About music: an address delivered at the Town Hall, Birmingham, on October 19, 1888, by Sir Arthur Sullivan.

It has come to my good fortune to have to address you as President of the Birmingham and Midland Institute, and I naturally choose the subject of Music. I can choose no other. Music has been my incessant occupation since I was eight years old. All my energies, all my affections, have been bestowed upon it, and it had for long been to me a second nature. The interests and triumphs of my art are dearer to me than any other interests and triumphs can be. Music is to me a mistress in every sense of the word; a mistress whose command I obey, whose smiles I love, whose wrongs move me, as no others do. And therefore, it will not be difficult for you to understand the gratification with which I address you in this famous city, a city which first set England the example of combining the triumphs of practical science with those of art by founding here, in the middle of your workshops and factories, the world-renowned Birmingham Festival, and afterwards crowning the edifices of this great town by the majestic portico of that temple in which so many masterpieces of music had been first heard by thousands of enthusiastic worshippers.

But I confess that it is with very considerable diffidence that I speak to you on the subject of music, and I can at once relieve you of all anxiety by stating that my address will be a very short one, because all my life I have been making music, and not talking about it. It is so easy, in an address on music, either to sink into dull platitudes, or to indulge in wearisome and, to many in a general audience, incomprehensible technicalities. I shall, however, endeavour to avoid both these errors, and in the few remarks I am addressing to you shall give utterance to a few thoughts of my own on the subject, which may, I trust, interest you as the have interested me.

Among the many advances of our country in the last half-century, surely none has been greater than that of music. Publications and performances are now so extraordinarily multiplied that the masterpieces – not only of the old composers, but of the most modern writers – are brought within the means of every one; more so, probably, that in any other country; England has thus, so far, the chance of again assuming the position that she held many hundred years ago of being at the head of Europe as a musical country. She was once (as I believe the most Teutonic of German historians now allow) a long way in advance of other nations – yet how little is this known or acknowledged by ourselves! So far back as the year 1230 a piece of music composed by a monk of Reading (John of Fornsete was his honoured name, and the M.S. of his work is at the British Museum) was far, far in advance, both in tunefulness and expression, of anything else produced at that time. I allude to the celebrated glee, in six vocal parts, “Summer is a cumin in.” And observe that that pre-eminence implies many years (I might say centuries) of previous study and progress on the part of our countrymen, But we need not trust to implication only; records exist to prove how diligently and enthusiastically music was pursued in England from the reign of King Alfred to the time of the Reformation. Here are a few facts:

In 550A.D. there was a great gathering and competition of harpists at Conway – an early Eisteddfod.

In 866 King Alfred instituted a professorship of Music at Oxford, and there must have been concerted music in those Anglo-Saxon times, for in the British Museum is an old picture of a concert consisting of a six-stringed harp, a four-stringed fiddle, a trumpet, and a crooked horn. Curiously enough, this is, with the exception of the horn, exactly the same combination of instruments that we

see nearly every Saturday night playing outside a London public-house! I have not noticed whether the background of the picture I allude to represents the corresponding locality of that period.

Even then music had begun to exercise an influence on trade; the metal industry and joinery must have already benefited by it, for in the tenth century the monk Wulston gives a long description of a grand organ in Winchester Cathedral and St. Dunstan, famous for his skill in metal work, at the same date fabricated an organ in Malmesbury Abbey, the pipes of which were of brass.

Long before the Conquest three-part harmony was practised, and is spoken of by the chroniclers as the "custom of the country." Thomas à Becket, on his visit to France to negotiate the marriage of Henry II., took with him 250 boys, who sung in harmony of three parts, which is expressly recorded to have been "in the English manner, and till then unheard of in France."

It is a satisfaction to know, also, that in those days musicians were well paid; for at the wedding of Edward I.'s daughter every King's minstrel received forty shillings – equal, at least, to twenty pounds in these days. Chaucer, in his "Princesses' Tale," mentions approvingly that young children were taught to sing as much as they were taught to read. But he somewhat weakens the value of his judgment in my eyes, by expressing, elsewhere the opinion that every country squire should be taught to play the flute.

