

EDWARD BELLASIS

CARDINAL
NEWMAN AS A
MUSICIAN

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Edward Bellasis

Cardinal Newman as a Musician

Music's ethereal fire was given
Not to dissolve our clay,
But draw Promethean beams from Heaven,
And purge the dross away.

J.H.N.

It is a remark of St. Philip Neri's latest biographer that, "Our Saint was profoundly convinced that there is in music and in song a mysterious and a mighty power to stir the heart with high and noble emotion, and an especial fitness to raise it above sense to the love of heavenly things."¹ In like manner the Saint's illustrious son, Cardinal Newman, has spoken of "the emotion which some gentle, peaceful strain excites in us," and "how soul and body are rapt and carried away captive by the concord of musical sounds where the ear is open to their power;"² how, too, "music is the expression of ideas greater and more profound than any in the visible world, ideas which centre, indeed, in Him whom Catholicism manifests, who is the seat of all beauty, order, and perfection whatever."³ Music, then, to him was no "mere ingenuity or trick of art like some game or fashion of the day without meaning."⁴ For him man "sweeps the strings and they thrill with an ecstatic meaning."⁵ "Is it possible," he asks, "that that inexhaustible evolution and disposition of notes, so rich yet so simple, so intricate yet so regulated, so various yet so majestic, should be a mere sound which is gone and perishes? Can it be that those mysterious stirrings of heart, and keen emotions, and strange yearnings after we know not what, and awful impressions from we know not whence, should be wrought in us by what is unsubstantial, and comes and goes, and begins and ends in itself. It is not so; it cannot be. No; they have escaped from some higher sphere; they are the outpourings of eternal harmony in the medium of created sound; they are echoes from our home; they are the voice of angels, or the *Magnificat* of saints, or the living laws of Divine governance, or the Divine attributes, something are they beside themselves, which we cannot compass, which we cannot utter."⁶ And with him, as with St. Philip, may we not say that music held "a foremost place in his thoughts and plans"?⁷ True, out of its place, he will but allow that "playing musical instruments is an elegant pastime, and a resource

¹ Cardinal Capececiatratro's *Life of St. Philip Neri*, translated by the Rev. Thomas Alder Pope, of the Oratory, vol. ii. p. 83.

² *Discourses to Mixed Congregations*, p. 297, Fourth Edit. 1871.

³ *Idea of a University*, dis. iv. p. 80, Sixth Edit. 1886.

⁴ *Oxford University Sermons*, p. 346, Edit. 1884.

⁵ *Idea*, dis. ix. 230. Dr. Chalmers writes to Blanco White: "You speak in your letter of the relief you have found in music... I am no musician and want a good ear, and yet I am conscious of a power in music which I want words to describe. It touches chords, reaches depths in the soul which lie beyond all other influences... Nothing in my experience is more mysterious, more inexplicable." (Blanco White's *Life and Correspondence*, edited by Thom, 1845, vol. iii. p. 195.)

⁶ *Oxford University Sermons*, pp. 346, 347. Writing to her brother about the passage on music, partly cited above, beginning: "There are seven notes in the scale, make them fourteen; yet what a slender outfit for so vast an enterprise! What science brings so much out of so little! Out of what poor element does some great master in it create his new world!" Mrs. J. Mozley says, "We are pleased at your tribute to music, but what do you mean by fourteen notes? Do you mean the twelve semitones, as some suggest? I am indignant at the idea. I think you knew what you were saying. Please tell me when you write." (Mozley, *Corr.* ii. p. 411.) He replies: "I had already been both amused and provoked to find my gross blunder about the 'fourteen.' But do not, pray, suppose I *doubled* the notes for semitones, though it looks very like it. The truth is, I had a most stupid idea in my head there were fifteen semi tones, and I took off one for the octave. On reading it over when published, I saw the absurdity. I have a great dislike to publishing hot bread, and this is one proof of the inconvenience." (*Ibid.*) The Second Edition has "thirteen notes," which is correct, if the octave be included, but later editions go back to "fourteen."

⁷ Pope, *Capececiatratro*, ii. 82.

to the idle."⁸ Music and "stuffing birds"⁹ were no conceivable substitutes for education properly so called, any more than a "Tamworth Reading-Room" system could be the panacea for every ill; but so long as an art in any given case did not tend to displace the more serious business of life; should it become for such an one an "aid to reflection," or, *per contra*, profitably distract him; in brief, if it anywise helped a soul on to her journey's end, then welcome the "good and perfect gift."

