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Robert Browning and music.

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ROBERT BROWNING AND MUSIC

by

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First Reader

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Second Reader
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Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning was saturated with learning. He inherited a great love for all forms of art, and his interest in all forms of life, thought, circumstance, and knowledge led him to study deeply in these fields of human history. A number of studies have been made of Browning's interest and accomplishment in painting. This is probably due to the very large number of poems written by him dealing with art or artists. But little has been written in regard to his musical background and the musical references in his poetry. Although these are fewer than his references to painting, they give evidence that the poet was not only a worshiper at music's shrine, but was also firmly convinced that music alone could penetrate deeply into the realm where language cannot go. Music was, then, to his mind, one of the important forces of expression.

Since the influence of music on Browning seems to have been great, and since he believed its influence on the world was of the first importance, it is the purpose of this study to determine several facts regarding Browning and music.
First, we shall try to discover what the background of musical training was -- just how deeply did the boy Browning venture into the study of musical technique; what kind of a performance he was able to give himself and how sound was his judgment of other's playing. Next, we will see just how important a part music played in his life after his years of training. And last, the effect that this musical training and association with music had on his poetry may be shown by references to ideas concerning music which he expressed in his works. Perhaps in the exploration of these questions we shall also be able to discover a few facts about Browning's preferences in music and the musical world of his day.
Chapter II
HIS MUSICAL EDUCATION

Robert Browning was very fortunate in being a member of a family where his artistic talents and appreciation were encouraged and developed. He loved all the arts. Music, painting, sculpture, architecture -- they all brought him great pleasure and inspiration; but of all these his earliest and greatest appreciation was for music. All through his life he held the belief that music was the greatest, the most sublime, of the arts. He expressed this idea many times in his poetry, but it is expressed the most perfectly in Abt Vogler when he says:

"For think, had I painted the whole, Why there it had stood, to see, nor the process so wonder­worth: Had I written the same, made verse -- still, effect proceeds from cause, Ye know why the forms are fair, ye hear how the tale is told; It is all triumphant art, but art in obedience to laws; Painter and poet are proud in the artist-list enrolled:-- But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can, Existent behind all laws that made them and, lo, they are! And I knew not if, save in this, such a gift is allowed to man, That out of three sounds he can make, not a fourth sound, but a star." 1

This delight in and admiration for music lasted all his life, for in his later years an acquaintance -- a young lady -- said, "I don't know whether you care for music, Mr. Browning,

Browning, Robert: Abt Vogler, lines 43 - 53.
but if you do, my mother is having some on Monday." And he replied, half in jest but half meaning what he said, "Why, my dear, I care for nothing else."²

His earliest musical memories were connected with his mother, from whom he inherited his musical talents. For this reason, too, his interest in music was set apart from his interest in the other arts; for he seems to have caught his enthusiasm for all the other arts from his father, but his love of music came from Mrs. Browning who was a "sympathetic and accomplished musician".³ "Before his hand could stretch an octave"⁴ he listened to his mother playing at dusk, and at times her music moved him so greatly that he would rush into the room where she played and, crying, would urge her to play some particularly well-loved composition again and again. One of the piano solos of which he was particularly fond was the Grand March in C Major by Charles Avison. This march impressed his young mind so indelibly that seventy years later he still remembered vividly his youthful emotions upon hearing the march, and these were recorded in his

³. Griffin & Minchin, page 15.
⁴. Griffin & Minchin, page 16.
Parleying with Charles Avison. Then, in memory of his early musical love, he printed the music of this long-forgotten march at the end of his Parleying.

Charles Avison was important in Browning's musical education for other reasons than for this march. The Browning library was rich in literature of all kinds, and Robert's education was largely acquired by reading these books. Among these books were two copies of Avison's Essays on Musical Expression. This "little book", referred to in Browning's Parleyings, discusses the classical period in English music, the music of Handel's day; and it compares the music of Handel and his great rival, Buononcini. Not only does the book take up the subject of Handel's music in great detail, but it comments on most of the preceding English composers back to Palestrina. A further knowledge of these musicians from the past was probably gained by reading Sir John Hawkin's History of Music, the most popular music history of the day, and a book which was most certainly in the library of the elder Browning.5

But Robert Browning's musical education was not the irregular training which he received in other fields. As his interest in music developed and became more and more evident,

his father saw that his training in it was thorough and comprehensive. To make certain that Robert's study of music was the best possible, two instructors were engaged by Mr. Browning. It was to these two men, Abel and Relfe, that Robert Browning owed his excellent foundation in technical performance and general understanding of music.

Abel, a student of the great Moscheles, was his teacher in technique. He was a young man at the time, enthusiastic about the theory of playing of his master, Moscheles, and managed to impart a portion of that enthusiasm to his pupil. Abel was not only young, but was an amiable individual whom Browning liked immensely. Later he was fond of telling one particular anecdote about his former teacher. As an illustration of an amazing climax he wrote to Dr. F. J. Furnival on August 31, 1887; "A climax equalled by my old pianoforte master, Abel: said he, 'Yes, I am in love. It destroys my appetite, interferes with my sleep, and considerably breaks in upon my practising.'"6

More important than Abel, however, in his influence on the poetry of Browning, was John Relfe who instructed Browning in harmony and the rules of music-writing. Relfe was one of the most eminent teachers of music theory in his day. He was also a composer and the author of The Principles of Harmony, an intricate explanation of Thorough-Bass. Relfe claimed

to teach all his pupils "not only Thorough Bass, but the whole arena of the science, so as completely to analyze any regular composition." It was due to the influence of John Relfe that Browning understood so thoroughly the techniques of music -- an understanding which made it possible for him to discuss, with perfect confidence in the accuracy of his technical references, lines like the following:

