

The Color Organ and the Theatre

IT is a relief to find that Mr. Wilfred's color organ, now at the Neighborhood Playhouse and so much talked and written about, has no connection with music. From Scriabine back to the seventeenth century and down to last winter this attempt to find in color some equivalent for music has persisted. It rests on the feeling, common enough, that there must be some color scale that corresponds to the scale in music. But all experiments from Galton onwards have shown that, however beautiful and engaging this dream of some hidden and inner unity of the senses may be, it has no psychological support; there is no exact relationship for us between sound and light; what sounds white to one ear sounds black to another; and scarcely two persons would agree as to which sound represents the color blue, or green or red. The rumor of the color-music experiments has given to this whole subject of mobile color a fantastic and supersensitive hue from which Mr. Wilfred's invention is free. What he has done is to perfect all the experiments in pure color, such as Rimington's or Mr. Claude Bragdon's, and to achieve an instrument on which light can be manipulated as air is on the pipe organ and can be thrown against a white field with every variety of control in pattern, movement, color, intensity of color, and tempo. He has made an old dream possible in practice, and has brought a new art into being. To say that mobile color is an art means that it rests on its own bottom. "Most men," Plato says, "are blind to the fact that they are ignorant of the essential character of each individual thing." And you miss the point of mobile color if you fail to see its essential character and its difference and freedom from other arts.

But though mobile color has this essential difference and though it is too new an art for any ceremonial or familiar uses and associations, I cannot, seeing it in the theatre, think of it without beginning to wonder what significance it may have there and what implications and subtle evidence it may exhibit. All experience of the theatre divides into two parts, the visual response and the abstract response within the visual. In the life of the eyes all objects seen, the arch of the sky, the expanse of water, the mountain, the running horse, the clouds, possess in themselves an underlying abstraction of design, of pattern, whose presence some men may not detect but whose absence they will resent as lack of proportion, bad color and so on. Primitive art derives its abstract effects from reality, and progresses always toward an embodiment of reality in which the abstract design may be as easily overlooked as it is in nature; and then art moves away from this reality toward design again. But in all stages of art the design is always sought, for it expresses the life of the mind behind the visual life. Mobile color has this design, of course; but it has one advantage at least over other visual arts in that it can express a design that is not static but is perpetually changing, as our invisible consciousness changes. This changing pattern lives for us on that inner sense back of our eyes as music underlies for us the sounds of the world. The visual side of the theatre may derive all sorts of ideas from mobile color. For one among them take, shall we say, the use of a background of mobile color. The scene consists of a spectacle of moving light, of colors and patterns that express some idea. This might supply something of that loosening and freeing of emotion that music has been used

to attain, of that breaking down of our ego's resistance to being carried out of ourselves. Or — for something more interesting technically — what new conceptions might come from the study of the human figure against abstract forms that are freer of the accidental materiality but as living and inexhaustible as the human figure in the nuances of change!

Or for a wider observation take one of Mr. Wilfred's compositions on the color organ, imperfect as they must be as yet, and see what a light it throws on all dramatic theory:

When the curtain rises at the Playhouse there is only a darkened stage to be seen. A complete silence reigns. And then slowly across the blackness of the stage a gradual azure comes. At the top it is a little deeper, perhaps, than lower down, where already a shadow of violet appears; and then in the center a strange figure, white, very pale, azure now against a background which is turning to a pearl color. The figure we have seen before somewhere in the mind, somewhere behind actual things that we have looked at; it is like and unlike a robe, it drifts and is drawn upward slowly. Other figures appear like it, they move toward each other, they change to a vermillion, a flame color, incredibly pure, the life of light itself, without any intervening medium but given straight to us. The vermillion shrinks to a deeper intensity against the azure that has passed now into the space beyond. The figures disappear, drifting upward, the ground fades again, and they return, moving in from the sides, orange with violet and shimmering faint green. They move one above another, we see them rising there like pinnacles; but, at the same time, form shows through form as if some radiant geometry has arisen there. The whole thing seems to have at once the convincingness of physical reality, the abstraction of mathematics, the motion and power of music. All description of the effect must sound vague or merely loose and sensuous; for we have no words beyond a few simple triangles and ovals and squares to express form, and few words that carry any but general images of color. This mobile color is as impossible to describe as music is. And because so much of the theatre is visual, mobile color suggests even more vividly than music does the essential character of the dramatic.

Music has long held its place as the most ideal of the arts. Which is to say that where other arts depend on some phenomenon, as in painting, or some concept, as in poetry, to express the idea, music conveys the idea direct and general; can put, for example, marching itself into our very feet. Mobile color has the same claim to ideality. It too without any intervening medium can convey a pure abstraction not to the ear but to the eye. Out of this abstraction emerges a quality of rhythm, rhythm of pattern, color, movement, tempo and so on. And since these elements draw from all parts of our natures they set up in their action and variety the conflict that is the source of the dramatic. Mobile color, then, illustrates flamingly and unforgettably these abstractions of form, intensity, proportion, tempo, that make up all rhythm. Looking at this moving color you feel a quickening of the whole rhythmic sense of the theatre. You see more than ever how essentially all drama rests on the rhythm of these abstract qualities; they underlie any piece of dramatic art, and if necessary are separable from it; and it, finally, if it has any value, must be reducible to them.

STARK YOUNG.

