

MUSIC.

THE JUBILEE SINGERS.

IN 1867, an institution called the Fisk University was established at Nashville, Tennessee. It was intended as a training school for colored teachers, the promoters of the enterprise wisely judging that the freed people could be most easily reached through the ministry of their own race. The institution prospered so fast that larger and more commodious buildings were soon needed for it; and in October, 1871, a little party of the pupils, accompanied by one of their teachers, set out on a tour through the Northern States, to raise money for this purpose, by giving concerts of the characteristic slave songs of the South. They sang in many of the large cities, and returned to Nashville in the spring with a purse of about \$20,000. Encouraged by this success, they began a second tour in the autumn of 1872, and, in the course of their journey, they came a few weeks ago to Steinway Hall, New York, where an immense audience of the most cultivated class of citizens assembled to hear them. There are eleven young people in the company, all, with one or two exceptions, born in bondage.

The personal history of these colored singers would be enough to make their concerts deeply interesting, even if their music were not very good. But, indeed, their music itself is admirable. They have, of course, no great cultivation. They have art; but it is the product of a rich natural gift, polished by natural taste and discrimination. They have a quick ear for harmony, catching readily the proper chords in part-singing, and rarely giving a false intonation. A musical voice seems to be a characteristic endowment of their race; and they possess, also, that indefinable musical refinement which, to a certain extent, supplies the lack of scientific instruction and systematic exercise of the vocal organs. But the great charm of their singing is its sincerity. They are moved to the bottom of the soul with their own melodies. The enthusiasm, grotesque sometimes, but always genuine, which inspires the rude poetry, and the pathos, the sorrow, the joy, the exultation which by turns color the music, all find a response in the heart of the singer. To these impressionable minstrels song is not an exhibition of art, but the expression of feeling. In all the world we believe there is no other singing so thoroughly emotional. The Jubilee Singers give us very few of the manufactured melodies of their burnt-cork imitators. They rather despise the sentimental ditties of Stephen Forster and his fellow composers. Now and then, to be sure, they sing a genteel parlor ballad, or a popular tune like "The Old Folks at Home;" but their taste runs more to the real slave songs, which used to ring through the camp meeting, or while away the evening hours on the plantation, or fill the forest and the cabin fireside with soft pathetic melodies. These are the hymns, the laments, the prophecies, which they brought with them out of bondage. The origin of these extraordinary productions has long been an interesting problem. They are clearly not the product of civilization, and yet an instinct seems to have taught their makers to follow strict musical laws. Wild and irregular as many of them seem on a first hearing, it will be found that the wildest are capable of reduction to scientific form, and the strangest phrases can be correctly expressed in musical notation. Gross violations of the laws of musical grammar are extremely rare in them; an unscientific ear, in fact, detects none at all; and yet they are by no means as simple and easy as they are popularly supposed to be. They abound in difficult intervals and eccentric turns, and even the *tempo* presents peculiarities that an uneducated singer might often find puzzling. Possibly the existence of such music among the slaves can be accounted for in part by two characteristics of the negro race; one is their aptness at imitation; the other that natural sense of rhythm which shows itself so plainly in their fondness for the dance. We do not discover in their songs many traces of the more scholarly music of the dominant race; but we cannot doubt that the quick ear of the servant caught snatches of melody from his master's parlor, and in the solitude of the cane-brake, or at his work in the field, wove them into connected phrases, regulated by his instinctive love of form and his nice sense of time and proportion. If in doing this he followed laws of composition of whose existence he had never heard, it only proves that those laws are founded upon a correct theory of what the ear requires.

The words offer less difficulty than the music. All the pieces—that is, all the genuine slave songs—given at Steinway Hall, were hymns—fragments of scriptural phrase, of pious exhortation, of prayer and praise, and spiritual comfort, gathered from the pulpit and the prayer meeting, and strung together with a sort of rhythmic regularity controlled by the same instinct of form and proportion of which we have already spoken. With some homeliness of language that is often laughable, they unite a rude poetic force of which we must be sensible even when we are most amused. Take the famous "Go down, Moses;" the most ludicrous verses of that popular hymn (there are twenty-five of them in a collection now on our table, and they are capable of indefinite extension) have a ring of real dramatic power:

"When Israel was in Egypt's land;
Let my people go;
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go.
Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land,
Tell ole Pharaoh,
Let my people go.

"O bretheren, bretheren, you'd better be engaged;
Let my people go;
For the devil he's out on a big rampage;
Let my people go.
Go down, Moses," etc.

The narrative part of this comprehensive Bible story, which covers some of the principal events of the Old Testament and the modern Christian church, is sung in unison, to a rather monotonous but impressive strain, and the refrain, "Go down, Moses," is given in harmony with a delicious gusto. We see in this hymn the fondness for prophecy which was so remarkable among the slaves long before the near prospect of emancipation dawned upon them. They drew a parallel between their own servitude and the bondage of the chosen people of God. They relished nothing so keenly as a reference to the discomfiture of "Ole Pharaoh," and next to Jesus they loved especially to sing of "Good Ole Moses

and Aaron too," who led the Lord's people into a land of freedom, and of Daniel, who was delivered out of the den of lions. A vision of liberation ever brightened before them.

"Gwine to ride up in the chariot,
Sooner in the morning.
Ride up in the chariot,
Sooner in the morning.
Ride up in the chariot,
Sooner in the morning,
And I hope I'll join the band.
O Lord have mercy on me,
O Lord have mercy on me,
O Lord have mercy on me,
And I hope I'll join the band.

"Gwine to meet my brother there,
Sooner in the morning, etc.
O Lord have mercy, etc.

"Gwine to chatter with the angels,
Sooner in the morning, etc.
O Lord have mercy," etc.

The first piece which they sang, on the night of their first concert in New York, was an excellent specimen of their best work. To insure a more perfect unison in delivery, they are in the habit of bunching themselves together on the stage—standing "in close order," as they term it—and this helps them to preserve the beautiful *pianissimo* effect which is so much admired in their singing. It was with the most delicious softness then that they began the hymn,

"Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus!
Steal away, steal away home,
I hain't got long to stay here."

This was in harmony; then they burst out in unison, *fortissimo*.

"My Lord calls me,
He calls me by the thunder,
The trumpet sounds it in my soul,"

and the voices die away in the last line,

"I hain't got long to stay here,"

followed by the refrain, "Steal away," etc. It was a fine piece of dramatic delivery, which would have done credit to the best of our singing clubs.