

## THE COLLECTOR ON VIOLIN-PLAYING

THE Young Violinist had called upon the Collector - their mutual friend the Musician had effected the introduction, and had chuckled to himself in anticipation of the interview.

The readers of this series of articles know as well as did the Musician that our friend the Collector holds some peculiar ideas regarding the musical art.

The Collector received the young man with that playful aggressiveness that is either the privilege or the usurped right of age towards youth.

'Well, young gentleman; so you've taken up playing as a profession?'

'Not as a profession, sir; but rather as a hobby.'

'Quite right; make it a hobby. Music should be a delight, not an irksome task. Can you play?'

'If you care to judge, my violin is in the hall.'

'Call it a fiddle, man.'

'I'll call it a crowd if that would please you better, sir.' The young fellow was plucking up spirit.

'Well then, my young crowder, let's hear how you perform.'

The violin was produced, and the young performer gave a specimen of his skill. The Collector was good enough to approve, and questioned the young man as to the selection of his pieces. The information imparted, the Collector gave an ominous 'Humph,' and remarked, 'All foreign.'

'Yes,' admitted the Violinist. 'My teacher says that there are practically no English violin compositions that he could recommend a young player to study. You see,' he continued, 'he lays great stress upon the formation of taste. He thinks it bad if a young musician accepts as good stuff that which he - well, I don't know how to express it - that, in fact, he shouldn't think good! You see, sir? Don't you agree?'

'I do, very much indeed; and you can tell your teacher that he is a very clever person, or rather a conceited one, if he thinks to set up the standard of taste, and tell an Englishman that he must set aside his own natural instinct for the music of his country in favour of that of other nations. I do not say that such is bad; it may, viewed in one light, be better than our own, but that is not the question.

'We have been so persistently told by generations of music teachers that our own natural inclination to music, which really represents our own national temperament, is debased taste, that we have accepted the dictum. As a consequence, we have sent our earnest young students to Germany - mainly - where they have been told to empty their minds of anything of purely British taste, and to regard nothing as music but what the foreign professors choose to pronounce as such.

'If music is anything, it is the expression of temperament; and any foreign influence on a naturally born temperament is bound to be for the worse, so far as originality is concerned.

'In view of the temperament that produces the "kultur" that we have so lately seen in Belgium and France, it is something to shun, not to cultivate. We are paying a bitter price for this war, but it is to be hoped that one result of it will be that we shall throw off the trammels that have so long hampered our musical taste, in at least one direction, and try to rebuild on the early foundations a purely British music, uninfluenced by a taste that is foreign to our own natural liking. Have you studied any of the compositions of the early English violinists?'

'I didn't know there were any.'

'You are probably aware that English violinists and other performers were in the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries of more repute on the Continent than Continental ones?'

'No; I confess my ignorance.'

'You are not alone in that ignorance. It was probably Mr. Alfred Moffat who, forming a collection of early British violin music, first drew attention by his republications and arrangements to its great value. You should get some of these arrangements. They include compositions by Boyce, Richard Jones, Henry Eccles, John Collet, James Lates, and many others. Try these before your teacher has thoroughly knocked all taste for English music out of you.'

'I am afraid I am not very skilful at present. I must do a lot of practising before I am fit for anything. My teacher insists that I must be able to master any difficult passage of fingering that may occur.'

'Has it ever struck you, or your teacher, that a lot of "violinistic (if I may use such a word) gymnastics" is not altogether music, but rather a species of musical jugglery; and that some pieces are composed solely for the display of these - as I have before called them - "violinistic gymnastics", applauded by the general public in the same spirit that they would applaud a difficult feat on the trapeze in a music-hall? Has your teacher ever given you to practise a simple English melody, and told you to pull out all the soul that lies within the sixteen bars that comprise the tune? You may laugh, young man; but let me tell you it is a greater test of musical feeling than any amount of finger jugglery.'

'Pray understand me, young friend. I do not depreciate high-class violin technique, I certainly appreciate it; but it comes to few to be easily attained even in a moderate degree, and it will be found that those who possess such skill frequently are so absorbed in it that they ignore the simpler compositions, which are equally artistic.'

'And so such simple things are never heard in public, because both professional and amateur strive after the highest technique that the violin is capable of.'