Gerhart Hauptmann's Idyll

Anna, by Gerhart Hauptmann. Berlin: S. Fischer.
25 marks.

THE most obvious qualities of Gerhart Hauptmann's now considerable work are two: versatility and lyricism. Both are qualities with a large admixture of defect in them; they have a smooth and a seamy side. Versatility is often the cloak of inward uncertainty, lyricism only a name for fluency without control. And in Hauptmann the predominance of the positive over the negative is so wavering and doubtful that our general verdict almost depends on the particular work we have been reading last. He carries versatility to such a point that it is almost impossible to see any single one of his manifestations in relation to a whole. A new book by Hauptmann never seems to be another stone added to a building whose general plan we know; much less does it make the plan more definite. Almost invariably it strikes us as a foundation for a new structure.

Indeed, if we had to find an image to describe Hauptmann's achievement, we should naturally choose a piece of open and beautiful country, on which some imaginative millionaire—another Beckford—had decided to build a town to satisfy his dreams. Roman temples, French châteaux, Indian pagodas, Italian villas, German summer houses, English cottages, all are there. But the money gave out. Some have no roofs, and those with roofs have no furniture, and those with furniture no inhabitants. An atmosphere of death hangs about the abandoned place. But it has a curious, fantastic charm of its own. The failure of so much fine intention is in itself beautiful; and the grass that has overgrown the buildings, the blend of exquisiteness and desolation, give it a baroque enchantment which the most resolute purpose could hardly have created. Our very wonder at what could have been in the artist's mind makes the spell more powerful; but we can hardly be persuaded that it is the artist's own.

Probably the explanation of Hauptmann's failure—and we can call it a failure only by the most positive standards—is that his driving impulse has been almost wholly aesthetic, and his powers too great to submit to it. He has been haunted by beauty, yet he has instinctively shrunk from the patient, minute, almost niggling labor necessary to the achievement of a purely aesthetic end. On the other hand the allurements of beauty have been too persistent and too strong to allow him to be single-hearted in pursuit of truth; whenever he has sat down determined to express the verity of his thought and feeling, the will o' the wisp has danced before his eyes. He could not trust himself, in the last resort he could not believe that beauty would come unsought to inhabit an edifice of truth; he could not make the act of faith that a great writer makes naturally. He must find a nearer way, he must feel as he writes the words: "This is beautiful." The divided soul is apparent in all Hauptmann's work. The solid earth in which his realistic novels begin dissolves into a romantic cloudland; the majority of his plays become those amphibious, ambiguous creatures he calls tragi-comedies; and the rest are fantasies, Lustspiele, Glasshüttenmärchen or fairy-tales.

This is the reason why Hauptmann has many styles but no style. He is the least recognizable of considerable modern writers. It would be impossible for us, when confronted with an unfamiliar piece of his writing, to say positively "That is

Hauptmann." He has no nuance of feeling that is peculiarly his own; he has no individual trick of revealing unsuspected relations in the visible or sensible world. We do not even know what are the elements of experience to which he especially responds, save that he is sensitive to the beauty of great literature, and indeed to beauty in all its more familiar manifestations. But he discovers no new ones. In the deepest sense he is not a creative writer at all: he is too big to be a small one, and too small to be a big one; too much a man to trust his dream, too much a dreamer to face the truth.

In his latest work, *Anna*, which he calls a country love-poem, his essential insecurity is manifest. And yet, though it is another failure to be added to the long list of his failures, it comes perhaps nearer to being a success than anything else he has written. It is a long poem—twenty-four cantos of, on the whole, singularly fine hexameters—telling the story of a young poet's return to the village where he had been once a farm-pupil, and his disastrous love for a girl who has succeeded him in his place on the farm. Hauptmann puts two lines from the third Eclogue on his title page; and his endeavor has obviously been to fit the form and the sentiment of the classical idyll to a story of modern life. The remarkable thing is how nearly he has succeeded. If anyone had told us that we should one day read in a modern hexameter poem of love in a German village, a canto with the old Theocritean refrain to the Muses:

Hebt den Liebesgesang, Ihr Musen, den Liebesgesang
an . . .

without immediately throwing the book away, it would have seemed incredible. But the incredible thing has happened. We not only did nothing desperate; we positively enjoyed that canto. Even now it seems uncommonly beautiful.

Hauptmann, indeed, uses his powers most admirably in evoking the picture of the German village in the stillness of spring. The directness of the opening, the greeting to Luz Holtzmann when he returns to what had once been his home, carries us completely away. The description of the sunlit farmhouse, of Schwarzkopf the farmer and his pious wife, is so simply and fluently done that we share Luz's emotion. And we are ready, when but the name of *Anna* is mentioned, to believe that it sped like an arrow to his heart.

Luz war wieder allein. Es erschollen die Rufe des Kuckucks

In das lichte Gemach, durch angelweit offene Fenster unaufhörlich, und Luz, der sie zählte, erhielt ein Jahrhundert

Lebenszeit als Geschenk: wahrhaftig, es war nicht zu viel ihm.

Zweige streckte herein ein blühender Obstbaum. Er brauste ganz von Bienen und andren Insekten und duftete köstlich.

Seltsam, wie es mich traf, was ist mir doch diese Elewin?

dass mir stockte das Herz, als ihr Name, Anna, genannt ward?

Ich war immer ein Narr, und mein Leben lang werd ich ein Narr sein.

In his first two cantos Hauptmann has succeeded in the