in his own aesthetics, and his lively forthrightness in publicly asserting his independent opinions despite their occasional dogma—these stand as a singular chapter in the story of music criticism in the mountain West.

1 *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City, Utah), October 21, 1863.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 George Bernard Shaw, *Music in London 1890-94* (London: Constable, 1949-50), Vol. 3, p. 321.

7 *Deseret News*, *loc. cit.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11 *Deseret News*, December 17, 1863.

12 *Utah Magazine* (Salt Lake City, Utah), 1869, p. 347.

13 *Ibid.*