

Notes on “The Most Utter Failure Ever Achieved”

Hubert Parry — a leading British composer of Shaw’s time

Job — a book in the Christian and Jewish bible, considered in its English translation to be a literary classic as well as a religious text. In it, the Devil makes a bet with God, saying that he can turn God’s most faithful subject against Him. That person is Job. God allows the Devil to make Job suffer in many ways, but Job doesn’t lose his faith.

presentiments — predictions

chrysolites — jewels

Falstaff — Verdi’s last opera, premiered in 1893, and immediately acknowledged as a masterpiece

dulness — meaning something is dull, boring

derogation — criticism

stewards — ushers

savor vivre — style

choleric — angry

boorification — making something stupid

merrie England — an expression used to praise England, to say that it was a happy place

grub — food

go out in the fields to kill something — go hunting (Shaw is being sarcastic, assuming that hunting is a stupid way to spend time)

exchanges — places where business is done

rosewater — water that smells sweet, like roses; Shaw is saying that you can’t make a revolution by being gentle

forewent — neglected

rostrum — podium

There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job — the first words of the Book of Job, and therefore the first words in Parry’s oratorio

taxed to the utmost the highest powers of Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, or Wagner — required all the power that these supremely great composers had

ascertained — known; Shaw is saying that by this point in Parry’s life, everyone knows his ability, and knows he’s not a great composer

the morning stars singing together and the sons of God shouting for joy — things described in the book of Job

a tragedy on the subject of King Lear — a play with the same story as one of Shakespeare's greatest works

efface Shakespeare's — make everyone forget Shakespeare's play

ingenuous — innocent; well-meaning, but not very smart

arranged in lines that would scan — Shakespeare's plays are written in a kind of poetry called iambic pentameter, which has lines of a particular length, and has a particular rhythm. Shaw is saying that his version of King Lear could be written in iambic pentameter, and that all the lines would scan, meaning that they'd all have the proper length and rhythm.

G.B.S. — George Bernard Shaw

has the author been able for his subject? — was the author good enough to match the power of the King Lear story?

shirk — run away from, avoid

scrupulous moderation — careful avoidance of all extremes

shewn — shown (Shaw wanted English spelling to be reformed, and when he wrote, he spelled things the way he thought everyone should spell them; I'm amazed that publications he wrote for allowed him to do this!)

freedom from any base element of art or character — freedom from anything unattractive or evil

epitaph — words written on a gravestone to describe the person buried in the grave; Shaw is suggesting that epitaphs don't tell the true story of a person's life, and that the descriptions of Parry's work that he makes up might be correct, but wouldn't tell the full truth about the piece

irrelevancies — things that don't matter

The Man that broke the Bank — a popular song of Shaw's time

left his subject practically untouched — didn't even begin to convey the real power and meaning of the book of Job

shamed the devil — triumphed over the devil

professorial school — composers in Shaw's time who wrote music modeled on the classics, as opposed to musical revolutionaries like Wagner, who wrote in new, freer forms. Shaw loved Wagner and other revolutionary composers of the time. And he despised composers who used the old forms, especially Brahms. His writing about Brahms seems so totally wrong that it's easy to guess he was blinded by his preconceptions.

geniality — good spirits, friendliness

the academic faction that he leans to — the “professorial” composers whom Shaw thinks write old-fashioned music, using the old forms

prepossessions against the composer’s school — prejudices against the composer’s kind of music

Satan — the devil

give himself an infernal air — make himself seem horribly evil, as if he came from hell

though a tenor and a fiend models himself on Mendelssohn’s St. Paul — St. Paul is an oratorio by Mendelssohn, about St. Paul, who of course is a great Christian saint. In this oratorio, St. Paul is sung by a bass. Shaw is saying that Satan, in Parry’s oratorio, is an imitation of St. Paul in Mendelssohn’s piece, even though the singer is a tenor and even though the character he sings is a fiend, meaning someone evil. This is a severe criticism of Parry’s piece, in two ways. Shaw says that Parry simply imitates Mendelssohn, and that he does it without much thought, making an evil character, the devil himself, sound like a Christian saint

Loki — a character in Wagner’s Das Rheingold, the first of the Ring operas. Wagner calls the character Loge; Shaw for whatever reason uses an English version of the name. Loge not strictly a villain, but he’s complex, and not altogether good.