"Give me the keys, I feel for the common chord again,
Sliding by semitones till I sink to the minor -- yes,
And I blunt it into a ninth, and I stand on alien ground,
Surveying awhile the heights I rolled from into the deep;
Which, hark, I have dared and done, for my resting-place is found,
The C Major of this life." 8

or again

"What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished,
Told them nothing? Those suspensions, those solutions -- 'Must we die?'
Those commiserating sevenths -- 'Life might last! We can but try!" 9

Browning said later in life that he had good reason to know so much about the technical aspects of music, for "I was studying the Grammar of music," he said, "when most

9. Browning, R: A Toccata of Galuppi's
10. Quoted by Griffin & Minchin, p. 16, from the Manchester Examiner and Times, December 18, 1889.
children were learning the multiplication table, and I know what I am talking about when I speak of music." And in all his poetry, correspondence, and records of his conversation, there is only one occasion to be found when he ever made an error in reference to music. That was in a letter to Albert H. Orne on November 12, 1881. Mr. Orne had tried to illustrate some of Mrs. Browning's poetry and asked for a picture of a part of one of her poems saying "Experience, like a pale musician, holds a dulcimer of patience in his hand." Browning wrote in explanation:

"I'd take it, patience holds a dulcimer in his hand; the left one -- propping it (as a lyre might be managed) against his side. There are many strings to it, and one hand suffices to evoke 'harmonies' enough by help of the fingers and thumb. Paganini used the guitar for this purpose, -- so he said." 11

But Browning was wrong, and he acknowledged his error by again writing:

"I have no doubt the dulcimer was such an instrument as your authorities describe. My own most vivid notion of it must be caught from Coleridge and his 'Abyssinian Maid.'" -- So Peccavimus!" 12

Browning's mastery of the techniques of composition was not only demonstrated in the technical references of his poetry, but also in the composition of numerous pieces. We have record of his setting to music such songs as Donne's Go and Catch a Falling Star, Hood's I Will Not Have the Mad

Clytie, and Peacock's The Mountain Sheep are Sweeter.\textsuperscript{13}

He looked at them later with a critical eye and, deciding they were not of a quality worthy of preservation, he destroyed them. In 1837 he composed a crooning measure for Strafford's children to sing in his play, and it is probably true that he occasionally wrote stirring songs -- songs like the Cavalier Tunes -- for those who heard his early musical compositions said that all his music was very spirited.\textsuperscript{14}

Not only was he a well-trained musician, but he was a better than average musician naturally, for he had a very good musical ear. This may be seen by an incident that happened later in his life. In 1834 he had made a visit to Russia, during which he had been very interested in the folk music of that country. Half a century later he met Prince Gagarin in Venice and began a conversation with him about Russia. For an hour they talked of Russian folk music and Browning sang in a low voice the various national airs he had picked up by ear in 1834, commenting on some of them. The Prince was amazed and exclaimed at Browning's musical memory. His own ear was exceptional, but he said that Browning's was "better than my own, on which I have hitherto piqued myself not a little."\textsuperscript{15}

John Relfe's more important contribution -- that is, in so far as the effects seen in his poetry are concerned --

\textsuperscript{13} Orr, Mrs. Sutherland: Life and Letters of Robert Browning, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1891, page 41.

\textsuperscript{14} Orr: Life and Letters, page 43.
was in the knowledge he gave Browning of music and musicians. Ralfe's theories were based on those of the Abbe Vogler, as the compiler of the *Biographie Universelle des Musiciens* (Paris, 1875) notes; "La base de ce systeme est puisee dans les livres de l'abbe Vogler et de Schicht." Nor was Vogler the only great musician with whom Browning became acquainted because of his instructor, Ralfe. Browning's knowledge of the great and lesser names in the world of music was probably a result of the teaching of this man. And that he did have a thorough knowledge of musicians we know; for he refers to Hudl, Greene, Pepusch, Vogler, Buononcini, Galuppi, Handel, Purcell, Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Schumann, and many other great and small makers of music. DeVane says "in spite of the technical character of his books, Ralfe was cognizant of the emotional qualities of music, of the highly individualized styles of the different periods -- all of which must have been highly interesting to the young Browning."16

This instruction of Ralfe's and Abel's was supplemented by Browning's own reading -- and he was a constant and intelligent reader -- of the books in his father's library. Charles Avison's book we have already mentioned; but he must have read much more widely than one or two books of music history, for his great interest and his love of both music


and reading would probably combine to lead him on and on in literature dealing with music. We do know that he read a French work by Claude le Jeune. He seems to have been especially impressed by this work, for he comments on it in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett, and he arrived at an important idea concerning music as a result of reading this work. The letter is dated March 7, 1846, and it reads:

"For music, I made myself melancholy just now with some 'Concertos for the Harpsichord by Mr. Handel'—brought home by my father the day before yesterday; what were light, modern things once! Now, I read not very long ago a French memoir of Claude le Jeune called in his time the Prince of Musicians, — no Phoenix — the unapproachable wonder to all time — that is, twenty years after his death about — and to this pamphlet was prefixed as motto this startling axiom — 'In music, the Beau Ideal changes every thirty years' — Well, is not that true? The Ideal, mind, changes — the general standard ... so that it is no answer that a single air, such as many one knows, may strike as freshly as ever — they were not according to the Ideal of their own time — just now, they drop in the ready ear, — and next hundred years, who will be the Rossini?"

