

Morris and Music

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Perhaps the best-remembered quotation of Morris concerning his attitude to music appeared in one of his last letters from Kelmscott Manor to Georgiana Burne-Jones: “though you think I don’t like music, I assure you that the rooks and blackbirds have been a great consolation to me.”¹ It has often been asserted that Morris was insensitive to music. In the above statement, however, he implies that this was not so. In fact, May Morris claimed that her father “had a genuine love of music ... Now and then we have seen him stirred by some slow Beethoven movement”.² And Mackail contended that early church music and English and Italian secular music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries “appealed to him very deeply”.³

From his youth, indeed, Morris indicated a real appreciation of music. In 1849, to his sister Emma, he wrote from school at great length concerning “the anthem on Easter Tuesday” (*Letters*, p. 4), describing the arrangement of voices from full choir to one treble then alternating base and treble. His only criticism of the anthem was that “it was too short”. According to Mackail, Blore’s chapel was being built when Morris arrived at Marlborough and “a trained choir was formed when it was opened in the following autumn”. Mackail continued: “The older church music appealed to him with a force only less than that of mediaeval architecture.” (*Life*, I, 17). Indeed, Mackail believed that “the interest in church festivals and church music” was “highly characteristic” of Morris (*Life*, I, 24). Music was a prominent feature of Morris’s association with Oxford, from nights when “Oakley and an Oriel man entranced us by music” to “Adams who gave us music.”⁴ Together with Burne-Jones, he sang plain-song daily in St. Thomas’s Church, and with Dixon and Price belonged to the Plain-Song Society which “practised regularly in the Music-Room in Holywell” (*Life*, I, 66). Later, when Morris was working in Street’s office, one of the students stuttered; finding the student more confident at singing than speaking, Dixon relates that the staff “chanted to him in Gregorian plainsong through rolls of foolscap.”⁵

In 1855, while touring France with Burne-Jones, Morris wrote to Cormell Price with unabated joy and enthusiasm of Rouen Cathedral. The greatest disappointment to the travellers had been finding that Vespers were only sung on Saturdays and Sundays, not every day:

And weren’t they sung, just. O! my word! on the Sunday especially, when a great deal of the psalms were sung to the Peregrine tone, and then, didn’t they sing the hymns! (*Letters*, p. 14).

Some fourteen years later, accompanying Janey to Bad-Ems, Morris wrote humorously to Philip Webb of “ecclesiastical music” on a different level:

They keep early hours here; the band woke us this morning at 7 with Luther’s Hymn played in thundering style. (*Letters*, p. 27)

Humour to some extent he also later found in Gilbert and Sullivan. Having been to see *The Sorcerer* with the Burne-Joneses, he wrote to Janey:

I am going out to dine with Stopford Brooke to-night, but I fear I shall be irreverently reminded of a parson...by Gilbert which I saw the other night: he, the play-parson, was very funny, but all else I thought dreary stuff enough in spite of Ned. (*Letters*, 102)

Even in the early Oxford days, similar reactions had occurred:

... In the evening to the Opera, to hear Alboni in *Le Prophète*. Jones was enraptured; Morris seemed a good deal bored. (*Life*, I, 72)

There is no doubt that Morris reacted favourably to certain forms of music, and unfavourably to others. In this he simply displayed the same emotional responses which may occur in all of us. Opera did not appeal: it was “the most rococo and degraded of all forms of art” (*Letters*, p. 61). Yet Mackail relates the “great delight” that Morris felt at “a dance with mediaeval music” which was included in Kean’s production of *Richard II*. Morris’s dislike of Wagner’s music is often highlighted. His statement to H. Buxton Forman that Wagner’s “theories on musical matters seem to me as an artist and non-musical man perfectly abominable” (*Letters*, p. 60) has been accepted by many without elaboration. May suggested that Morris’s outburst to Buxton Forman was typical of a “breakfast” conversation she had with her father when “we young folk were in the middle of our Wagner craze” (*Introductions*, p. 328). Thus he did not forbid his children’s favourable response to the music which he himself did not favour. He also had many “long discussions” with Aglaia Coronio after the latter’s return from Bayreuth: one in particular concerned Wagner’s physical interpretation of Fafnir as a “pantomime dragon” and the widely accepted inadequacy of the “Awakening on the Mountain” (*Introductions*, pp. 328–9). Besides “personal outrage” at such details, May claimed that her father could coolly “discuss the artistic principle involved”. Morris believed that it was not possible to balance musical and literary expression equally as Wagner purported to achieve; one discipline must dominate, and a musical composer undoubtedly would sacrifice the literary. Fairy tales or libretti of the calibre of *Don Giovanni* were suitable themes for opera – the “great story of the North was too tremendous to be used so” (*Introductions*, p. 329).