In the reign of Edward II. harmony had advanced. At the "Tournament of Tottenham" we read that –

"In all the corners of the house
Was melody delicious
Of six-men songs."

The constitution of military bands in England was also of a very early date. Henry VI., when he went to war with France, took over with him a band consisting of ten clarion players and other instrumentalists, who played at headquarters morning and evening. This is the first military band we have a record of. Queen Elizabeth improved upon it so far as to have a band which played during her dinner, of twelve trumpets, two kettledrums, pipes, cornets, and side drums, and I am not astonished when I read that "this musicke did make the hall ring for half-an-hour."

In her reign the priest must have been (as he often is now) the musician of the parish, and a cheery good fellow; for in Vernon's "Hunting of Purgatory and Death," 1561, the author says: "I knewe a priest whiche, when any of his parishioners should be maryed, would take his backe-pype and go fetch them to the Church, playing sweetlie afore them; and then he would lay his instrument handsomely upon the aulter tyll he had maryed them and sayd mass. Which thing being done, he would gentillye bringe them home again with his backe-pype."

I could produce an immense mass of evidence as to the forward condition of music in England up to the beginning of the sixteenth century, but I will not weary you with details – details which you can learn for yourselves in your excellent Free Library, if you are inclined to go more deeply into the matter. Suffice it to say that we have clear proof of the existence of a highly educated school of theoretical musicians who preserved the plain-song for the Church in its integrity, and made it the basis of harmonic treatment; who wrote out their harmony in score, and from one of whom emanated the earliest remaining composition of freedom and beauty, the before-mentioned glee "Summer is a cumin in." And this was followed up by a succession of original works by such writers as John Dunstable, who, though now little known in England, had in his own day a great reputation abroad.

The Universities of Cambridge and Oxford acknowledged the importance of music by making it a faculty, and granting doctors' degrees, analogous to those granted in Divinity, Law, and Medicine, at a very early date. Joan of Arc and her tragical end seem to us a long, long way back in our history, and yet only thirty years after her death was the first musical degree conferred at Cambridge; and even now no other Universities in Europe but English ones confer musical degrees.

There are clear indications that up to the time of the Reformation music was in continual progress. But, unfortunately, the Wars of the Roses and the ruthless destruction which accompanied the suppression of the monasteries (the only homes of art of all kinds in those rough savage days) have obliterated all but the rarest indications. But it is certain, not only from the treatises and compositions of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that have survived, but from the splendour of the English School when we again encounter it about 1520 that in the interval our music had been growing and flourishing, as everything in England grows and flourishes when it really seizes hold of the English people. Palestrina (from 1550 to 1600) no doubt wrote more nobly than any of his contemporaries, including our own Tallis and Byrd; but it is not too much to say that the English predecessors of Tallis and Byrd – Edwards, Redford, Shepperd, Tye, White, Johnson, and Marbecke, who date from 1500 to 1550, were much in advance of any of the predecessors of Palestrina on the Continent. For they were their equals in science, and they far surpassed them in the tunefulness and what I may call the common-sense of their music. Their compositions display a "sweet reasonableness," a human feeling, a suitability to the words, and a determination to be something more than a mere scientific and mechanical puzzle, which few, If any, of the Continental composers before 1550 can be said to exhibit. I have only to mention the familiar title of the charming and favourite madrigal, "In going to my lonely bed" (by Edwards, 1523-1566) to convince many here present of the truth of what I am saying. Such was our position in the first half of the sixteenth century; and the half-century following is the splendid time of English music, in which the illustrious names of Morley, Weekes, Wilbye, Ford, Dowland, and Orlando Gibbons shine like stars. These names may be unknown to some of you, but the men existed, and their works live; live not alone by reason of the science, their pure part-writing and rich harmonies, but by the stream of beautiful melody which flows through all their works – melody which is ear-haunting even to our modern and jaded natures, and which had no parallel elsewhere. Those of you who have heard such works as the "Silver Swan," by Gibbons, and "Since first I saw your face," by Ford, will, I am sure, endorse my opinion.