So Browning's musical education started with the dawning of an appreciation for music while listening to his mother, was made technically sound by his two excellent teachers, Abel and Relfe, and was rounded out and broadened by his own reading from the library of his father. He used it not only as a basis for a thorough understanding of music, and not only

as a well-rounded training for performance himself, but he wrote small compositions; and at one time he composed fugues and even contemplated writing an opera! 18

With his youth, Browning's formal training in music ended, but his interest in the art grew rather than diminished. From his earliest days when he would steal closer to listen to his mother playing until the days just before his death when he charmed his friends with his improvisations and musical memories, he remained a devoted worshiper at the shrine of music.

18. Griffin & Minchin, page 16.
With such a background of musical education it is natural that Browning the young man would find ready time for musical activities, and it is also natural that among his friends there should be many who were bound to him by ties of mutual musical interests. He was a friendly person, fond of many people, and a great lover of all sorts of social gatherings. London at this time was in the midst of a vogue of musical teas in the afternoon, musical gatherings in the morning, and musical parties in the evening. At these Browning was a popular guest.

Perhaps the most important of his friends in the world of music were the Flower sisters. They were very talented young ladies of great charm and interest. Robert Browning became acquainted with them through a friend, Miss Sturtevant, and soon was a great admirer of them and a constant caller in their house. Sarah and Eliza Flower shared with Browning talent and judgment in both music and literature. Sarah is probably the better known -- she is the author of the well-known hymn, "Nearer, My God, to Thee", and of a great deal of sacred verse. But it was Eliza that Browning especially admired. She set her sister's poetry to music, and the two sisters sang together delightfully, Their voices perfectly harmonizing with each other.¹ Browning constantly denied

¹ Orr, Life, page 135
that any particular woman inspired Pauline, but it seems probable that he had Eliza Flower in mind when he wrote the poem. Eliza Flower not only returned his admiration, but felt a somewhat warmer feeling for the young poet -- her junior by many years -- and she wrote to him until her death in 1846. Both the Flower sisters seem to have been influenced in their verse and music by Browning. Sarah wrote to Fox in November, 1827, about her mental state at the time she wrote "Nearer, My God, to Thee":

"My mind has been wandering a long time . . . The cloud has come over me gradually, and I did not discover the darkness in which my soul was shrouded until, in seeking to give light to others, my own gloomy state became too settled to admit of doubt. It was in answering Robert Browning that my mind refused to bring forward argument, turned recreant, and sided with the enemy."²

And although Browning may have been the cause of Miss Eliza's remaining single, he most certainly helped and inspired her music by his admiration and praise of it. Just before her death in 1846 he wrote to her, expressing this feeling:

"As for me, I never had another feeling than entire admiration for your music -- entire admiration -- I put it apart from all other English music I know."³

Arnould, the very good friend of Browning, introduced him to Henry Chorley, Arnould's neighbor in Victoria square.

² Griffin & Minchin: page 46.
³ Orr: Life, page 135.
That Chorley became a good friend of Browning may be seen by the fact that he, with Arnould, was a trustee for the Browning marriage. Chorley's bachelor residence was noted by all who were in Browning's social set for its good music. Chorley was not a particularly gifted performer himself, but he loved music and had discriminating taste in it. "Mendelssohn, Moscheles, Liszt, Ernst, David, Batta, and almost all the great instrumentalists of the day performed there at various times."4

About this same time Browning found among his own relatives fellow-spirits. His cousins James, John, and George Silverthorne he had known since childhood, but their appreciation of each other's society did not develop until their later youth. Now they found not only common family interests to deepen their friendship, but also a common interest in music. Browning spent many evenings at the opera with his cousins, especially with James who was his favorite. When James died in 1852, Browning wrote May and Death, in which he refers to these occasions of "warm moon-births and long evening-ends" when they walked home arm-in-arm after an evening spent at the opera.5


5. Griffin & Minchin; page 55.
But Browning's musical life was gradually interrupted by his love for Elizabeth Barrett. Their minds met with harmony on all subjects save spiritualism and music. Although Elizabeth did not have the background of training in the arts that Robert had enjoyed, she enthusiastically set about to learn and appreciate them -- all except music. So, toward the end of his stay in England, Browning spent more time with his returned interest in painting, doubtless due in part to the influence of Miss Barrett. Still his letters to Elizabeth before their marriage are full of references to music, but she seemed unable to share his understanding of that art.6 And with their marriage and flight to Italy the concerts, operas, musical parties, talks with the Flower sisters, evenings at Chorley's, and association with the Silverthornes were all left behind. There was no piano in their Italian residences for a number of years; and there is evidence to believe that, famed as Italy is for its opera, the quality of the performances did not measure up to Brownings's standards. At least a passage in Bishop Blougram's Apology would seem to indicate that such was the case.

"Like Verdi, when, at his worst opera's end
(The thing they gave at Florence -- what's its name?)
While the mad houseful's plaudits near outbang
His orchestra of salt-box, tongs and bones,
He looks through all the roaring and the wreaths
Where sits Rossini patient in his stall."

But there were a few opportunities for good music in this period of Browning's life. In 1847 he and Mrs. Browning made a visit to Vallombrosa, and he found opportunity while there to play upon the famous organ in the monastery chapel -- an organ upon which Milton was believed to have played two centuries before. One of his friends described the occasion:

"Mrs. Browning was still too much of an invalid to walk, but she sat under the great trees upon the lawn-like hillsides near the convent, or in the seats of the dusky convent chapel, while Robert Browning at the organ chased a fugue, or dreamed out upon the keys a faint throbbing toccata of Galuppi."  

