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### **Miscellaneous works Of The Late Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl Of Chesterfield**

Consisting Of Letters to his Friends, never before printed, And Various  
Other Articles

**Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope of  
Dublin, 1777**

XVIII. Common Sense. Saturday, Oct. 14, 1738. N° 89.

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## XVIII.

## COMMON SENSE.

SATURDAY, Oct. 14, 1738.

N<sup>o</sup> 89.

**S**UCH is the uncertainty and instability of the things of this world, that there is scarce any event, which ought to surprize us, or any thing new to be said upon it. The greatest empires, and best-modelled governments, have been suddenly overturned by unexpected occurrences of unlucky and unforeseen accidents. Notwithstanding which, when one sees great and sudden revolutions happen, one cannot help falling into trite observations, which a thousand events of the same kind had suggested to thousands of people before.

I confess this happened to me lately, when I heard that operas were no more, and that too at a time when the vigor and success, with which a subscription was carried on, both by the great and the fair, seemed to promise them in their fullest lustre. “ Shall the kings, and the ministers  
“ of the earth, cried I, be surprized when their best-  
“ concerted schemes are defeated; schemes which it is  
“ generally the common interest of mankind to defeat?  
“ and must we behold, unmoved, the fatal catastrophe  
“ of that great design, which the common pleasures of  
“ mankind seemed engaged to support?” Many other reflections occurred to me, which, though I thought new at the time, I am since persuaded were made by the Assyrians, the Medes, the Persians and others, upon the subversion of their several empires; and therefore I shall not trouble my readers with them.

But I came at last to consider, as I always do, how far, and in what manner, this great event might possibly affect the public, and whether the the cessation of operas would prove a national loss, or a national advantage: for public diversions are by no means things indifferent; they give a right or a wrong turn to the minds of the people, and the wisest governments in the world, I mean, to be sure, our own, thought so not above two years ago, and prudently  
subjected

subjected all our public entertainments to the wisdom and care of the lord chamberlain, his licenser, or his licenser's deputy-licenser.

Was I to follow the examples of the greatest historians, I should search into, and assign the causes of this revolution, and might possibly affirm, with more certainty than they commonly do, that the unskilfulness of the composers, the immoderate profit of the performers, the partialities of the governors, and the influence of foreign mistresses, naturally produced this event. But I wave, at present, these reflections, in order to consider the effects of music in general.

Music was held in great esteem among the antients, particularly the Greeks, who looked upon it as the necessary part of the education of their youth, and thought the due regulation of it worthy the care of their laws; in so much that Timotheus was condemned by a decree of the Lacedæmonians, for introducing innovations in their music, and corrupting the true established taste. Which decree Boëtius has preserved to us in the original. It says, that Timotheus of Miletum, being come into their town, had shewn great disregard to the antient music, and the antient lyre, that he had multiplied the sounds of one, and the strings of the other, and that, instead of the plain, expressive manner of singing, he had invented a fantastical new one, where he had introduced the chromatic, &c. He was therefore publicly reprimanded by the ephori, and his lyre was ordered to be altered.

This is not to be wondered at, considering the astonishing effects which the best historians assure us music had in those days, and of which I shall give some instances.

The Pyrrhic tune, as is well known, had such a martial influence, that, in a very little time, it set the audience a fighting, whether they would or not. This tune, by the way, must have infinitely exceeded our best modern marches, which, by what I have been able to observe in Hyde Park, rather sets our army a dancing, than a fighting. I ascribe this difference wholly to the unskilfulness of our modern composers; for I will never believe that my countrymen have not as much potential courage in them as the Greeks, if properly excited. I therefore wish the Pyrrhic tune had been transmitted  
down

down to us, to have been used in proper places, and upon proper occasions.

The Phrygian music inclined as much to love, and Quintilian tells us that Pythagoras, having observed a young man so inflamed by this Phrygian modulation, that he was going to offer violence to a lady of condition, immediately ordered the instruments to play in a graver measure, called the spondee, which instantly checked the gallant's desires, and saved the lady's chastity. A strong instance this of the force of music, and the sagacity of the philosopher! though by the way, if that Phrygian movement had the same effect upon the lady, which it had upon the gentleman, the philosopher's interposition might possibly be, but unwelcome. Our operas have not been known to occasion any attempts of this violent nature; which I likewise impute to the effects of the composition, and not to any degree of insensibility or modesty in our youth, and who, it must be owned, give a fair hearing to music, and whose short bobs seem admirably contrived for the better reception of sounds.

