

50 Articles of War

GEORGE SCOTT RAILTON

ABOUT SINGING

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Would any one sing if there were no one to hear? Certainly not. It is an exertion to sing, even when singing seems most inevitable, and no one would be incited to the exertion but for the pleasure of being heard.

But alas! alas! there is so much selfishness in the human heart, that to be heard by one's self is quite sufficient for many. The pleasure of singing—that is, the pleasure of hearing one's self sing—is too often a mere gratifying of the flesh, degrading, like every other self-gratification, the power employed, and injuring the selfish pleasure-seeker.

There are songs which are meant only for the ears of God; songs at times bitter in their plaintiveness, at times charming in their gleeful simplicity; such songs as have been set forth as permanent models in the Psalms; songs with whose construction, method, music, and language, no one may intermeddle—they always pleased God, and that is enough. No rules can be applied to such songs, no opinions even can safely be ventured upon them. But upon songs designed for human ears, we may properly form and express a judgment. And it seems to us that if song be the expression of anything—

1.—The best singing must be that which best expresses what is within the singer.

Of all the secular songs ever composed in our tongue, which are the most thoroughly acceptable to us all? Are not such as—"Home, sweet home"; "I love it, I love it, that old arm-chair". "Britons never shall be slaves"? And why are these so much loved? Simply because they express, without reserve and without circumlocution, the thoughts and feelings which are deepest and most constant in the minds and hearts of the people.

But if this be the case, then it follows that good spiritual song must be possible only as the Holy Spirit implants and moves in men's hearts and minds those



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Divine thoughts and feelings which are beyond the range of, and utterly opposed to, the natural earthly thoughts and passions of mankind.

What is it that has raised religious song under the leadership of such men as Philips and Sankey, in our times, to such a height of excellence and power and value? Is it not this one fact, evident to every one, that these men have sung like the Psalmists and Prophets of the Scriptures—from hearts inspired by the living God? They have sung—not for singing's sake, not for music's sake, not for any one's sake—but because they could only pour forth in sacred melodies the gushing streams of the river of life which were overflowing their souls. Every one goes out wondering to see this strange sight. One after another comes back exclaiming—"Whatever can it be that makes this singing so attractive? I can't see anything so very special about it!" No, there is nothing about it—that is just why it is so good. It is merely the soul of a godly man conveying itself in music to other souls. It is spirit, and it is life—notes, time, harmony, may be there, or may be wanting; no matter—life is there—God is there, and almost every one becomes conscious of this as he hears the true singers of Israel.

II.—*And whenever God enters and fills a human soul, that soul must express itself.*

"Ready to bust, like new bottles." as the Scriptures express it. A very vulgar phrase, perhaps the educated will say, but a true and frank explanation of the reason for all truly holy poetry and singing. The scientific musicians may protest against this unruly, violent sort of melody, and the very churches which are buying up Messrs. Moody and Sankey's songs wholesale today would have scorned them as irregular, if not irreverent, but for the Divine power which seems so to possess and sway the authors.

We thought "repeats" had been scouted by every enlightened church some years ago, and now, behold all the Christian churches taking up and repeating continually songs, one of the chief features of which is the repetition of strains and words! Ah, when a man really opens his eyes to any one truth, he is ready to repeat it any number of times, in prose or verse. Petty criticism and silly particularity about details vanish when people feel compelled to sing. They have got something to sing about, and they must and will sing in some way.

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But in order that the desire to give expression to one's self may be turned to the best account, the understanding must exercise due influence. To express to the largest number of persons, in the fullest manner, what we know and feel, it is necessary—

1. To avoid any peculiarity of song, such as would repel those who might otherwise listen, or might prevent our conveying to them our meaning. Discord may be no impediment to the satisfaction and devotion of the singer, but it must act unfavorably on the hearer. Many a street-singer undoes all the influence of his words and tunes by his screeching tones or his absurd time.

On the other hand, excess of art may render the conveyance of any meaning to the heart utterly out of the question, while it attracts to the highest extent the outer ear. See the throng of surpliced singers in their most splendid efforts in our great cathedrals. Their singing, as such, is perfect, but their words, who can distinguish?

But inasmuch as the vast majority of our fellow men are determined not to hear, and never to receive the truths that should be dearest to our hearts, it is above all necessary—

2. to sing with the utmost combination of force. There is force in love and tenderness, a force which few can resist, and he who can express to the greatest extent these emotions in his song, is likeliest to move the multitude.

But then the masses are so thoroughly resolved not to be influenced by Divine love that, unless the fury of the Lord of Hosts be combined with His love in the work, the sweetest songs will be wasted, and the love they express will be powerless.

How then is the strength and vigor necessary to drive in upon the people the undesired facts of our religion to be compressed into song?

1. By the employment of the very utmost lung power in singing. Whether indoors or out the fastidious are ready enough to complain if we sing loudly; but what of that, if our voice and our words sound out so that none can fail to hear? Let us make up our minds as to our duty. If it be our calling to awaken the people, and



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to make known our Savior, then let us be determined to be faithful to our calling whether men smile on us or curse us.

2. By the use of such tunes and such words are strike the ear most forcibly. Why do the military rulers of the people choose the bugle and the clarion as the chiefest of their instruments of music, with the rattle of the drum to accompany them? Why do they prefer the brass instrument to the stringed one, or the sweeter and more pleasant reeds? Why, but that for the most pressing and urgent of human actions there is no other sound so startling, so thrilling, so supreme over the noise of war itself.

If we are in earnest in the great business of summoning a rebel world to submit to our God, if we care about the souls of those to whom we appeal amidst the bustling cares of life on behalf of our Divine Master, then we shall certainly choose such words, such songs, such tunes, as are wildest in their liberty and most startling in their vigor.

Earnest men are not to be put aside by trifles, by theories, or rules of art. They have a work to do, and they *will* do it. Let us away with every little objection that would cross our path in the great operations in which, by the grace of God, we are engaged.

Above all, let us for ever cast out and contemn *machine singing*.

The singing that is acquired in the singing class, that savors more of the music-book than of anything else; the singing that means to be, even when it is not, a performance; singing without a heart; singing because it is nice or fashionable or good to sing—never glorified God nor did permanent good to men's souls, and never can.

Such singing, however popular it may be, must always be an abomination in the sight of God, and should always be detested by honest men. Hypocrisy is always hateful; but of all hypocrisy, there is surely none so loathsome or so inexcusable as the hypocrisy of songs not meant. To clothe in lovely music, and in poetic language, thoughts with which the mind and heart are not in thorough sympathy, is the height of miserable deceit. It is the perfection of Satanic

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subtlety, and yet it is fast becoming the admired and beloved practice of the highest and loveliest circles in the land.

Oh, ye men of truth and honor, awake to the fearful reality! The words, the truths of our God, are sung by the voices of His enemies, and that amid the applause and under the approbation and thanksgiving of His professed friends. Singing, that might be one of the choicest instrumentalities for men's salvation, is made the most complete and refined agency of ruin—an awful spiritual ruin—wrought out under the eyes of the Lord's own servants, in His own houses of prayer, and in His own name.

Oh! Let us rescue this precious instrument from the clutches of the devil, and make it, as it may be made, a bright and lovely power for good. May God help us! Amen.