In 1851 Mrs. Browning writes of living "like a Grand Duchess, and going to the opera in the evening at fivepence halfpenny;" and again of going to the Venetian opera house and of drinking coffee in the Piazza San Marco in a setting of "music and stars". So even though his wife did not share his intense love for music, Browning probably did hear it occasionally during his years in Italy. And perhaps the operas in Venice were better than the ones in Florence.

Then there were the musical gatherings in the home of Adelaide Sartoris in Rome, to which Browning went weekly whenever he was in that city. She had been a prima donna

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in grand opera, and the music heard in her weekly musicales was of the best kind.

Not such good music, perhaps, but music nevertheless, was heard at the home of Frederick Tennyson in Florence in 1852. Browning was interested in him first because he was the brother of the poet Tennyson, the friend of the Brownings, and they were gracious to him for the sake of his brother. But a friendship soon sprang up based on a genuine liking for the man himself. Browning wrote: "I have a new acquaintance here, much to my taste. Tennyson's elder brother, a very earnest, simple, and truthful man, with many admirable talents." One of those "admirable talents" was music. He had a large villa, with an income to match, and it is said that he would sit in the hall of his villa surrounded by forty fiddlers.

In 1857 the Brownings managed to acquire a piano for their apartments in the Casa Guidi. Browning was glad for this acquisition because it made renewed practice possible. It also made it possible for him to start his son, Peni, in the same thorough musical training which he had had himself. Only Pen's teacher both in technique and theory was his father. Peni Browning inherited his father's love for music.

and poetry, and like his father he started writing both while very young. He wrote short poems and then he would sing them to his mother who would fondly write them down and show them proudly to Browning. Pen was also typical of a small boy with musical potentialities, for he loved to beat on drums or any other noise-maker handy in accompaniment to music. This habit amused his mother, but sometimes it caused great irritation to his father's sensitive musical ear. Upon one occasion Robert Browning sat down at the piano for some serious practice when Pen appeared with his drums, with the evident intention of joining in the music. His father was somewhat displeased and broke off his practicing, preparing to leave the room. "OH!" exclaimed Mrs. Browning, "you are going away, and he has brought his three drums to accompany you upon." She probably could not understand her husband's inability to practice accompanied by three drums, and would gladly have endured the noise for the sake of Pen's pleasure. But "if he did not play the piano to the accompaniment of Pen's drums, Browning played piano duets with him as soon as the boy was old enough to take part in them, and devoted himself to his instruction in music."  

Aside from these few occasions when Browning found


opportunity to indulge in a small bit of musical pleasure, his years in Italy were devoid of music. He attempted to compensate for this loss by an increased interest in other forms of art, but there can be little doubt that Browning's musical nature was starved in Italy. That this was true can be seen by the fact that with his return to London he threw himself into a busy program of concerts and operas, as if to make up for all the music he had missed during his absence. These next few years were the most active musically of all his life. His love of music "had now grown into a passion, from the indulgence of which he derived, as he always declared, some of the most beneficent influences of his life. It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that he attended every important concert of the season, whether isolated or given in a course. There was no engagement possible, or actual, which did not yield to the discovery of its clashing with the day and hour fixed for one of these."¹²

He made many new friends at this time, and with them he kept busy attending all the musical activities of London. Always popular, now he seemed to be more so than ever, and he had company wherever he went. In 1867 he wrote to Miss Isabelle Blagden --

"A fortnight ago I was talking about Rubenstein (he is, definitely, a marvelous player, beyond what I remember of Liszt, and immeasurably

¹² Orr: Life, page 303.
superior to everybody else) -- a lady said 'and now it is too late to hear him.' I said 'No -- I know he will be playing at Erard's, quite alone, this afternoon.' -- 'Will you take me?' 'And me,' said one sister. 'And me,' said a third. So we all started: And I think Rubinstein was a little surprised as they sailed in, -- the three most lovely women in London. He played divinely." 13

A new friend, Miss Egerton-Smith, became his constant companion to these concerts. She lived a rather secluded life, seeing only those people in whose society she found great pleasure, and going out only for a few trips into the country and for the concerts which she so greatly enjoyed. She would call for Browning in her carriage and together they would ride to the concert, discussing the virtuosity of the artist they were about to hear. Sometimes Browning's sister, who lived with him, would accompany them; sometimes they would go alone. But they greatly increased one another's enjoyment of the music they heard, for each was a well-trained and sensitive artist. Miss Egerton-Smith became a very dear friend of the Brownings, brother and sister. She spent several vacations with them in the quiet English countryside, and Browning dedicated La Saisiaz to her. Her death was a great shock to him, and with her death his intense interest in music also died. He said that "a first appearance of Joachim or Sarasate, a first concert of Richter or Henschel

or Halle" at which he formerly appeared without fail no longer held much appeal for him. 14

During the last years of Browning's life his musical activity was greatly lessened. This was not only because of Miss Egerton-Smith's death, but also because his growing fame brought increasing demands for public appearances. He was growing older and all his strength was needed to continue such a strenuous round of activity as that in which he now took part. But occasionally he found a few moments to play his beloved piano or to indulge in some musical reminiscences with a few close friends. During his last visit to Italy, in the last months of his life, there are two special musical events mentioned. He went to Chambery where he visited Les Charmettes and found an old harpsichord upon which he played Rousseau's Dream. And in Rossini's theatre in Venice he assisted in the performance of Barbier of Paisello. Wagner was present at the performance and the two great exponents of dramatic art -- in music and in poetry -- briefly met. 15 Browning met not only Wagner but also Clara Schumann and Joachim in these years, and Joachim became a fairly good friend of the aged poet.