Dion Chryostomus informs us, that the musician Timotheus, playing one day upon the flute before Alexander the Great, in the movement called Ortios, that prince immediately laid hold of his great sword, and was with difficulty hindered from doing mischief, restrained, no doubt, by some prudent and pacific minister. And Mr. Dryden, in his celebrated ode upon St. Cecilia's day, represents that hero alternately affected, in the highest degree, by tender or martial sounds, now languishing in the arms of his courtesan, Thais, and anon furious, snatching a flambeau, and setting fire to the town of Persepolis. This we have lately heard, set to music by the great Mr. Handel, who, for a modern, certainly excels in the Ortios, or warlike measure. But we have some reason to think that the impressions, which it was observed to make upon the audience, soon gave way to the Phrygian or lascivious movement.

I am apt to believe that in music, as in many other arts and sciences, we fall infinitely short of the antients. For I take it for granted, that we should be open to the same impressions, if our composers had but the skill to make them. However, though music does not now cause those surprizing effects which it did formerly, it  
still

still retains power enough over men's passions, to make it worth our care: and I heard some persons, equally skilled in music and politics, assert, that king James was sung and fiddled out of this kingdom by the protestant tune of Lillybullero, and that somebody else would have been fiddled into it again, if a certain treasonable Jacobite tune had not been timely silenced by the unwearied pains and diligence of the administration.

The bag-pipe, I am credibly informed, has been known to have a wonderful effect upon our countrymen the North Britons, and to influence whole clans; which I am the more inclined to believe, because I have really seen it do strange things here.

The Swifs, who are not a people of the quickest sensations, have at this time a tune, which, when played upon their fifes, inspires them with such a love of their country, that they run home as fast as they can: which tune, is therefore, under severe penalties, forbid to be played, when their regiments are on service, because they would instantly desert. Could such a tune be composed here, it would then be worth the nation's while to pay the piper, and one could easily suggest the proper places for the performance of it: for instance, it might be of great use, at the opening of certain assemblies, where prayers have already proved ineffectual, and the serjeant at arms and the gentleman usher of the black-rod should be instructed to play it in perfection. The band of court music would of course execute it incomparably, where it would doubtless have all the effect which could be expected. I would therefore most earnestly recommend it to the learned doctor Green, to turn his thoughts that way. It is not from the least distrust of Mr. Handel's ability that I address myself preferably to doctor Green: but Mr. Handel, having the advantage to be by birth a German, might probably, even without intending it, mix some modulations in his composition, which might give a German tendency to the mind, and therefore greatly lessen the national benefit I propose by it.

How far the polite part of the world is affected by the cessation of operas, I am no judge myself; but I asked a young gentleman of wit and pleasure about town, whether he did not apprehend that he should be a sufferer by it in his way of business, for that I presumed those soft

and tender sounds soothed and melted the fairest breasts, and fitted them to receive impressions? He answered me very frankly, that, as far as he could judge, the loss would be but inconsiderable to their profession, that some years ago, indeed, the taste of music, being expressive and pathetic, had inspired tender sentiments, and softened stubborn virtue, but the fashion being of late for both the composers and the performers only to shew what tricks they could play, had rather taught the ladies to play tricks too, than made the proper impressions upon them, and that he oftner found them tired than softened, at the end of an opera. But he confessed that they might happen to miss the opera books a little, because, as most of his profession could make a shift to read the English version at least, they found in those incomparable dramas, sentiments proper for all situations, which might not otherwise have occurred to them, and which, by emphatical signs and looks, they could apply to the proper objects; insomuch that he had often known very pretty sentimental conversations carried on through a whole opera by these references to the book.

Having thus shewn the power and effects of music, both among the antients and the moderns, and the good and ill uses which may be made of it, I shall submit it to persons wiser than myself, what is to be done in this important crisis. I look upon operas to have been the great national establishment of music, and I am persuaded that innumerable sects will rise from their ruins, and break into various conventicles of vocal and instrumental, which, if not attended to, may prove of ill consequence. But in this, as in every thing else, I put my trust in the wisdom of the ministers, who daily shew that nothing is above their skill, or below their care. Kingdoms and gin-sellers tremble at their fleets, and their informers. Terrible abroad, and lovely at home, they put me always in mind of that beautiful description, which Tasso gives of one of his heroes,

*Se'l vedi folminar, fra l'arme, au volto  
Marte le stimi; Amor se scopre il volto.*

If you were to see him, says he, glittering in his armour, and in all the thunder of war, you would take him for Mars, the god of it; but when that is over, and he lays by his helmet, you would think him the god of love.

XIX. COM-