'All this, young man, tends to this: I should advise young amateurs like yourself to spare your own household and your neighbour's the incessant practice of exercises that are supposed to lead you to the higher technique; and rather turn your attention to simpler things, striving in the playing of these, as I have before said, to pull the full soul out of each. And now,' said the Collector, 'I will show you how the country fiddler took such things.'

The Collector pointed to one of his shelves.

'Here are fifty or sixty manuscript books, mostly, as you see, in small oblong, adapted for the pocket. They each have belonged to some bygone fiddler, and it is interesting to note their contents. Here, for example, is a delightful little book inscribed "Patrick Cuming. His Book for the Violin. Edinburgh, 1723." It contains a number of Scottish tunes, some of which had not then appeared in print. There is a curious setting of Roger de Coverley, which is named "The Maltman" or "Roger the Cavalier." Many speculations have been made as to the identity of Roger de Coverley, but here we get what I think is the real name of the tune, "Roger the Cavalier"; and remember that "Roger" was the name applied to the adherents of Charles' party. "The Maltman comes on Monday" was a Scottish song fitted to the tune.'

'Here is another early book, "Thomas Bennet's Book," 1718, chiefly filled with minuets, rigadoons, and jigs, with a sprinkling of gavottes. This has belonged at one time to William Shield. See, here is his autograph.'

'Minuets and country dances formed for a long time the staple themes of many country fiddlers. This book, in date about 1765, written in a heavy-fisted hand, gives us plenty of them, and recalls to memory many of the beauties of George II's and George III's time. Here is "Miss Guning's Minuet" - the writer was not great at spelling. The three Misses Gunning came to London, and were so stared at for their beauty that King George accorded them a military guard when they took the air in Hyde Park; they married ducally. The owner of the book must have been a Loyalist and a Protestant, for his first two tunes are "God save the King" and "Lelli-by-la-rough," which is his eccentric way of spelling "Lilliburlero."'

'Here is another delightful manuscript book full of most interesting airs, including an early version of "Yankee Doodle." It was written down by Stephen Catt in 1790, and the end inscription tells us it was "given to John Carter by Stephen Catt when going away, May 19, 1792." And so we could go through a large number of similar manuscript books; and as they come downwards through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we can trace the popularity of tunes that have come and gone.

'Here is a thick oblong that has belonged to a professional fiddler. The beer and tobacco stains on its leaves testify to the company it has kept, and the rollicking merry-makings it helped to enliven about the year 1820.

'The writers of these manuscript books were frequently labouring under a bad spell. See, here is a tune named "The pig withought a tale," which turns out to be the air "Le Petit Tambour." Then here's one named "Paddy's Race-horse," which is really "Paddy's Resource"; and we can easily understand how that has arisen. "She wore a wreath of roses" is another flight, and suggests what the "wreath of roses" might be at the end of a Society ball.

'Here are a couple of books of manuscript tunes which have belonged to the Kennedy family, who were evidently of Irish extraction; and the wild spelling and the sprawling notation sufficiently indicate that family's characteristics. The books have been used not only as a family register but as memoranda as to the family's accounts.

'For example, under a tune named "The Flour in the Garden Reel," we get the information that "Maryan Kenedy was born July, 1848"; and another inscription tells how she "departed this life" in 1865; also one telling of the births of Patrick and of Denis Kennedy. We learn also that there was "due to Rody Brien 18 and 2 pence"; and follow various statements as to the sums "paid to Rody" in regard to this debt.

'But all this, my dear young fellow, has nothing to do with the question that we commenced with. My idea - I may be wrong in it - is that amateurs like yourself should not make life miserable by the incessant playing of discordant exercises, but rather advance by means of pieces not too difficult at first, but which are musically good. I fancy that too, much "exercise" study is apt to debase the ear, so that it will accept as music that which really cannot claim to be such, just as a person might debase his appetite in other matters by things which he in a normal state would reject.'

The Young Violinist looked puzzled.

'Your doctrine is quite opposed to what my teacher and other people have told me. They say I should never play anything but exercises for at least a couple of years, and I should be very careful as to the selection of pieces.'

'Quite so; I know they say that. It's part of the Mumbo-Jumbo,' concluded the Collector.

FRANK KIDSON.