At Asolo during the last few months of his life, the friends of Browning remember him playing in the home of

his friend, Mrs. Bronson. She had obtained a spinet especially for his enjoyment, and he played on it all the old-time melodies which he remembered from his youth. He played in a dreamy and nostalgic fashion many quaint little tinkling melodies. It is fitting that the end of his life was so like its beginning -- full of peace and enjoyment of quiet music played at dusk upon the piano.

He was buried in Westminster Abbey on December 31, 1889, and the music played at the ceremony was a new setting of Mrs. Browning's poem "The Sleep."
Chapter IV

MUSICAL REFERENCES IN HIS POETRY

Although Browning has written more poetry about painting than about its sister art, music, his poetry is rich in references to music. It would be strange if this were not true; for he himself was so fond of music, and he believed it to be so noble an art, that he could hardly have escaped mention of it in his writing. The poems which deal wholly with music are Abt Vogler, A Toccata of Galuppi's, Master Huppe, and the Parleying with Charles Avison. But many other of his works contain references to music. At the very beginning of his writing, in 1833, when he published Pauline anonymously, he had established in his mind an idea of the place of music among the arts; and he proclaimed that idea in the poem —

"For music, (which is earnest of a heaven,
Seeing we know emotions strange by it,
Not else to be revealed) is like a voice,
A low voice calling fancy, as a friend,
To the green woods in the gay summertime:
And she fills all the way with dancing shapes
Which have made painters pale, and they go on
Till stars look at them and winds call to them
As they leave life's path for the twilight world." 1

Browning always found that music called up for him "dancing shapes", recreating the world in which the music

1. lines 365 - 374.
was composed. So in the *Toccata of Galuppi's* the music called to life the men and women who first danced to it. In this passage from *Pauline* Browning also expresses the idea that he had been so impressed with in the French memoir of Claude le Jeune -- the idea that the fashions of music change, that musicians lose popularity and "leave life's path for the twilight world where the dead gather."

Soon after *Pauline* was published, Browning wrote *Paracelsus*, and again he expresses the idea that only music can

"perfect and consummate all,
Even as a luminous haze links star to star,
I would supply all chasms with music, breathing
Mysterious motions of the soul, no way
To be defined save in strange melodies."

He repeats over and over in various poems this idea that only by music can certain feelings be expressed, and for that reason he believed it to be the supreme expression of the soul. Painting fell short of this greatness because it was recorded on paper for all to see whenever they wished, but music could only be understood and enjoyed when it was performed; and since each performance was different, and each listener heard differently, it spoke to the soul more directly. Even words -- and Browning fully appreciated their power -- must reach a point when they can express no more, but music speaks even when voices must be stilled. In the poem "A Serenade at the Villa" Browning speaks of the power of verse which can be helped by the addition of music, but even this combination fails and music alone
carried best the message of the serenader.

"What they coud my words expressed,
Oh my love, my all, my one!
Singing helped the verses best,
And when singing's best was done,
To my lute I left the rest."

It is natural that the poems written in Italy should
deal mainly with painting, and that the years between 1861
and 1877, years which were full of musical activities,
should be rich in musical references. These were the years
when Browning spent so many enjoyable evenings at the
concerts and operas of London. So we find in Balaustine's
Adventure, Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Fifine at the
Fair, and Red Cotton Night-Cap Country many musical terms
and illustrations. It was during these years that he wrote
his finest poem dealing with music, Abt Vogler. Perhaps
we can understand just how much music meant to the poet
only by going to his verse, and it is the poetry of these
years that reveals his complete thoughts on the subject.
We will seek to understand Browning and music, then, by
referring to these several poems in turn and looking in them
for a key to him.

Master Hurfues of Saxe-Gotha was an imaginary composer,
but he might easily be any one of a great many musicians
who lived and composed in the days of classical music --
about the time of Bach or a little before. An organist is
speaking, talking to the composer of the fugue he has just
performed, while he makes some necessary repairs on his
organ before leaving it for the night. As he works on his
organ he imagines that he can see in the shadows among the
organ pipes the face of Master Hugué drawn in musical
figures -- a "brow ruled like a score", eyes like two large
black notes, and a straight nose that might be the bar
between two measures; and to this ghostly figure he talks.

"Hist, but a word, fair and soft!
Forth and be judged, Mast Hugues!
Answer the question I've put you so oft:
What do you mean by your mountainous fugues?

Then follows a clever description by Browning of the old
contrapuntal style of composition which followed strict
rules and resulted in uninspired music -- Bach was a notable
exception. The fugue first states its themes in the various
voices, then it weaves them together in an intricate
design of sound by the use of inversions, modulations and
other devices clearly stated in the rules of counterpoint.
Browning cleverly gives the feeling of this type of music,
and at the same time he demonstrates the thorough knowledge
of the rules of harmony which he learned under Relfe.

"First you deliver your phrase --
Nothing profound, that I see . . .
Answered no less, where no answer needs be:
Off start the Two on their ways."

So the two themes of the fugue are set forth. But they
must be intertwined with many more --

"Straight must a third interpose,
Volunteer needlessly help;
In strides a fourth, a fifth thrusts in his nose,
So the cry's open, the kennel's a-yelp,
Arguments hot to the chase."
The various themes become so complicated, chase each other round and round so much, that the organist is reminded of a huge spider web, intricately spun -- but "Where's music, the dickens?" It seems to the organist that his playing of the fugue which caused him so much hard work and wore out three boys pumping the bellows was all for nothing and that Hugues' music would be appealing only to the deaf. All the carefully written contrapuntal of Hugues, even if it be a "mountain in labor," seems empty and even ridiculous when compared with the simpler, more exalted music of earlier composers.

