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Oratorio.

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“THE *Oratorio*,” says one of the most popular of our lexicons, “signifies a kind of sacred drama, generally taken from the Scriptures, and set to music.” This is a definition which will not be disputed. The word is Italian, and at once points out to us the origin of the thing itself, which was devotional, or connected with church worship. In a land where the devotion of the senses was mistaken for that of the spirit, and where “the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life,” soon became ministers of the altar, music was carried out beyond its just proportions, and in various forms absorbed the devotions of men. The land of “Opera” gives name, as well as origin, to the “Oratorio.” The former, however, was purely secular, the latter was purely religious; the one was designed for the theatre, the other only for the Church. In process of time the Oratorio has been sundered from its primary relation to the house and worship of God: it is conjoined with the opera in its objects, and all its concomitants, so as to be distinguishable only in name and subject.

Still, however, the Oratorio maintains the *internal* character given in the definition. It is a kind of “sacred drama,”—a continuous representation in words, of certain events or objects, revealed in holy writ, and generally in the very words of Scripture. The verbal is accompanied by musical representation, in which it is attempted, by the power of music, to convey certain ideas corresponding with the character of the words, or of the action described in the words. Thus in the grand Oratorio of the *Messiah*, by Handel, there is a continued verbal and musical representation of the history of our Lord Jesus Christ, from His birth to the final judgment, and to the Hallelujah Chorus of the redeemed in heavenly glory, and this is given in about fifty texts of Scripture, selected as the most descriptive, and put together in the most effective manner, the whole being set to music of the highest order. The effect of such a composition is strictly dramatic, if we only

substitute the idea of verbal and musical acting, for that which is scenic and personal. The same principle applies to the Oratorio of the *Creation*, only its words are not so literally Scriptural, although the subject of representation is equally sacred and holy. The successive scenes of creation, the productive energy of the eternal Spirit of God, the sublime words of Jehovah, "Let there be light," and the grand first truths of religion, as declared in Psalm 19, "The heavens tell forth the glory of God," &c, are successively introduced in the sacred opera.

These two Oratorios are placed by general consent at the head of all sacred music, with which we are acquainted, and, by the advocates of such musical performances, these are ever pointed to as the noblest and most sublime. Now, be it observed, that these embody the two most sacred subjects in the universe, the *creation* of the world by God, and the *redemption* of it by the same glorious Lord as Messiah. Out of the former springs our existences, as creatures of the Almighty, with all our relations, duties, and awful responsibilities; out of the latter springs our existence as Christians, redeemed sinners, heirs of eternal life and glory! The former event was the revelation of God the Creator, the latter was the revelation of God the Saviour. These, then, are the themes of our two chief Oratorios, *subjects* divine, *words* sacred,—the supreme *object* in both is Almighty God Himself,—and the *acts* His works of creation and redemption,—the *mode*, musical representation,—the avowed *object*, the love of music,—the *accompaniments*, in nine cases out of ten, operatic and orchestral selections; as if by a public and palpable (though silent) index, to demonstrate the latent end of the whole. With the intentions of the composers of these pieces we have nothing to do. The Oratorio, as practised at present, is a "kind of sacred drama, generally taken from the Scriptures, set to music," and performed for *public amusement*, as certainly as the tragedy of "Othello," the "Comedy of Errors," the opera of "Der Freischütz," or "the Overture to Jupiter." In short, the Oratorio is now a *sacred subject* turned into a *worldly amusement*. The *music* alone is sought and considered; and he who would attend the Oratorio as a *devotional* exercise, or a *scriptural* service, would be hailed with the smile of doubt, the sarcasm of scorn, or the gaze of wonder.