According to May the music that appealed to Morris was “the music of the people”; he would join in with traditional songs such as the ‘Battle of Agincourt’, “humming or murmuring in his tenor voice” (*Introductions*, p. 329). While journeying to Edinburgh in 1886 Morris related how he amused himself “partly with Homer ... and partly with reading a new book which is very interesting, Russian Epic Songs to wit” (*Life*, II, 167). Three years later, in Glasgow, after lecturing on Gothic Architecture, he was obliged to attend “a solemn dinner” of speeches and toasts at the Arts Club and “had to return thanks for Music and Literature, curious conjuncture!”. He obliged by “alluding to the Scotch Ballads and their old tunes” (*Life*, II, 219).

Morris’s own ventures into music were inspired by just such “music of the people”. May relates that his songs, written for various socialist choirs, were “set to well-known tunes”. The ‘measure’ of Morris’s verses would appear to have been set by the original verses, not by the tunes themselves. In the case of ‘The March of the Workers’, set to the tune of ‘John Brown’s body’, May claimed that “some one unluckily furnished my father not with the original words as a guide, but with another set of verses, ... When he found out how much simpler the original John Brown song was, he was rather vexed about it” (*Introductions*, pp. 734–5). Morris wrote with some pride to Janey in 1878:

you will have seen about our music: wasn't it a good idea? ... they set me to write the song, wh: I did on the Monday night. It went down very well, & they sang it well together: they struck up while we were just ready to come onto the platform & you may imagine that I felt rather excited when I heard them begin to tune up: they stopped at the end of each verse and cheered lustily ... (*Letters*, pp. 107–8)

Eight years later he wrote to Jenny of a socialist outing which finished at Dorking with “tea, beer, singing and recitation.” The town thought the group to be “a detachment of the Salvation Army” (*Letters*, p. 256). A similar outing to Dundee was recounted with equal mirth but not quite the same satisfaction:

I was only *part* of the entertainment; music (which if it had been good I should not have objected to) and a recitation from parson's self (which I very much objected to) being part of it also ... (*Introductions*, p. 580)

Violet Hunt once described Morris as a “man who loved a battle shout better than a symphony”.⁶ For years he provided his “battle” music: in 1892 he sent to Bruce Glasier a copy of the latest songbook wherein could be found “some of the old well-worn fellows” (*Letters*, p. 349). After his death the *Daily Chronicle* recognised his musical contribution to the cause:

he became gradually more and more enamoured of a fresh and simple world, romantic indeed, but conceivable; and he ended with songs for socialists, practical march music for the Israelites *in exitu de Aegypto*.⁷

He even tried to enlist Swinburne to write a song: “I mean to be set to music, for singing at meetings of the faithful” (*Letters*, p. 192).