Thus, of a pupil's violin playing, September, 1865: "There are more important things, and I had some fear that he might be neglecting his proper studies. Now since he has not been, his music is all gain... To my mind music is an important part of education, where boys have a turn for it. It is a great resource when they are thrown on the world, it is a social amusement perfectly innocent, and, what is so great a point, employs their thoughts. Drawing does not do this. It is often a great point for a boy to escape from himself, and music enables him. He cannot be playing difficult passages on the violin, and thinking of anything else." Perhaps he was speaking from experience, for he told us in September, 1875: "I began the violin when I was ten years old," and his two brothers used to accompany him in trios, Frank playing "the bass." On going to Oxford he kept up his music. Thus in February, 1820: "Our music club at St. John's has been offered, and has accepted, the music-room, for our weekly private concerts;" and later: "I went to the R's to play the difficult first violin to Haydn, Mozart, &c.;"¹⁰ and in June, 1820: "I was asked by a man yesterday to go to his rooms for a *little* music at seven o'clock. I went. An old Don – a very good-natured man but too fond of music – played bass, and through his enthusiasm I was kept playing quartets on a heavy tenor from seven to twelve. Oh, my poor eyes and head and back."¹¹ When the news arrived of his success at Oriel he was practising music. "The Provost's butler – to whom it fell by usage to take the news to the fortunate candidate – made his way to Mr. Newman's lodgings in Broad Street, and found him playing the violin. This in itself disconcerted the messenger, who did not associate such an accomplishment with a candidateship for the Oriel Common-Room, but his perplexity was increased when on his delivering what may be considered to have been his usual form of speech on such occasions, that 'he had, he feared, disagreeable news to announce, viz., that Mr. Newman was elected Fellow of Oriel, and that his immediate presence was required there,' the person addressed merely answered, 'Very well,' and went on fiddling. This led the man to ask whether, perhaps, he had not gone to the wrong person, to which Mr. Newman replied that it was all right. But, as may be imagined, no sooner had the man left than he flung down his instrument and dashed downstairs."¹² And again, "With a half-malicious intent of frightening them (his electors at Oriel), it was told them that Mr. Newman had for years belonged to a club of instrumental music, and had himself taken part in its public performances, a diversion, innocent in itself, but scarcely in keeping, or in sympathy with an intellectual Common-Room, or promising a satisfactory career to a nascent Fellow of Oriel."¹³ So thought the *quidnuncs*; nevertheless, Mr. Newman "went on fiddling." His pupil, F. Rogers (the late Lord Blachford), joined him herein, and writes, January, 1834: "Your sermons ... and Beethoven are most satisfactory. I wish I could hope to join you in the last in any moderate time. However, I do expect you will take me to Rose Hill to hear some of it again, if it were only to remind me of those evenings I used to spend with you when at Iffley. I am afraid you will have enough of my

⁸ *Idea*, dis. vi. p. 144.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Mozley, *Correspondence*, i. p. 52.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Mozley, *Corr.* i. p. 71. On one occasion (between 1860-70) two Oratory boys went up to his room to make a complaint, and hearing only "fiddling" the other side of the door, made bold to enter, but their visit was ill-timed. "Every Englishman's house is his castle," said the Father, and he "went on fiddling." This term, "Father," is what every one in the house called Dr. Newman, and correctly, as being Father Superior of the Oratory. It is the name (it need scarcely be added) that he liked to be called by.