"Hugues! I advise mea paena
(Counterpoint glares like a Gorgon)
Bid one, Two, Three, Four, Five clear the arenal!
Say the word, straight I unstop the full organ,
Blare out the mode Palestrina.

It is rather interesting to note, in connection with Browning's criticism of Master Hugues' fugue, that of all the classical composers, the only one of which he spoke in enthusiastic terms was Handel. And Handel seldom composed the complicated fugues in the style of Master Hugues. Less intricate music setting forth noble but simple themes attracted Browning. In the "Boy and the Angel" he notes that

"Theocrite sang a simple Praise God."

In Balaustion's Adventure he once again feels the
power of music to recreate lost characters and bring back the world of the composer.

"Who hears music, feels his solitude Peopled at once -- for how count hearbeat plain Unless a company, with hearts which beat, Come close to the musician, seen or no?"

And once again he demonstrates his knowledge of musical construction when he notes that a chord based on a minor -- on the seventh note of the minor scale, for instance -- may add another note a third beneath it and be the dominant seventh chord which leads into the tonic of the major scale.

"And so some long last moan Of a minor suddenly is propped beneath By note which, new-struck, turns the wail that was, Into a wonder and a triumph."

Again in Fifine at the Fair Browning refers back to the instruction he received from John Relfe and illustrates his poem with a rather technical discussion.

"And music: what? that burst of pillared cloud by day And pillared fire by night, was product must we say, Of modulating just; by enharmonic change, -- The augmented sixth resolved, -- from out the straighter range Of D Sharp Minor, -- leap of disimprisoned thrall, -- Into thy light and life, D Major natural?"

He displays a feeling for the moods created by different keys, and he recognizes the enharmonic method of writing B flat instead of the proper A sharp.  

2. This is the modulation to which he was referring.
This poem also contains one of Browning's finest passages in praise of music: --

"Up with thy fine free force, oh Music, that canst thrid, 
Electrically win a passage through the lid 
Of earthly sepulchre, our words may push against, 
Hardly transpire as thou! Not dissipate, 
thou deignst 
So much as tricksily elude what words attempt; 
To heave away i' the mass, and let the soul, exempt, 
From all that vapoury obstruction, view, instead 
Of glimmer underneath, a glory overhead."

And even as music has overtones, hardly perceptible to the human ear but vibrating far above the obvious chord; so Browning thinks of the common life with reverberating notes unrecognized by those who think they hear.

"For this is just the time 
The place, the mood in you and me, when all things chime. 
Clash forth life's common chord, whence, list how there ascend 
Harmonies far and faint, till our perceptions end, -- Reverberating notes whence we construct the scale 
Embracing what we know and feel and are!"

Therefore since

"Thought hearkens after speech, while no speech may evince 
Feeling like music"

Browning tries to go back to the feelings of a dead musician

3. Fifine at the Fair.
and awakens his ideas to express his own. So the playing of Schumann's Carnival carries him back to a Fair in Venice and the people who were present at that fair.

"I somehow played the piece: remarked on each old theme; saw how food o' the soul, the stuff that's made To furnish man with thought and feeling is purveyed Substantially the same from age to age."

He enjoys the soothing calm of a composition written in flats --

"the sweet monotony of those Three keys, flat, flat, and flat, never a sharp at all."

but finds the technical difficulty of Schumann's composition rather trying and wonders

"what if, wrist were numb; And overtense the muscle, abductor of the thumb, Taxed by those tenths and twelfths unconsocnable stretch?"

But in spite of the difficulty of the composition, he finds that it is still better than speech, for

"Thought hankers after speech, while no speech may evince Feeling like Music."

All the ideas expressed by Browning in his various poems dealing with music are summed up and restated in the poem which is not only the best of these poems, but in a sense their climax; -- Abt Vogler.

The abbe Vogler was a musician of the late 18th Century, a famous organist and teacher. His students included many of the great names of the music world, among
them Carl Maria von Weber, who was indebted to Vogler for his knowledge of folk music -- a knowledge he used to write his delightful melodies later. Meyerbeer was also Vogler's pupil. Georg Joseph Vogler made many simplifications in the pipe organ, which resulted in a portable organ about nine feet in height, depth, and breadth; and on this instrument he gave his famous organ recitals. Browning knew of Vogler through Relfe and through his reading in his father's library, and it is on this portable organ that Vogler has been improvising when Browning's poem opens. The musician wishes that his music might be permanent, not doomed to perish as all music does.

"Would it might tarry like his, the beautiful building of mine,
This which my keys in a crowd pressed and importuned to raise!"

he says, thinking of the temple of Solomon. Then Browning contrasts the rational processes of other arts with the divine creative process of music, expressing his life-long belief that music is the greatest of the arts. He finds that God is near to musicians, and gives a divine revelations of His truths to them. In the last part of the poem Browning uses his knowledge of the technical phases of

4. lines 41 - 56.
5. lines 81 - 88.
music when he traces the modulation from the improvisation of Vogler back to the tonic -- the key of C Major.

"Give me the keys. I feel for the common chord again, sliding by semitones, till I sink to the minor -- yes, And I blunt it into a ninth, and I stand on alien ground, Surveying awhile the heights I roll'd from into the deep; Which, hark, I have dared and done, for my resting-place is found, The C Major of this life."

So when Abt Vogler's improvising is finished, he must gradually modulate back to the very ordinary key of C. Browning believed that just so although there were a few to whom God whispered in the ear, all must come back down to the common chord again.

