

When the Fiddler and Singing Master Provided Joy in the South of Long Ago

Ante-Bellum Music Reminiscences—Twenty Violinists Compete for Prize in the Old Dominion
—A Typical Lesson at One of the Picturesque Schools of Song

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THERE is less music among the people of the rural South to-day than there was in ante-bellum days. This is a statement of a condition that calls for verification, explanation and amelioration.

In various literary and historical works dealing with the South of ante-bellum days passages occur in which music is mentioned, and which give us a hint of the status of music at the time. In the chapter on "Society in the Old Dominion," in his book "Virginia and Her Neighbors," John Fisk quotes the following newspaper notice which appeared in the year 1737: "We have advice from Hanover County that on St. Andrew's Day there are to be Horse Races and several other Diversions, for the entertainment of the Gentlemen and Ladies, at the Old Field, near Captain John Bickerton's, in that county (if permitted by the Hon. Wm. Byrd, Esquire, Proprietor of said land), the substance of which is as follows, viz.: It is proposed that 20 Horses or Mares do run around a three mile's course for a prize of five pounds.

"That a violin be played for by twenty Fiddlers; no person to have the liberty of playing unless he bring a fiddle with him. After the prize is won they are all to play together, and each a different tune, and to be treated by the company.

"That Drums, Trumpets, Hautboys, &c., be provided to play at said entertainment.

"That after dinner the Royal Health, His Honor the Governor's, &c., are to be drunk.

"That a Quire of ballads be sung for by a number of Songsters, all of them to have liquor sufficient to clear their Wind Pipes."

On this Fisk comments: "The part played by violins in this quaint program reminds us that fiddling was an accomplishment highly esteemed in the Old Dominion. As an accompaniment for dancing it was very useful in the home parties on the plantations. The philosophic Thomas Jefferson, as a dead shot with the rifle, a skilful horseman, and a clever violinist, was a typical son of Virginia. As boys learned to play the violin, and sometimes the violoncello, girls were taught to play the virginal, which was an ancestral form of the piano. Virginals, and afterward harpsichords, were commonly to be found in the houses of the gentry, and not unfrequently hautboys, flutes, and recorders.

"The music most often played with these instruments was probably some form of dance or the setting of a popular ballad, but what is called 'classical music' was not unknown. Among the effects of Cuthbert Ogle, a musician at Williamsburg, who died in 1755, we find Handel's 'Acis and Galatea' and 'Apollo's Feast,' four books of instrumental scores of his oratorios, and ten books of his songs; also a manuscript score of Corelli's sonatas, and concertos by the English composers, William Felton and Charles Avison, now well nigh forgotten."

A number of other writers bear out Fisk's statement as to the place of the "fiddle" in the musical culture of the time. Of frontier sports and pastimes in Tennessee a writer says: "The quilting bees and corn huskings sometimes wound up with a big dance at night. This amusement was not favored by the church people, but was indulged in by the more worldly class. The dances consisted of reels, minuets, jigs and break-downs. The music was usually furnished by a couple of backwoods fiddlers, who played a great variety of old tunes which are not to be found in any book of music."

When Fiddling Was Sinful

Writing of the early social life of Raleigh, North Carolina, Kemp Plummer Battle, its historian, says: "Dances were mainly jigs, reels and cotillions, or contra-dances, mispronounced country dances. The grand minuet had gone out of fashion. The music was almost invariably furnished by colored nd-

dlers, who acquired wonderful skill in playing their dance tunes. By constant repetition the musical sounds would be brought out in due harmony, whether the wielder of the bow was awake or asleep, sober or, as he often was, drunk. The music was extremely inspiring. As you listened you could actually hear the violin shriek out the request, 'Molly, put the kettle on,' or inquire facetiously:

"'Old Molly Hare, what you doing there?
Sitting in a corner smoking a cigar.'

"Or ask, as if it expected an answer:

"'Oh! Mister Revel,
Did you ever see the devil
With his wooden spade and shovel,
A-digging up the gravel
With his long toe-nail?'

"Or, changing the subject, would inform us that 'The crow, he peeped at the weasel, and the weasel, he peeped at the crow.' The music may not have been as scientific as in modern days, but there was vastly more fun in it. It would strike the auric nerve, run down to your feet and put motion into your toes in spite of the strongest resolutions against it. Men who had lost their feet affirmed that it set agoing the toes which had been buried years ago. It seemed to be dangerous to play those tunes in the presence of marble statues, unless they were securely fastened to the floor. The old revivalists who wished to wean their converts from the vanities of balls, felt compelled to proscribe the fiddle as the devil's instrument. When I was a boy it was a general religious tenet that playing it was a sin equal to dancing, horse racing, cock fighting and gambling."

In his famous lecture, "The Fiddle and the Bow," Bob Taylor, the great Tennessee orator, thus describes the old field school exhibition, which he calls "the parade ground of the advance guard of civilization," and which was held far out in the country:

"It was the climax of great events in olden times, and vast assemblies were swayed by the eloquence of the budding, sockless statesmen. . . . It was at the old field school exhibition that the fiddle and the bow immortalized themselves.

