

ADDRESS

BY

FR. NIECKS.

ADDRESS

TO A MEETING OF EDINBURGH MUSIC TEACHERS,
CALLED WITH A VIEW TO THE FORMATION
OF A SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF
MUSICAL EDUCATION AND CULTURE.

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LADIES and GENTLEMEN,

Many of you, on reading the circular inviting you to this meeting, may have exclaimed: "What, another society?" And it must be confessed that the existing societies are already far too numerous—too numerous for our available time, too numerous for our bodily and spiritual comfort, and too numerous for our purse. This being so, would-be-founders of a new society ought to be able to advance strong reasons in justification of their scheme.

Well, have we such justifying reasons in the present case? I answer unhesitatingly and firmly: "Yes." The objects of the projected society are undeniably excellent, and in the highest degree desirable; and there is no existing society known to me that supplies or is likely to supply in future the things aimed at. It has been asked: "Why do you not go for what is wanted to the Incorporated Society of Musicians?" Do not imagine that that Society has been

overlooked. No, it was even thought of first of all. Here is in a few words the history of the movement. Miss Ellis, who ought to be remembered as having given the first impulse to the movement, wrote to me, asking whether it was not possible to get up, in connection with the I. S. M., lectures on the art and science of teaching music. After discussing the question, between ourselves and with others, we came to the conclusion that the scheme was not feasible. It was then that I proposed the founding of a special society, an idea that was favourably received and taken up by others.

Now, why was Miss Ellis's original proposal departed from? For several reasons, of which I will mention two. First, because, as the I. S. M. is a purely professional Society, admitting only teachers of some years' experience, there would have been excluded from benefiting by the scheme incipient teachers and young people preparing for the profession, classes of musicians deserving special consideration. And secondly, because, as a large number, probably the majority, of the members of the I. S. M. may be supposed not to take an interest in the scheme, it would be unreasonable to expect that the Society as a whole would be willing to facilitate and pay for what they would call the fads of a minority. The Edinburgh section of the I. S. M. meets only about eight times in the course of the year. Now, even if all these meetings could be used for educational lectures, papers, and discussions, they would be too few for the objects we have in view; and if the meetings were increased, the rent of the room where the meetings are held would be increased too. And, moreover, what is the use of petitioning for lectures and discussions a society that shuns these things as the devil shuns holy water? Thus with all our respect for the I. S. M. and the useful work it does, we cannot but perceive that it is not a body from whom encouragement may be looked for in a case like the one we are contemplating.

Having explained why a new society is proposed, I must

turn to the more difficult task of explaining what the objects of the society are to be, and in what ways they can be attained. The task is difficult, because there may be widely different views about the objects to be chosen and the ways to be pursued. It is difficult also because the work and methods of the society must largely depend on the character and number of its members.

It is intended to admit as members not only professional musicians, but also students of music preparing for the profession. Now don't be shocked at what I am going to say next. This society is to be a mutual improvement society. I have been most solemnly warned and most impressively appealed to not to mention the word "improvement," especially with the qualifying adjective "mutual." "If you use that word, you will frighten away every body." Now, improvement may be a very unpopular word, but it is a most useful, excellent, and necessary thing. In fact, I reckon him as dead and shelved who no longer wants to be taught and improved. Well, then, let us form ourselves into a mutual improvement society, each of us contributing his or her quota to the general fund of knowledge. There is none so experienced and learned that he cannot gain by the experience and learning of his fellows. And even the most inexperienced and unlearned can widen and clear the knowledge of the most venerable sage, if by nothing else, at least by questions. There is nothing so educative as being asked questions. Questions often draw our attention to problems previously overlooked, shirked, or otherwise neglected by us, and not infrequently draw our attention to spots and fields of ignorance in us of which we had not been aware.

One of the chief benefits derivable from such a society seems to me to be the opening of our eyes to the vast extent and the immense complexity of what is implied in the study and teaching of music—an extent and complexity in the face of which even the most accomplished must feel children and

ignoramus. Do not overlook that the teacher stands in need of a wider and more many-sided knowledge than the executant, and that his responsibility is far greater. The most terrible fact about us teachers is that we are never trained for the profession of teaching: what we learn of it we learn from our pupils, who really ought to be paid by us, and not we by them. The great majority of teachers never learn their business, and the best learn it only imperfectly. There are innumerable members of our fraternity who imagine that the whole duty of a music master consists in teaching his pupils to play pieces and sing songs as a bird trainer teaches finches and canaries. But that is not teaching music at all. Others think only of finger exercises, scales, and technique generally. But that is only the mechanical substratum of the executive side, a small part of the art if we take into account the texture, structure, beauty, and expression of music, and the cultivation of the ear, mind, and heart of the learner. Again, it is very common that a teacher has but one method and one repertory for all pupils, ignoring the infinite variety of their physical, psychical, and moral dispositions. The disastrous results may easily be imagined. Of course teachers are not all of them so bad as that; but, owing to the difficulties of their calling, owing to the extent and the manysidedness of the knowledge required, not one of them can boast that he is complete and perfect, fully armed from head to foot.

Now, ought we not to endeavour to improve this state of matters? It goes without saying that a society like the one projected cannot take the place of a training school—it cannot give systematic courses of lectures and demonstrations in technique, harmony, counterpoint, form, acoustics, history, æsthetics, ethics, and psychology. But it can do many things worth doing—it can suggest new ideas, open undreamt-of vistas, lighten up many dark corners in our minds, and above all, invite us to further study and renewed efforts.

Now, let me indicate somewhat more particularly a few of the things that can be done—and can be done by the reading of original papers, by accounts, summaries, translations, and criticisms of other people's writings and speeches, by analyses and demonstrations, by discussions, and by questions. One of the many possible subjects, a subject of immense scope, and practically inexhaustible, is the exposition of methods of teaching music, either music as a whole, or certain departments of it, or certain details in these departments. This subject may be considered from various points of view—from the technical, physiological, æsthetical, ethical, and psychological. The æsthetical and ethical points of view are of the greatest importance, as they relate to the influence of the art on our sense of the beautiful, and on our moral sense. Note the astounding range of the subject, from five finger-exercises to the moral sense. Very useful would be papers setting forth what music has been written for instruments and for voices, and grouping it according to classes (*genres*) and grades of difficulty; and enumerations and descriptions of books on music generally, and on teaching particularly. Discrimination of the styles of composers is another important and interesting subject. Nor should history and biography be forgotten,—they are valuable tools of the model teacher.

Thus I could go on for a quarter-of-an-hour and more with my enumeration. But I think I have said enough to show that there is a sufficiency of material for the society, and I hope I have also said enough to induce you to join the society. I invite you, I urge you, to join it. I ask you to do so for your own sake, for your fellows' sake, for your pupils' sake, for your art's sake—for all these will benefit by your taking part in the work of the "Society for the Promotion of Musical Education and Culture."