Probably Browning's most complete statement of his thoughts about music is in the Parleying with Charles Avison. This poem might almost be called Browning's musical autobiography, for in it he traces his ideas and experiences in connection with music from the earliest days when he remembered his mother playing the Grand March of Avison. All these musical reminiscences arise when he thinks of the month of March -- it announced

"I verily believe, the dead and gone Name of a music-maker, one of such In England as did little or did much, But, doing had their day once. Avison! He tells about his impressions of his mother's playing Avison's March -- times when it

"Did veritably seem to grow, expand, And greaten up to title as, unchecked, Dream-marchers marched, kept marching, slow and sure,
In time, to tune, unchangeably the same,
From nowhere into nowhere — out they came,
Onward they passed, and in they went."

Although the music caught the fancy of the young boy,
there was nothing complicated or intricate about it —
nothing that might remind one of Master Hugue's fugues —
rather it was very simple; the key was Browning's
"common chord" — C Major.

"No lure of novel modulation picked the flat
Forthright persisting melody, — no hint
That discord, sound asleep beneath the flint,
Struck."

But in spite of its simplicity there was something
wonderful about this march to the young boy; something so
wonderful that seventy years later he remembers the
composition clearly and comments on the might

"Of quietude's immutability,
That somehow coldness gathered warmth, well nigh
Quickened — which could not be! — grew burning-
bright
With fife-shriek, cymbal clash and trumpet blare,
To drum accentuation: pacing turned
Striding, and striding grew gigantic, spurned
At last the narrow space twixt earth and air,
So shook me back into my sober self".

The spell of the march carries him into a world of music
and reminds him of the past — not only his own, but that
of many musicians long since dead and gone.

"The March had set me down
There whence I plucked the measure."

He comments specifically on the simple pattern of the
march. The two basic keys for every musical composition
are the chords of the tonic and the dominant -- the chords
based on the first and fifth notes of the scale. All
simple children's compositions are written around these
two chords; Avison's March was, too.

"The key
Was -- should not memory play me false -- well C.
Ay, with the Greater Third, in Triple Time,
Three crotchets to the bar: no change, I grant,
Except from Tonic down to Dominant."

So indelibly had the music been impressed on the mind of
the boy Browning, that he remembered not only the melody
of the march, but also the key and the time -- 3/4.
The music takes him back from today

"And today's music-manufacturers -- Brahms,
Wagner, Dvorak, Liszt, -- to where -- trumpets, shawms
Show yourselves joyful! -- Handel reigns -- supreme?
By no means! Buononcini's work is theme
For fit laudation of the impartial theme."

He remembers the ancient feud between the followers of
Handel and Buononcini. It has almost been forgotten because
of the much more lasting fame of Handel, but in the days
when the two composers worked it was the most important fact
of the musical world. Browning also recalls Geminiani
and Pepusch. The music makes these long-dead men seem
real. It recreates an ancient world --

"Hear Avison! He tenders evidence
That music in his day as much absorbed
Heart and soul then as Wagner's music now."

6. Shawms were instruments used in the eighteenth century
and before. They were wind instruments, played with a
reed, somewhat similar to our modern oboe.
Thoughts of the musicians whose names he learned while studying under his old music masters reminds him of his teacher "Great John Relfe, Master of mine, learned redoubtable," who taught him so much about the composers of his own and other days. He seems to feel that Avison's music is nearly forgotten and the same fate awaits more recent men -- perhaps even the great Wagner.

"And yet -- and yet -- whence comes it that "O Thou" Sighed by the soul at Eve to Hesperus -- Will not again take wing and fly away (Since fatal Wagner fixed it fast for us.)"

He still recalls his early belief, first discovered in the French memoir of Claude le Jeune, that the Beau Ideal changes every thirty years; yet, whether it changes or not, music is still the supreme art because

"I state it thus; There is no truer truth obtainable By man than comes of music."

and again

"How we feel, hard and fast as what we Know -- This were the prize and is the puzzle! -- which Music essays to solve . . . . All arts endeavor this, and she the most Attains thereto."

Music, he feels, is greater because it deals with greater truths, comes nearer the soul of man than the other; but even music fails because it is not permanent. Poetry is a good conveyor of emotion. Painting expresses the

7. Browning was referring to "O Thou Sublime Sweet Evening Star" from Tannhäuser.
"intermixtures" of life, but music outdoes them both --

"Dredging deeper yet,
  Drag into day, -- by sounds, thy master-net, --
  The abysmal bottom-growth, ambiguous thing
  Unbroken of a branch, palpitating
  With limbs' play and life's semblance!"

Music cannot perfectly give immortality to the past, but
it does bring back more effectively than the other two
great arts the past forms and feelings --

"off they steal
  How gently, dawn-doomed phantoms! back they come
  Full-blooded with new crimson of broad day."

The music of these old composers is not "stone dead" as
many claims would make them, he decides, but the fashions
must change and the new ideas must come to the front, in
music as in anything else.

"Ye look
  Your last on Handel? Gaze your first on Gluck!
  Why wistful search, O waning ones, the chart
  Of stars for you while Haydn, while Mozart
  Occupies heaven? These also, fanned to fire
  Flamboyant wholly,--so perfections tire,--
  Whiten to wanness, till . . . let others note
  The ever-new invasion."

But in spite of the changes in the music of his day,
Browning himself always loved the "half-asleep" music of
the old masters. The boy who loved the march of Avison
grew up to be the man who played gently tinkling melodies
of a group of musicians whose ideas, according to his own
views, were no longer in style. So he asks for

"good antique stuff!
  Was it alight once? Still lives spark enough
  For breath to quicken, run the smouldering ash
  Red right through."
He argues that Avison's music can be changed in a few places, rhythm or chord altered, and it will be brought up to date and come to life. So he demonstrates --

"See there -- and there!
I sprinkle my reactives, pitch broadcast
Discords and resolutions, turn aghast
Melody's easy-going, jostle law
With license, modulate (no Bach in awe)
Change enharmonically (Heidl to thank)
And lo, upstart the flamelets, -- what was blank
Turns scarlet, purple, Crimson! E'en thy March
My Avison, which, southe to say -- (ne'er arch
Eyebrows in anger!) turned in Georgian years
The step precise of British Grenadiers."