I will not go into the causes which, for nearly 200 years, made us lose that high position, and threw us into the hand of the illustrious foreigners, Handel, Haydn, Spohr, Mendelssohn (so long a favourite composer of the English), and of the Italian Opera, which exclusively occupied the attention of the fashionable classes, and, like a great car of Juggernaut, overrode and crushed all efforts made on behalf of native music. My belief is that this was largely due to the enthusiasm with which commerce was pursued, and to the extraordinary way in which religious and political struggles, and, later still, practical science, have absorbed our energies. We were content to *buy* our music, while we were *making* churches, steam-engines, railways, cotton-mills, constitutions, anti-Corn-Law Leagues, and Caucuses. Now, however, as I have already said, the condition of things is changing – it *has* changed. And yet I cannot but feel that we are only at the entry of the Promised Land. Habits of mind and modes of action are still to be found which show that we have much to do before we become the musical people that we were in the remoter ages of our history. We do, indeed, love music, but it is with an inferior affection to that which we lavish on other objects of life. We have not yet ceased to talk whilst music is being performed; we still come in late to a concert, and whilst some noble and pathetic work is enchaining the attention of every one, we too often insist upon disturbing twenty or thirty people and destroying the enjoyment because we have

bought seats Nos. 23, 24 and 25, and mean to have our money's worth. And if we come late, depend upon it we always go out before the concert is finished, to show how thoroughly independent we are. In this we are like Charles Lamb, who reproached by his chief, "Mr. Lamb, you come so late in the mornings." "Yes, sir," was the reply, "But I go away so early in the afternoons."

I am not apt to praise the foreigner at the expense of Englishmen, but we have a lesson to learn from both Germans and Frenchmen in this respect. I fear we must admit that even at present, in the mind of a true Briton, Business, Society, Politics, and Sport, all come before Art. Art is very well; we have no objections to pay for it, and to pay well; but we can only enjoy it if it interferes with none of the pet pleasures, and inconsequence it has often to suffer.

I will name an amusing little instance of similar indifference in another art which came to my notice while preparing these remarks. A very eminent commercial firm gave my friend, Sir John Millais, a large sum for a beautiful picture, with the full-size facsimile of which we are familiar – of the lad blowing bubbles. The bubble is in the air over the boy's head, and the picture tells its tale to every one. But a second facsimile has been posted, and in order that the name of the firm may be made more prominent, the bubble has been covered over and the whole point of the painting is lost.

But besides the indifference I speak of, there is no doubt that music has had to suffer much from the lofty contempt with which she and her votaries have been treated by those who professed to have a claim to distinction in other walks. True, since the days of the priggish nobleman, Lord Chesterfield, things have greatly changed. Eton, Harrow, Rugby – all the great schools – have now their masters for music on the same footing as the other instructors. Go into the officers' quarters in barracks, and you find pianofortes, violins, and violoncellos; and lying about there will be *good* music. Amateur societies flourish, which bring rich and poor together. H.R.H. the Duke of Edinburgh told me that he had a complete string quartette amongst the officers on board his hip – all these things point to a great reaction in the feelings of the professional classes towards music.

But much of the old leaven remains and one of its most objectionable developments is a curious affectation of ignorance on the part of many men of position in the political and scientific world – as if music were too trivial a matter for their lofty intellect to take notice of. At any great meeting on the subject of music, archbishops, judges, politicians, financiers – each one who rises to speak will deprecate any knowledge of music with a smug satisfaction, like a man disowning poor relations.

I am not here to explain why music should be cultivated, nor to apologise to superior-minded persons for its existence, not to speak humbly and with bated breath of its merits; but I claim for it boldly and proudly its place amongst the great things and the great influences in the world; and I can but express pity for those who are ignorant and stupid enough to deny its importance in the world and history, and to look upon it as a mere family pastime, fit only for women and children.