Klingsor — a very evil character in Wagner’s Parsifal

Iago — a very evil character in Verdi’s Otello

Boito’s Mefistofele — the devil, the leading character in an opera by Boito.

Gounod’s stage devil — the devil is a character in Gounod’s Faust, an opera very popular in Shaw’s time, and still popular today. Shaw calls this character a “stage devil” as a way of saying that the character doesn’t really come across as evil or frightening. Instead he’s (as we might put it) more like a Halloween monster, pretending to be evil but not succeeding. Shaw is implying here that Faust isn’t as deep or serious an opera as the other works he mentions, an opinion most people who know opera well would agree with.

excitable curate — a curate is a low-ranking clergyman. Shaw is saying that Parry’s devil, far from seeming evil, is like a person of no great importance who gets overexcited.

poles of the great world magnet — if you remember some basic science, a magnet has two poles, a positive pole and a negative pole. Shaw is picturing the morality of our world as a magnet. The positive pole is goodness (represented in the oratorio by God) and the negative pole is evil (represented by Satan). Shaw’s point is that Parry’s devil doesn’t seem nearly powerful enough to be one of the two great forces that drive our world.

Where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest — a quote from the Book of Job, an image of complete peace.

expostulation — an expression of disapproval

the voice that sometimes speaks through the mouths of babes and sucklings — sometimes it’s said that the voice of God can speak through babies or children. “Suckling” is a word for babies so young that they’re still sucking on their mothers’ breasts.

Brixton and Bayswater — suburban British towns. In Parry's piece, God's words are sung by a chorus (not a bad idea, in my opinion). Shaw imagines that the people singing in the chorus come from boring places, and thus wouldn't know how to sound like the voice of God. (In my view, that's an insulting idea. Think, for instance, of Blanche Moyse's chorus, as I described it in my review of her. It was made up of people from small towns in Vermont. If they could sing as profoundly as I thought they did, why should we think people from suburban British towns couldn't do it, too? Shaw, I think, is being a snob.)

"heil'gen Hallen" of Sarastro — Sarastro is the deeply good high priest in *The Magic Flute*, Mozart's opera. One of his arias is "In diesen heiligen Hallen," and Shaw once wrote that in his view this aria is the only music that wouldn't sound out of place if it came from the mouth of God.

bedizen — to dress up in a gaudy, shallow way.

scraps of sonata music — Shaw loved Wagner, as I've said, who was a revolutionary composer, writing in new forms. And Shaw despised the composers of his time who wrote in the old classical forms. The most important traditional classical form is of course sonata form, and this is what Shaw refers to when he says Parry inappropriately uses "scraps of sonata music." Parry is setting a profound drama to music, which is what Wagner did in his operas. And so, in Shaw's view, Parry shouldn't use music that sounds like it belongs in an old-fashioned piece written in sonata form.

martial tumult — the noise and confusion of war

compounded from the same academic prescription (etc) — Mackenzie was a prominent British composer, whom Shaw thought was an old-fashioned "academic" artist, just as he thought Parry was. Jason is an oratorio by Mackenzie, based on a Greek myth, and there's a place in it where dragon's teeth are planted in the ground and grow into armed men. Shaw is saying that Mackenzie's music for this is hopelessly academic, instead of being dramatic. And says that when Parry wants to depict war in his music, he fails in the same way.

absolute music — music written simply as music, not meant to portray any story or drama

I feel sore — I'm upset and angry

it made the most of itself — I'm not entirely sure what Shaw means here, since his criticism of the chorus, both in this sentence and earlier, is very severe. Maybe he's being nice to them, and saying that despite their failures, they did as well as they could.