We are ready to admit that the *music* of an Oratorio, like any other music in the abstract, is quite lawful and good—that the melody and harmony of sound combined in it, constitutes one of the sweetest pleasures of this world, and one of the highest delights

of which the senses are cognizant. We are ready also to admit that the *words* of the Oratorio are not only, as such, unexceptionable, but are of the purest and loftiest description—they are, in fact, divine—and this is the very burden of our complaint. We object not to music, we object not to sacred things; but we object to and condemn all musical representation of sacred things for mere wordly amusement—for mere musical entertainment. This we hold to be sinful on this clause of divine law—"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain." This commandment evidently forbids every light, irreverent, and unworthy use of this blessed name, in whatever form. It forbids all false swearing—all unnecessary oaths for civil purposes—all flippant appeals to the name of the Almighty in common conversation—all hypocritical mention of God in external devotion (for there is a complaint against those who honour Him with the lips whilst the heart is far from Him)—and where is the right-minded man who cannot perceive that when the name of God is used for the mere purpose of musical entertainment, and where the undeniable object is to exalt the *powers of music* and not to magnify the power of Jehovah, that in such a case the name of God is used "in vain?" that is "in vain" as to *Him* whose name it is? Were He considered as supreme in the enactment of the Oratorio; and were the conventional end of it to magnify His name by the direct consecration of music to Him, then, as we have already seen, the result would be different. But when the name of the Almighty is subordinate, and used only for the sake of the accompanying music, then is it most manifestly taken in a "vain" manner. Now, what applies to the *name* of God applies to all that is divine in His nature—such are the perfections of God considered as His—such are His *operations* considered as His also—and such, too, is *revelation* when regarded as proceeding from Him.

To use, therefore, these in the manner above described, for the mere enhancement of music, or the entertainment of the public, is an act in direct violation of that command which has been already quoted. If I make an unbecoming use of my friend's *name*, *actions*, or *correspondence*, it is considered by the world itself as a *personal* injury;—much more must this principle apply to that name which is "above every name," and to that *word* which is "exalted above all his name," and to those *works* which constitute the substance of that word of glory? May we not on this occasion apply those words

of the apostle, and say, "The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead, so that they are *without excuse*; because that when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened; professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God"—into what? (for here the parallel ceases) into a *common concert* of vocal and instrumental music, for public musical entertainment; into an *Oratorio* of the "Creation" of God Almighty, accompanied by a selection of profane Italian song and popular operatic music, the theme of the play-house, and the favourite strains of the public orchestra! If the praises of the Almighty are thus to be offered up at the feet of public *taste*, and if the words and works of Godhead are thus presented as incense at the shrine of *music* as a common pleasure, and all without sin, then may we indeed say, with the sweet singer of Israel, "If the foundations are destroyed, what shall the righteous do"?

How striking and awful are the proofs we have in Scripture of God's holy displeasure against the sin of profaning His name, or anything pertaining to His worship and service. When the men of Bethshemesh of old looked into the sacred ark of the Lord with profane curiosity, He smote of the people fifty thousand and three score and ten men; and the men of Bethshemesh said, "Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?" When Belshazzar of old, too, made a feast at Babylon, and caused to be brought out the sacred vessels which were taken out of the house of God in Jerusalem, it is written, "The king, and his princes, and his wives, and his concubines drank in them; they drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone. In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another." In that night was Belshazzar, the king of the Chaldeans, slain. "Now these things are our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted and fell." Those are remarkable words of the inspired writer—"Our God is a consuming Fire!" The God of *us* Christians, as well as of the Jews, is a "consuming fire." And this is actually stated for an

object corresponding with that for which we now contend. Warning the Hebrews against irreverence and presumption, the writer says: "Let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and with godly fear; FOR *our God is a consuming fire!*" Surely, then, it is neither right nor safe in the sight of an omnipresent God to utter the holy strains of an Oratorio for the conventional end of worldly amusement or musical enjoyment. Let wise men judge whether even a *doubt* on such a subject be not weighty enough in its consequences to merit caution and candour; and whether to act in the face of such a doubt, where the glory of God is involved, be not worthy of condemnation. To us nothing seems plainer than the fact that the Oratorio is a public amusement, a direct, thorough, and public violation of the third commandment of the moral law,—that it infers a sin of the same order with Polytheism, image-worship, and Sabbath-breaking, forbidden in the other three commandments of the first table,—that God "will not hold guiltless" those who for mere musical purposes profane His holy name, either as performers or auditors: and, guilty before God we leave them.