Darwin, in his "Descent of Man," says: "Neither the enjoyment nor the capacity of producing musical notes are faculties of the least direct use to man in reference to his ordinary habits of life." Physiologically he is probably correct, but as soon as mere rudimentary actions are left, as soon as existence becomes life, his statement is completely false. Indeed, music is, as the same philosopher elsewhere says, bound up in daily life, and a necessity of existence.

Of its usefulness in daily life there can be no question. What would religious services be without organs and singing? What would armies be without bands? If music were a mere luxury, would people spend so much time and money on it? It is not to obtain mere ear-enjoyment – it is

because it is a necessity to satisfy certain requirements of the mind. It enters into the chemistry of the mind as salt does into the chemistry of the body. Here and there you meet with a person who says, "I never eat salt – I do not require it." Well, you are sorry for him; there is evidently something wrong in his physical constitution. So when any one assumes a tone of lofty superiority, and boasts that he knows nothing about music, and pretends not to be able to distinguish one tune from another, you may either accept his statement with a considerable amount of reserve, or conclude that there is something wrong in his physical or mental faculties, and recommend him to consult an aurist.

Now bear with me a few moments whilst I briefly consider three points about music – its usefulness, its necessity for the mind, and its overpowering influence in the world. It is singular from how very early a date music took a great position. In the account of the origin of mankind as given us in the book of Genesis, we find society divided into three great divisions. (1) Agriculturalists, "Those that dwell in tents and have cattle"; (2) Manufacturers, "artificers in brass and iron"; (3) Musicians, "such as handle the harp and pipe," *i.e.* strings and wind. Music is put on a level with such essential pursuits as Agriculture and Manufactures. And this equal share in the economy of the world Music has maintained; but belonging, as it does, to the inmost part of man's nature, its presence is often overlooked, and we are as unconscious of it as we are of the air we breathe, the speech we utter, the natural motion of our muscles, of the beating of our hearts. It is co-extensive with human life. From the soft lullaby of the mother that soothes our cradle-life to the dirge that is sung over the grave, music enters into our existence, It marks periods and epochs of our life, stimulates our exertions, strengthens our faith, speaks both words of peace and of war, and exercises over us a charm and indefinite power which we can all feel, though we cannot explain. I repeat it is a necessity to the mind, as salt is to the body.

And now, to bring the question of its use forcibly forward to our British understandings, what would commerce be without the music trades, without that multitude of industries, those millions of workers who are necessary for the production of organs, pianofortes, and every kind of wind, string, and percussion instruments; for the engraving, type-setting, and printing of music; for the manufacture of the millions of reams of paper used in music-printing and copying?

I will take one item, comparatively a small one, but one which for Birmingham has a peculiar interest. Have you ever thought of the amount of steel wire used in the manufacture of pianofortes? It is impossible to get the actual statistics of the pianoforte trade of the world, but I have been at some pains to inquire, and have formed a fairly approximate estimate, Taking the products of the principal manufacturing countries, England, France, Germany, America, and smaller States, I find that the total of pianofortes manufactured every year is about 175,000, and that the average amount of wire used in each pianoforte is about 570 feet; your own quick calculation will tell you that this represents in length 18,892 miles of steel wire! If it were in one continuous piece it would reach from here to Japan and back again, and then you would have left over to run up with to Scotland and back.

When we come to the question of the influence of music, we arrive at its most important function – the area of its greatest power. Who shall measure the bondless influence of music on human feeling? Who shall gainsay the mighty power it exercises over human passions? or deny the dynamical force which it has exerted in history? In the ancient world it is constantly found associated with eventful episodes. The earliest records of the Bible contain more than one such. To the incident in the life of Lamech, the antediluvian hero – an incident embodied in what are perhaps the earliest lines of poetry in the world – I will only refer; but I would remind you that in the East verse and music are more constantly associated than they are with us, and that Lamech's poetry probably had

its own melody. Jubal, the inventor of string and wind instruments, and the father of all the musicians who have succeeded him, has (as I have already pointed out) his existence announced in exactly the same terms as the discoverers of Agriculture and of Engineering. The greatest of the great wells that supplied the Israelites during their wandering in the wilderness is expressly stated to have been dug to the sound of a solemn national music, of the extent of which we can form little idea from the concise terms of the ancient narrative; but from the mention of the fact that, at the special commend of Jehovah, the great Lawgiver himself, the leaders of the people, and the whole congregation took part in the singing, there can be little doubt that it was a most imposing and impressive musical ceremonial. We have the words, the very words themselves:

"Spring up, O well, sing ye unto it;
The well which the princes digged,
Which the nobles of the people delved
With the sceptre, and their slaves."