¹³ *Ibid.* i. p. 104: Provost Hawkins, at this time a Fellow, and ultimately succeeding Copleston, had no love for music, and rather despised such a thing as being "a sign of an effeminate (or frivolous) mind." He used one or other of these terms, or *both*.

bass to satisfy you without Beethoven in the course of next term." N.B. – "He was to be in Froude's room over my head, – J.H.N."¹⁴ Mr. Bowden also played the violoncello, and Newman was further supported by one who was a musician, and a deal more besides. "Mr. Blanco White," he writes, November, 1826, "plays the violin, and has an exquisite ear."¹⁵ "I have only one sister alive now," he said sadly in September, 1875, "and she is old, but plays Beethoven very well."¹⁶ She has an old-fashioned, energetic style of playing; but one person, I remember, played Beethoven as no one else, Blanco White. I don't know how he learned the violin, but he would seem to have inherited a tradition as to the method of playing him." "Both were violinists," writes Mr. T. Mozley of Blanco White and Mr. Newman, "but with different instruments. Blanco White's was very small... Poor gentleman! Night after night anyone walking in the silence of Merton Lane might hear his continual attempts to surmount some little difficulty, returning to it again and again like Philomel to her vain regrets."¹⁷ With Reinagle ... Newman and Blanco White had frequent (trios) at the latter's lodgings, where I was all the audience... Most interesting was it to contrast Blanco White's excited and indeed agitated countenance with Newman's sphinx-like immobility, as the latter drew long rich notes with a steady hand."¹⁸ Dr. Newman was still "bowing" forty years later, by which time the alleged "sphinx-like immobility" had made way for an ever-varying expression upon his face as strains alternated between grave and gay. Producing his violin from an old green baize bag,¹⁹ bending forward, and holding his violin against his chest, instead of under the chin in the modern fashion, most particular about his instrument being in perfect tune, in execution awkward yet vigorous, painstaking rather than brilliant, he would often attend at the Oratory School Sunday practices between two and four of an afternoon, Father Ryder and Father Norris sometimes coming to play also. For many years Dr. Newman had given up the violin,²⁰ but finding some of the school taking to the strings, he took it up again by way of encouraging them to persevere in what he deemed to be so good a thing for his boys. And he quietly inculcated a lesson in self-effacement too, for albeit he had begun the violin very long before our time, he invariably took second fiddle. He had no high opinion of his own performances. Answering the Liverpool anti-Popery spouter's summons to battle, he relied rather on his friends' estimate of his powers than upon his own. "Canon M'Neill's well-known talents as a finished orator would make such a public controversy an unfair trial of strength between them, because he himself was no orator. He had in fact no practice in public speaking. *His friends, however, told him* that he was no mean performer on the violin, and if he agreed to meet Canon M'Neill, he would only make one condition, that the Canon should open the meeting, and say all he had to say, after which he (Mr. Newman) would conclude with a tune on the violin. The public would then be able to judge which was the better man."²¹ With mere fiddling, a fluency void of expression he had little patience, and when, at a term "break-up," a youth's bow cleverly capered about on a violoncello, he uttered no compliment when the boy had concluded his flourishes. It was a mere display for executive skill, without feeling.

¹⁴ Mozley, *Corr.* ii. p. 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* i. p. 146.

¹⁶ She writes in July, 1843: "Now I do so wish, John, you would pay us a visit. I will practise hard to get up some Beethoven." (Mozley, *Corr.* ii. 415.)

¹⁷ With this difference, however, Philomel had not to learn her regrets: she knew them already.

¹⁸ *Reminiscences*, i. pp. 247, 248, Second Edition, 1882. Of statements in this work the Cardinal humorously observed: "When a thing won't stand on three legs, Tom supplies a fourth." The Father played the viola a good deal, which is larger than the violin; hence Mr. Mozley's "different instruments," &c.

¹⁹ One of the boys was once lent this aged green baize bag, and losing it, never heard the end of it. Whenever there was question of lending him anything else, the Father would say very quietly: "I think I lent you a green baize bag." Nor would he allow that it was lost: "You mean mislaid."

²⁰ A friend remembers Father Whitty, S.J., bringing to Maryvale Mr. McCarthy and Mr. M'Quoin, young converts and subsequently priests (the former is still living in Jersey). Both played the violin, so an instrumental quartet was essayed (a rare event in the community), the executants being the two named, and Fathers Newman and Bowles (violoncello).

²¹ Father Lockhart, in the *Paternoster Review* for September, 1890.