It is said, "Is not the musical part of the services of the sanctuary a little oratorio, performed every Sabbath day?" True, if you please; but this is only a confirmation of *our* argument. What would you say to the *prayers* of the sanctuary being rhetorically spoken, and recitations from the prayers of your church given, for the *same* end and in the same manner? And where is the difference between these two, prayer and praise, save this, that the latter is more the service of the heavenly world than the former! What would you say to the chanting of Italian song in the immediate sequence of the holy service of the sanctuary? Is this the Oratorio? Judge ye.

But "it is the custom of Britain, it is even the custom of Europe, to have the Oratorio; and even serious Christians attend it." Be it so; it has been the custom of the world to sin from the beginning, but is sin not therefore to be protested against? Is there such a thing as a legal right to sin, either through prescriptive custom, or a prevailing majority? The Christian regards the law of his God only; and in doing so, he sets the Infinity of One against the numbers of the world, and the eternity of his Lord against the duration of human custom. He laughs to scorn the idea of being ruled by the multitude or by the wise few. His king is one, and his commands are ten; and these summed up into two.

There are some who would plead a *special* exemption from the application of our argument to men in general, by saying, that "it *may* be *possible* to attend devoutly and enjoy seriously the Oratorio, so as actually to be benefited by it." The self-deception of the sincere and the hypocrisy of the false are so endlessly ramified, as well as deeply rooted, that it is impossible to say whether the theorist in this case knows or believes what he says; but even if he does, it affects not our cause the least. For our appeal is not to the opinion of even alleged experience of an *individual man*, but to the plain *law of the eternal God*. If the common Oratorio be a breach of that law, it is evil; and it were perfectly vain even for an archangel to tell us that he could be benefited by countenancing sin. Let it not be said that this is "begging the question." By no means; for this objection is not a reply to our former premises that the celebration of the Oratorio is a breach of the third commandment; it is a mere individual difficulty thrown in our way to entangle our progress after we have carried our first grand position. We thus, then, deal with it, and say—"Search and try your supposed edification, and see whether your devotion has not been more sensual than spiritual. See, also, whether you are not more desirous of *supposing* that you have received benefit than sure that you have attained it."

The plea is sometimes urged also, that Oratorios are generally "got up" to serve some charitable object, in regard to individuals, or institutions, and, therefore, that men may set down their names, or give their presence on such occasions, merely for the *sake of the charity*. Now, there is no acute man of the world that is not aware that is a specious *fallacy*. For is the *end*, in this case, good? Of course, charity, or almsgiving, is good. But what are the *means* employed for this end? Are they good? Determine this with us first on the abstract ground, and then we shall come to the full decision. If the public Oratorio, as formerly considered, be good, then the question is settled without regard to the charity, and so two good deeds are done instead of one. But if the Oratorio be evil, then two evil deeds are done instead of none; for then evil is done that good may come, and the outward good becomes a real sin, for it was only a lure to the sin. *Christian*, is this what thy Lord called charity? Is this the charity by which you would be tried in that great day when the Judge Messiah shall say, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto ME"? Was your charity at the Oratorio done unto Him? Oh, let love be without dissimulation!

The Bible, the Bible is the religion of Christians; it is the only rule of faith and practice. Turn to the scene on Sinai—consider what it tells of God—and see whether you could then sit down and chant in the strains of the Oratorio, for the amusement of the public, these solemn words,—“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.”

NOTE.—The foregoing is the substance of an article on the Oratorio, by the late Rev. John Macdonald, A.M. Published at Calcutta in 1839; re-published at Edinburgh, 1851.