Would that the music had also been preserved!

In Greece we find that the first definite political revolution in Athens, the murder of Hipparchus the tyrant, and the establishment of free government, as early as 514 B.C., was consecrated and probably accompanied by a song which is still preserved – the song of Harmodius and Aristogeiton. This song was for generations a rallying cry to the Greek Jacobins.

In more modern times music fully maintained its political influence. The Reformation in Germany was powerfully advanced by Luther's famous hymn, "Ein feste Burg," and by his other chorales, which are well known to have precipitated the conversion of whole towns to the reformed faith, and which during the late Franco-German war were lively symbols of heroic rejoicing, and watch-words of the national faith. During the same war the national song of the "Wacht am Rhein" had a popularity and an influence which it is difficult for us to understand, seeing how weak the tune is, but which is perpetuated in the immense national monument near Bingen on the Rhine, erected in the year 1883. I need hardly do more than refer to the French warlike song of "Malbrouk," the Ça ira," and the "Marseillaise," which played so large a part in the French Revolution of 1790, or the "Dunois the young and brave," and the "Chant du Départ," which fanned the flames on both sides in the latter Revolutions.

Nor have we Britons been without our musical influences. The enormous power exercised by the Welsh bards of old caused their extirpation. Readers of Carlyle's history of Cromwell will recollect his account of the Battle of Dunbar, and the emotion which forced that silent and undemonstrative man into urging his soldiers forward by shouting and making them shout the 117th Psalm to the version still used in the Church of Scotland, and to a still existing tune. On the other side "The King shall enjoy his own again" and "Bonnie Prince Charlie" were of great political importance in inspiring and encouraging the Royalist party. And need I, in an assemblage of Britons, do more than allude to the tune of mighty force which binds us all together over the whole wide world, "God Save the Queen!"

Dibdin's songs, simple and melodious, have, without doubt, taught our sailors lessons of patriotism and self-denial, and "Auld Lang Syne" has brought about kindness, goodwill, and the extinction of many a long estrangement between friends.

Well, this is all sentiment, many may be disposed to say. Yes, but he who refuses to accept the force of sentiment on human nature is a blind fool. Many a statesman has found, and will still find, this to his cost.

That the force of sentiment has been recognised we know from the fact that certain music has been prohibited by reason of its influence. In Poland no man, woman, nor child was allowed by the Russians to sing any of their own national songs. They raised feelings dangerous to the conquerors. Certain tunes are even now forbidden to be played by the band of the Highland regiments when they are quartered in foreign parts far from home. The effect on many of the men is actually physical; they fall ill of the intense longing for home

which the music excites. And the same thing happens to the Swiss peasant when he is removed from his mountains and valleys; the loved strains of the "Ranz des Vaches" produce positive suffering – an actual home-sickness.

I have myself witnessed the extraordinary effect of their rhythmical music on the Arabs in Egypt, more especially at the great ceremony of the departure of the Sacred Carpet for Mecca. In one tent there were nearly a hundred dervishes swaying their bodies in all kinds of movements and contortions, and singing the same monotonous measure over and over again, until they got maddened, and fell down, some senseless, some in furious fits, when they were really dangerous.

And is not our own British soldier moved at the tunes of "The British Grenadier" and "I'm ninety-five," which thrill his whole being, and make him feel that he is still equal to five foreigners!

Now, if this influence is so great, ought it not to be recognised and controlled by proper education? – education, not for performance, but for *appreciation and understanding*. The School Board is doing something, but it could do a great deal more. £160,000 a year is apportioned by Parliament to music, but it is not spent directly on teaching – it is brought in as an allowance for attendance, with what result I do not quite know. I ought to have referred to my friend Sir John Stainer, who is the able Government Inspector of Schools. But great things might be done with so splendid a sum devoted to instruction.