Despite the appeal to Morris of “the music of the people”, it is interesting that he seemed to frown upon music-hall songs. He wrote to Jenny in 1883 of a train trip “up to town” where he had a second class compartment to himself until “2 young mashers (no less) got in at Kingston – such fools they were! and hummed and whistled music-hall tunes” (*Letters*, p. 171). Perhaps his disapproval was politically based: Jack Lindsay has suggested that Morris objected strongly to Disraeli's “whipping up a war-fever” through the new ‘Jingoism’ which was popularised in music-hall song.⁸

Morris also found no pleasure in musical comedy: of one he described the French leading lady as “damned little pink TOAD”, another artist as “a pink pig squealing into a wool-sack.” Of the latter May had heard her voice described as having a “veiled quality” which apparently “did not appeal to our restive critic” (*Introductions*, p. 670). Yet music for entertainment was obviously known and enjoyed by Morris. Such in his Oxford days has already been mentioned. In the Red Lion Square days, at one party given with Burne-Jones, a “piano was borrowed or hired, and old French songs from Wekerlin's *Echos du Temps Passé* were sung.” And at the Red House, there “was a piano in the sitting-room, and in the evenings they sang the old English songs published by Chappell or *Echos du Temps Passé*.”⁹ In 1884 Morris informed Jenny of a visit by Andreas Scheu where the latter “was rather silent; but sang a song to May's accompaniment” (*Letters*, p. 192). May claimed that it was the “mechanical” nature of the piano that “drove him nearly frantic and made people think he really disliked music” (*Introductions*, pp. 329–30). The children were careful not to play unless invited and did not practise if Morris were at home. It was with “glee and

emphasis” that Morris quoted from *Considérant’s ‘Destinée Sociale’* of “the ferocious, the inevitable, the untameable piano” (*Introductions*, p. 330). Yet at evenings organised by the SDF, Bernard Shaw, Annie Besant and Kathleen Ina entertained with piano duets, while Morris and Edward Aveling gave readings. So it was obvious that Morris accepted the pleasure which may be produced by simple accompaniment. Morris himself favoured stringed and woodwind instruments, and also the bagpipes. May related an occasion when Scottish and Italian pipes were under discussion and someone had questioned the inclusion of such “among romantic or beautiful things”. Morris dispatched the argument with the opinion that “among the winds on the hillside it’s one of the most beautiful things in the world” (*Introductions*, p. 330).

Besides his Sunday morning visits to the Burne-Joneses, Mackail points out that for many years Morris regularly dined there on Wednesdays: “there was no music on those evenings ... and he would read aloud” (*Life*, I, 222). With his last illness, however, when he could no longer ‘read aloud’ as he loved to do, he seemed to draw even greater consolation from music. Arnold Dolmetsch brought a pair of virginals to Kelmscott House to play several pieces by sixteenth-century English composers. Morris most liked a pavan and galliard by William Byrd. Mackail relates that Morris “broke into a cry of joy at the opening phrase and after the two pieces had been repeated ... was so deeply stirred that he could not bear to hear any more” (*Life*, II, 334). Dolmetsch himself said of Morris:

He could find no pleasure in piano recitals and big orchestras; but, when he heard the kind of music whose ideals and purposes correspond with the arts he loved, he was profoundly moved. He was ever grateful to me for having filled in his all-embracing mind the place that music alone could fill.¹⁰

Certainly Morris may have put aside music “as not belonging to his work”, but as Mackail has pointed out, this was never from any “want of sensitiveness” (*Life*, I, 300). Morris displayed throughout his entire life an appreciation and enjoyment of music. If he limited the range to which he responded with pleasure, he did no more (or less) than show his humanness.

NOTES

- ¹ Philip Henderson, ed., *The Letters of William Morris*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1950, p. 382. Subsequent references in brackets are to *Letters*.
- ² May Morris, *The Introductions to The Collected Works of William Morris*, Oriole Editions, New York, 1973, p. 329. Subsequent references in brackets are to *Introductions*.
- ³ J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, Vol I, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1899, p. 300. Subsequent references in brackets are to *Life*.
- ⁴ Jack Lindsay, *William Morris*, Constable, London, 1975, pp. 75 and 83.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- ⁶ Esther Meynell, *Portrait of William Morris*, Chapman & Hall, London, 1947, p. 148.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- ⁸ Lindsay, *op. cit.*, p. 213.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 103 and 114.
- ¹⁰ Meynell, *op. cit.*, p. 224.