Readers will remember here the passage in *Loss and Gain*: "Bateman: 'If you attempt more, it's like taxing a musical instrument beyond its powers.' Reding: 'You but try, Bateman, to make a bass play quadrilles, and you will see what is meant by taxing an instrument.' Bateman: 'Well, I have heard Lindley play all sorts of quick tunes on his bass, and most wonderful it is.' Reding: 'Wonderful is the right word, it is very wonderful. You say, "How *can* he manage it? It's very wonderful for a bass;" but it is not pleasant in itself. In like manner, I have always felt a disgust when Mr. So-and-so comes forward to make his sweet flute bleat and bray like a haut-bois; it's forcing the poor thing to do what it was never made for.'"²²

In the same mood, when a quartet of Schubert was played to him in March, 1878, the sole remark he let fall was, "Very harmonious and clever, but it does not touch the heart."

In March, 1883, he observed that he missed the minor key in Palestrina, and on our adding that, perhaps, Mendelssohn had too much of it, he went on, "It cuts me to the heart that minor," and so he liked the mixed mode to the Psalm *In exitu Israel*, and was much affected by the slow movements in Beethoven's Ninth Quartet and C minor Symphony, and the Allegretto of the Symphony in A.

I cannot of that music rightly say,
Whether I hear or touch or taste the tones,
Oh, what a heart-subduing melody!²³

There was just that human element about it, so "deeply pathetic," which in the same way made him prefer Euripides to Sophocles, for all the latter's "sweet composure, melodious fulness, majesty and grace."²⁴ And here we may add, that as late as January, 1890, *apropos* of a Greek play for his school, he was as keen and eager as ever about the merits of Euripides, expressed himself as being at a loss to understand the critics invariably preferring Sophocles to the other two, and evidently placed Euripides and Æschylus first and second respectively. A frequently true and natural feeling, whether displayed by the author of the *Bacchæ*, or by the composer of *Fidelio*, evidently almost atoned, in his estimation, for every deficiency.

He writes to his sister, October, 1834: "There is a lady here" (at Tunbridge Wells), "who plays most beautifully. I think I never heard such a touch – why, I cannot make out, for she has not long fingers to be brilliant. So you must set yourself to rival her. It would be interesting to *examine* the causes of expression, which you might easily do. *Strength* of finger is one thing certainly. This lady is not brilliant in the common sense – that is, smart and rattling – but every note is so full-toned, so perfect, that one requires nothing beyond itself. This in Beethoven's effective passages produces a surprising effect. I accompanied her last night and am to do so again to-night."²⁵ He wrote in September, 1865, of a certain boy's progress with the violin: "He plays fluently, so to say; by fluency I mean in time, in tune, and with execution. This is stage one; stage two is eloquence, by which I mean grace, delicacy, and expression. To gain this nothing is better than to accompany his sisters. A boy who always is first fiddle is in danger of artistic faults parallel to those which are implied in the metaphorical sense of the words. When he comes back I think he has had enough of the music-master, and I shall try to make him turn his thoughts to a higher school of music than is suitable to a beginner, but I cannot tell whether he is old enough to take to it. I recollect how slow I was as a boy to like the school of music which afterwards so possessed me that I have to come to think Haydn, in spite of his genius, almost vulgar." And just as Blanco White would seem to have thoroughly initiated Mr. Newman into the mysteries of Beethoven, so did Dr. Newman lead on his boys (as they

²² *Loss and Gain*, p. 284, Sixth Edition, 1874.

²³ *The Dream of Gerontius*.

²⁴ *Essays*, i. 7, Fifth Edit.

²⁵ Mozley, *Corr.* ii. 67.

would say) "to swear by" that master. They might start with Corelli, and go on to Romberg, Haydn, and Mozart: their ultimate goal was Beethoven, and round would come the "Father Superior" with ancient copies of the quintet version of the celebrated septet, and arrangements from the symphonies; nor were the first ten quartets, the instrumental trios, the violin sonatas, and the overtures forgotten. The "Dutchman," with his force and depth, his tenderness and sweetness, was the Cardinal's prime favourite. "We were at the concert," Mrs. Newman writes to him at school, "and fascinated with the Dutchman" (the name he had given to Beethoven to tease his music-master because of the *van* to his name), "and thought of you and your musical party frequently."²⁶ "They tell me," he said in May, 1876, on occasion of hearing at the Latin Play, the *scherzo* and *finale* of the Second Symphony, "that these first two symphonies of Beethoven are not in his style; to me they are Beethoven all over. There is no mistaking that *scherzo*." And again in October, 1877, after a rendering of the *allegretto* of the Eighth Symphony, on our observing that it was like the giant at play, he said: "It is curious you should say that. I used to call him the gigantic nightingale. He is like a great bird singing. My sister remembers my using the expression long ago." And although he betrayed a little doubt as to Beethoven's tone being essentially religious, he was unwilling to hear anything said against him.²⁷ The late Father Caswall, once distracted, while singing High Mass, with Beethoven's Mass in C, half-humorously vented his wrath at recreation against the *Credo*. Said he: "I think that's a condemnable *Credo*." "Oh, I rather liked it," was Father Newman's rejoinder. "More dramatic than reverent," had been the remark made to the latter in September, 1882, by the then Warden of Keble, after the conclusion of the *Mount of Olives* at the Birmingham Festival. The Cardinal said little or nothing at the time, but his affection for Beethoven came out subsequently. "When you come to Beethoven," said he, "I don't say anything about good taste, but he has such wonderful bits here and there." And in the department of *cadenza* and variation he deemed him without an equal.