The love of music by children is remarkable – see what pleasure they derive from their school songs and hymns. And their love of music does not cease with their school-days; the girl's carry it with them into the factories, and the lads become a principal element in the numerous brass bands which have lately so much increased in the Midland and Northern counties. There is a sort of continuity in the musical life of our country which should be fostered and encouraged. The early home, the village school, the church choir, the choral society, or the brass band, and, in special cases, systematic study at one of our great music schools. The municipalities ought to take up this work and systematise it by the establishment of some kind of secondary schools. Ireland possesses a special Act sanctioning the teaching of music in municipal schools with aid from the rates in support; but we are not yet so fortunate in England. Our legislation not only does not encourage music, but it exhibits a curiously Philistine attitude towards it; I speak of the classing of music and drinking licences together, under the same authorities. I suppose there is some subtle reason for it, but I fail to understand why it is that in the midst of all that is low and degrading, the one humanising element which might lift poor besotted creatures, if only for a few moments, out of the depth of their wretched and sordid condition should require the special sanction of a board of magistrates. They may drink as much as they like, but let any one of them sing a song, or play a tune on the cornet or violin, and down comes the law upon them.

I wonder if this anomaly arises from the lofty contempt in which so many of our so-called politicians have held music in the *unsalted* minds. With them it was an occupation for the "lower classes," the fit companion to drinking or tight-rope dancing. Of course it is the *place* that is licensed – not the art – that I know. But neither a picture gallery nor a bookseller's shop required a licence; and yet a great deal more harm can be done to public morals by books and pictures than by music.

And herein lies one of the divine attributes of music, in that it is absolutely free from the power of suggesting anything immoral. Its countless moods and richly varied forms suit it to every organisation, and it can convey every meaning except one – an impure one. Music can suggest no improper thought, and herein may be claimed its superiority over painting and sculpture, both of which may, and, indeed, do at times, depict and suggest impurity. This blemish, however, does not enter into music; sounds alone (apart from articulate words, spectacle, or descriptive programme) must, from their indefinite nature, be innocent. Let us thank God that we have one elevating and ennobling influence in the world which can never, never lose its purity and beauty.

And now I have come to the end of telling you the thoughts that entered my mind whilst considering my address to you. They have been somewhat rambling perhaps, and there has been no intention to point any particular moral. I have endeavoured to show you how England was at one time in the foremost place amongst musical nations, and I would now only urge you to use all your efforts to restore her to that proud position. The means lie in education. We must be educated to appreciate, and appreciation must come before production. Give us intelligent and educated listeners, and we shall produce composers and performers of corresponding worth. Much is now being done in England for the higher education of musicians. At the Royal College of Music, my old and valued friend Sir George Grove is doing work of incalculable value, guiding and directing with unerring judgment his splendid staff of professors, and imbuing every one with his own enthusiasm. Nor must we forget the services the Royal Academy of Music has rendered to musical education, and that under the spirited guidance of that gifted musician Dr. Mackenzie, it is daily increasing its sphere of usefulness. Many other kindred institutions are fighting earnestly and unflaggingly the battle of our art, and to-night we have witnessed the result of that sturdy energy which Birmingham possesses in such high degree in the prosperity of the Midland Institute, where I am proud to see that musical education plays such a prominent part. I read on the list of teachers the names of men well known to me – their names are a guarantee that the instruction is sound. But there is one particular branch for which no professor is appointed, and with good reason, for I am sure that every teacher on the staff includes it in his instruction – namely, the art of listening. We want good listeners rather than indifferent performers; and with this little moral axiom, and with my warm thanks for the great compliment you have paid me in being yourselves such kind and attentive listeners, I will conclude.

[Transcribed from Arthur Lawrence ***Sir Arthur Sullivan: life-story, letters, and reminiscences***. James Bowden, 1899. pp.261-287.]