

THE COLLECTOR ON NOISY MUSIC
(BEING NO. XX OF THE 'COLLECTOR' SERIES)

THE Collector and the Musician were seated in the former's sanctum meditatively imbibing nicotine through the medium of a long clay pipe and a cigar respectively. The Collector's cat, equally meditative, was on his knee, no doubt reviewing her past triumphs over mice, birds, and feline friends or enemies. 'She doesn't object to "bacca," remarked the Collector; 'at least not the mild kind I smoke.'

The Musician mischievously puffed a cloud of cigar smoke into the animal's face, to the indignation both of the Collector and his favourite. The cat, with a disdainful look of disgust at so rude a practical joke, retired from the room.

'She won't readily forgive you for that insult,' said the Collector. The Musician gave what the Collector called 'a low chuckle.'

Further argument over the cat incident was interrupted by a burst of distant melody.

'Goodness! What's that?' queried the Musician.

'Only the piano over the way,' replied the Collector, with a resigned look. 'It's due about this time.'

'You see,' he added, 'it's a piano of long range, probably of German origin. I call it 'the big Bertha,' after that powerful gun that landed shells into Paris. They invariably have the window open - they are strong and healthy, obviously, to stand the shock of such a piano explosion - and window and piano-top remain open during the bombardment.'

'One good thing in German towns,' the Musician said, 'was mentioned to me by a friend: that is in most of them the police insist upon windows being closed during piano or other instrument playing; and besides, I fancy there is an evening "closing time" like that for our public-houses.'

'Has it not struck you,' said the Collector, 'that music has lost its old-time character, and is becoming very frequently unmelodic noise?'

'It is supposed to have a richer effect,' put in the Musician.

'Manufacturers of pianofortes,' continued the Collector, 'have continually pressed forward towards the production of the loud piano. First came thicker strings, and to bear the strain of tuning these to a high note it was necessary to have an iron frame, and having got this stronger and stronger, there was no end to what could be produced in the way of vulgar sound.'

'I often wonder,' continued the Collector, 'what such people as old John Broadwood and the other eighteenth-century makers would have said to all this. I am pretty sure they would not have welcomed the iron-frame affair. They aimed at delicacy of sound, not loudness. But vulgarism in music is on the increase. We are gradually losing the artistic sense in the art. A loud pianoforte is only excusable when a big concert hall is to be filled with sound. Perhaps a steam-worked organ in a roundabout at a fair may be in order; the ethics of that I leave to the frequenters of the giddy scene - they are better able to judge than I; but I certainly do object to this type in our drawing-rooms, where the modern piano appears to emulate such an instrument.'

'You are old-fashioned,' murmured the Musician, yawning.

'Well, perhaps so; and in this instance I claim that I am all the better for it. Suppose we could bring old Sebastian Bach into the world again -'

"Called Back," in fact, interpolated the Musician, with scant reverence.

'I say,' continued the Collector, ignoring the Musician's attempt at wit, 'if he were to come to life again, he, who was content to play on clavichord and feeble spinet, do you not think he would put

his hands to his ears and cry aloud if he heard any of his immortal compositions rendered on a modern piano?'

'On the other hand,' said the Musician, 'the old boy might be delighted.'

'I say, sir,' continued the Collector, with rising wrath at his companion's levity, 'I say, sir, he would be horrified. Do you think that Dr. Arne, that delicate and delightful composer, who had heard no more powerful keyed instrument than a double-manual harpsichord - save the organ - would have been gratified to hear those pretty "curly" tunes of his rendered on a concert grand of to-day?'

'I should certainly like to have had his candid opinion on a jazz band,' laughed the Musician.

'Yes, the jazz band - that's about what modern music is coming to. We have had our dances founded upon the antics of half-intoxicated negroes, and it seems we are to have that sort of thing also imported into our music,' said the Collector, with growing indignation.

'I say emphatically that the moderns are losing music in confusion of noisy sound. A composer is either forced (or by his own choice composes such) to produce pieces which have either intricacy or loudness as their chief characteristic. Difficulty of performance or involved technique does not necessarily mean good art. The whole scope of domestic music has changed, and, to my fancy, none for the better. When I was a young man, nobody was ashamed to do his or her best on the drawing-room piano. Nowadays every young lady takes the matter seriously, and goes in solidly for the study of music as an art, with a big "A." Possibly five percent. of these have talent and aptitude; to the rest of the 95 such study produces nothing but weariness to themselves and to the unfortunate auditors of the never-ceasing "practising." Asked by papa or mamma to play some simple piece formerly current, the elders are told that such is out of date and absolutely impossible from an art point of view. Possibly such is the case, but these young persons do not realize that the compositions they favour will, in all probability, be as out of date five or six years hence, and as useless as an almanack, after the same period of time.'

'Publishers and musicians must live,' interjected the Musician. 'It's all good for trade; we can't stand still, you know.'

The Collector, now on his hobby, began to lug out book after book from his shelves.

'See here - look at all these little works. They are eighteenth and early nineteenth-century tutors for different instruments, all of an inoffensive and domestic character. Here's a tutor for the modest flute-a-bec, or flageolet, half a dozen for the German flute. Every gentleman in those days played the German flute.'

'Even Dick Swiveller, who was thoughtful enough to play it under the bed-clothes,' said the Musician; 'but let's have a look at your stock of tutors.'

The Collector placed them on the table beside the Musician, who turned them over rather carelessly, and, to the Collector's chagrin, quite disrespectfully.

'Humph! I see here's *The Compleat Tutor for the Flute*, printed and sold by Peter Thompson, with an owner's name, and the date, 1754. The frontispiece depicts a gentleman in very elaborate dress, with wig, sword, and cocked hat. He is tootling on a terrace with a flute-a-bec placed in the lips of an amiable countenance. No doubt the simple airs contained within the covers would satisfy so gentle a soul. Now we get the *Compleat Tutor for the Fife*, also published by the Thompson family, and here the frontispiece shows a Grenadier, wearing a mitre cap, playing on that instrument, to a background of tents and a fortress. This is about 1760 in date, I see by your pencilled note. Now we change the instrument and come to *The Compleat Tutor for the Violin*, also printed and sold by C. and S. Thompson, circa 1765. The gentleman of the frontispiece is most richly dressed, and wears a long curled wig. Messrs. Thompson evidently considered that their clients would be all men of fashion, and not common people like you and I. Now we come to Longman & Broderip's *New Instructions for the German Flute*, and again a frontispiece with a man of fashion. He is in the courtyard of a noble mansion. Evidently he has made the house unbearable by his weird wailings,

though his faithful hound - a greyhound - listens with an awe-stricken face to his master's efforts. Here is Broderip & Wilkinson's *Complete Treatise for the Violoncello*, which has "excellent examples by the late Mr. Cervetto." The gentleman in the frontispiece, with wig, cravat, and silk stockings, is in a panelled room which contains an impossible organ, and there are festoons of flutes, music-books, bugles, and other instruments of noise. In the *Harpsichord Made Easy* we find a dashing fine lady in a Gainsborough hat, seated at the instrument, while a love-sick gentleman is leaning over her chair, singing from an open book.'

The Collector heard his friend's satirical remarks with rising indignation, and finally packing up the books, said, 'You have no respect for these things. I merely wished to show you that in the old days people were more simple, more satisfied with a gentler art, and content with a domestic practice of it.'

'Quite simple,' agreed the Musician, lighting a fresh cigar.

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