Distrusting their talent lest it should run away with them, and they neglect the rubrics, Dr. Newman was sensitive over musicians of the day setting to work upon liturgy. Of sorts of liberty taken we have modern examples in Gounod's *Mors et Vita* Oratorio, where *O felix culpa*, &c., is planted in the middle of the *Dies Irae*, and in his *Messe Solennelle*, where *Domine, non sum dignus*, &c., figures as a solo in the *Agnus Dei* (a less objectionable case, the treatment being fortunately devotional). Berlioz, too, in his *Requiem*, introduces before the *Tuba mirum* the words, *Et iterum venturus est judicare vivos et mortuos*. And in a passage where he would appear to be depicting Beethoven's power, after alluding to "the marvellous development which musical science has undergone in the last century," Dr. Newman continues: "Doubtless, here, too, the highest genius may be made subservient to religion," but "it is certain that religion must be alive and on the defensive, for if its servant sleep a potent enchantment will steal over it... If, then, a great master in this mysterious science ... throws himself on his own gifts, trusts its inspirations and absorbs himself in those thoughts which, though they come to him in the way of nature belong to things above nature, it is obvious he will neglect everything else. Rising in his strength he will break through the trammels of words; he will scatter human voices, even the sweetest, to the winds; he will be borne upon nothing else than the fullest flood of sounds which art has enabled him to draw from mechanical contrivances; he will go forth as a giant, as far as ever his instruments can reach, starting from their secret depths fresh and fresh elements of beauty and grandeur as he goes, and pouring them together into still more marvellous and rapturous combinations; and well indeed, and lawfully, while he keeps to that line which is his own; but should he happen to be attracted, as he well may, by the sublimity, so congenial to him, of the Catholic doctrine and ritual, should he engage in sacred themes, should he resolve by means of his art to do honour to the Mass, or the Divine Office – (he cannot have a more pious, a better purpose, and

²⁶ Mozley, *Corr.* i. 19.

²⁷ The late Canon Mozley said that Chopin was "certainly a Manichean; he did not believe in God; he believed in some spirit, not in God;" while "the moral grandeur of Beethoven's genius was always present to him, as, with less force, was also Mendelssohn's: 'They believed in God – their music showed it.'" (*Letters*, p. 353, Edit. 1885.)

religion will gracefully accept what he gracefully offers; but) is it not certain from the circumstances of the case, that he will be carried on rather to use religion than to minister to it, unless religion is strong on its own ground, and reminds him that if he would do honour to the highest of subjects, he must make himself its scholar, must humbly follow the thoughts given him, and must aim at the glory, not of his own gift, but of the Great Giver."²⁸

²⁸ *Idea*, dis. iv. 80, 81. In a Bull of 1749, Pope Benedict the Fourteenth lays great stress on the words being heard and understood, "Curandum est ut verba quæ cantantur plane perfecteque intelligantur," and this is best secured in the unaccompanied chant. In an interesting article of the *Dublin Review* (New Series, vol. ii. January-April, 1864), the effect of official pronouncements on the questions affecting the plain chant and concerted music is thus succinctly summed up: "1. That music, properly so called, may be admitted as well as plain chant. 2. That the music of the church is to possess a certain gravity and to minister to devotion. 3. That instrumental music may be allowed, under certain restrictions."

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