The strict rules of the classical period had been done away with and Browning could do to Avison's March what Avison himself would not have been able to do. The use of the newer rhythms and chords introduced by such musicians as Wagner and Brahms gave new life to a composition which would otherwise have seemed dead to modern ears. So Browning had the ability to improvise himself.

In spite of his modern demonstration with Avison's March he thinks that for him antique music is important because it peoples for him the world of the composer. This dream world created for him the scenes on which Galuppi looked when his toccata was popular, peopled the world of Master Hugh, created a scene from the playing of Schumann's Carnival in Fifine at the Fair; and finally, after imagining the world of the future, it takes him back to the days of the recusants and the Civil War in
England. The variations he has played on Avison's March have brought back all these things to him, and finally he sees

"Some sable-stoled procession -- say,
From Little-ease to Tyburn -- wends its way
Out of the dungeon to the gallows-tree
Where heading, hacking, hanging is to be
Of half-a-dozen recusants this day
Three hundred years ago! How duly drones
Elizabethan plain-song -- dim antique
Grown clarion-clear the while I humbly wreack
A classic vengeance on thy March."

After variations on the March that were in the style of the chanting plain-song, he thinks of the days of the Commonwealth, and ends his improvising and variations with a song to be sung to the music of the March -- a song very reminiscent of the Cavalier Tunes written so many years before:

"Fife, trump, drum, sound! And singers then,
Marching, say 'Pym, the man of men!'
Up heads, your proudest -- out, throats, your loudest--
'Somerset's Pym!'

Strafford from the block, Eliot from the den,
Foes, friends, shout 'Pym, our citizen!'
Wail, the foes he quelled, -- hail, the friends he held,
'Tavistock's Pym!'

Hearts prompt heads, hands that ply the pen
Teach babes unborn the where and when--
Tyrants, he braved them -- Patriots, he saved them --
'Westminster's Pym!'"
Chapter V
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

From the earliest days of his childhood Browning received a musical education that was unusually thorough -- an education that fitted him for the technical knowledge of harmony that is so plainly shown in his poetry. Music always played an important part in his life, but its part was felt especially in his youth and after his return from Italy. This was not because of any waning of interest, but because of a necessary lack of musical contacts while he was away from England. From his first days of music lessons under his teachers, Abel and Relfe, he was attracted to the classical composers, and he was always interested in musicians who were not the great names of the music world -- men like Vogler and Buononcini and Pepusch, whose names he could discuss with perfect confidence in the accuracy of his information.

From the first reference he made to music in Pauline until his Parleying with Charles Avison Browning had certain definite ideas concerning music. These ideas were conceived early by him, they were developed during his youth and the discussions of music he had with the Silverthornes and Chorley; they never changed very greatly, but became more and more firmly fixed in his
mind. First, he felt that music was the most important of the arts. The best expression of this belief is the famous passage from Abt Vogler which was quoted earlier in this paper. Music, he believed was eminent in catching "mysterious motions of the soul", and bringing emotions too profound to be expressed by any of the shallower arts. The business of all arts is to catch truth, but because of this deeper range of music, it performs this business better than they. Music, however, also fails at last because it is not permanent.

His second important idea about music was expressed in his letter to Elizabeth Barrett. "The Beau Ideal," he wrote,"changes every thirty years." And even if, occasionally, a composition from a former time seems to please us today it is because the particular composition was not according to the fashion when it was written -- it was ahead of its time, taking forward to the world of tomorrow. But the very fact that music is typical of its time and is old-fashioned when times change, makes it important to Browning because each composition reflects the world of its own day. Thus, he thinks it is the business of music and musicians to call back dead men and their emotions and make them live again; it must always recreate moods and life. So the music of Master Hugue of Saxe-Gotha calls up both the composer and the atmosphere of the church with its saints, and the Carnival
by Schumann pictures the dissolute soul of old Venice, while through the music of Abt Vogler walk the "wonderful dead" and souls yet unborn.

For these reasons Browning holds music in the highest regard, was devoted to it all his life, and considered those who were able to make beautiful music as great people to be held in the highest esteem. His poems are full of references to music, and many of his poems deal almost wholly with music. These are Master Hugue, A Toccata of Galuppi's, Abt Vogler, Fifine at the Fair, and Parleying with Charles Avison. Such poems as Saul and Pippa Passes show his idea of the influence which music has on the human soul.

Robert Browning himself was never famous for his performances in the field of music, but he has written and preserved for us many of the most beautiful thoughts in regard to that art. He was always a great lover of all the arts and appreciated the great inspiration which must go into them to make them live. --

"Whoso rhymes a sonnet pays a tax,  
Who paints a landscape dips brush as his cost,  
Who scores a septett true for strings and wind  
Mulcted must be."

Browning's great genius was outside the field of music, but he found relaxation, enjoyment, inspiration and a source of power in that art. He realized that

"Never was so plain a truth
As that God drops his seed of heavenly flame
Just where He wills on earth."

That the "heavenly flame" granted to Browning was in poetry rather than music did not keep him from feeling the strong fascination of the greater art, and he would probably be pleased to have his name recorded here, if nowhere else, as Robert Browning, Poet and Musician.
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