"When the frowning old teacher advanced on the stage and nodded for silence, instantly there was silence in the vast assembly; and when the corps of fiddlers, 'one of which I was often whom,' seated on the stage, hoisted the black flag and rushed into the dreadful charge on 'Old Dan Tucker' or 'Arkansas Traveler,' the spectacle was sublime. Their heads swung time; their bodies rocked time; their feet patted time; their eyes winked time; their teeth ground time. The whizzing bows and screaming fiddles electrified the audience, who cheered at every brilliant turn in the charge of the fiddlers. The good women laughed for joy; the men winked at each other and popped their fists. It was like the charge of the Old Guard at Waterloo or a battle with a den of snakes."

In former articles in MUSICAL AMERICA I have often referred briefly to the so-called "singing school," that still exists in many rural sections of the South. From literature that I have been able to discover bearing upon this institution it is evident that the singing school occupied a very prominent part in the social life of the people prior to the urbanization of rural life. George Cary Eggleston, writing on "Early Hoosier Manners," gives the following account of a school in Decatur County when it was a backwoods region:

An Old-Time Singing School

"At that time a man named Higgins opened a pay school there and taught it for three months. He eked out the meager income derived from the school by teaching a singing school ever Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning. There was an abundance of volume in his voice, I remember, but his only knowledge of music consisted of an ability to sing by 'numeral notes,' a system then much in vogue in the remoter parts of the country. Instead of a musical scale, there were two parallel lines between which numbers were printed. One stood for

do, two for re, three for mi, four for fa, and so on to eight, which stood for do' again. If a numeral was printed above or below the parallel lines it indicated that it was to be sung an octave above or below. Instead of soprano, bass, alto and tenor, the four parts were tenor, treble, counter and bass, the word tenor signifying the 'air' of the tune, to be sung by soprano voices. That use of the word was logical and etymological, at any rate.

"The singing school was maintained by subscription, just as more pretentious operas and concerts are at present. And like our opera, its sessions constituted important social functions. All the young men of the neighborhood subscribed the price fixed upon. The young women were deemed to contribute their sufficient share merely by gracing the sessions with their presence. The little boys and girls also came without charge."

Bob Taylor, whom I have quoted above, gives a very interesting and amusing description of the old-time singing school in one of his lectures:

"Did you ever hear the music of the old-time singing school? Oh! Who can forget the old schoolhouse that stood on the hill? Who can forget the sweet little maidens with their pink sunbonnets and checkered dresses—the walks to the spring and the drinks of pure cold water from the gourd? Who can forget the old-time courtships at the singing school?"

"Who can forget the old-time singing master? The old-time singing master with very light hair, a dyed mustache, a wart on his left eyelid and one game leg was the pride of rural society. He was the envy of man and the idol of woman. His baggy trousers, several inches too short, hung above his toes like the inverted funnels of a Cunard steamer. . . . His vest resembled the aurora borealis, and his voice was a cross be-

BOWDOIN HEARS HAVENS

Two Thousand Applaud Boston Pianist in Last Concert of His Season

BOSTON, June 29.—Raymond Havens, pianist, brought his successful season to a notable close on June 19 at Bowdoin College, Brunswick, where he appeared in a monster Red Cross concert. An audience of 2000 was present. The accompanying soloists were Constance Purdy, contralto, and Romilly Johnson, baritone.

Mr. Havens's program was especially well balanced, and played with his accustomed artistry. The program included Chopin's Ballade in G Minor, the Etude in F, the Prelude in D Flat and Liszt's "La Campanella." The second part consisted of Liszt's Etude in D Flat and Chabrier's "España." There were many encores and a goodly sum was raised for the Red Cross. It was Mr. Havens's second appearance in Brunswick this year. W. J. P.

Florence Otis Selects Five American Songs for Her Programs

Florence Otis, the New York soprano, has selected for her recital programs during the coming season five American songs: Elliot's "In Pillowtown," Harvey Worthington Loomis's "A Little Dutch Garden," Hallett Gilberté's "Contentment" and Frederick W. Vanderpool's "Regret" and "Songs of Dawn and Twilight." The Elliot, Loomis and Vanderpool songs are issued by the house of Witmark, and the Gilberté song is now being published by them.

Marie Stapleton-Murray Wins Pittsburgh's Favor in "Aida"

Marie Stapleton-Murray recently returned from Pittsburgh, where she was called by wire to sing "Aida" to substitute for Florence Easton, who sang this rôle at previous performances at the Grand Opera Company.

Mrs. Murray formerly resided in Pittsburgh and has many friends there. The announcement of her appearance in the title rôle of the opera resulted in a sold-out house. She won enthusiastic

tween a cane mill and the bray of an ass. Yet, beautiful and bright he stood before the ruddy-faced swains and rose-cheeked lassies of the country, conscious of his charms and proud of his great ability. He had prepared, after a long and tedious search in Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, a speech which he always delivered to his class.

A Typical Lesson

"'Boys and girls,' he would say, 'music is a conglomeration of pleasing sounds, or a succession or combination of simultaneous sounds, modulated in accordance with harmony. Harmony is the sociability of two or more musical strains. Melody denotes the pleasing combination of musical and measured sounds as they succeed each other in transit. The elements of vocal music consist of seven original tones, which constitute the diatonic scale, together with its steps and half steps, the whole being compromised in ascending notes and half notes, thus:

"'Do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-si-do,
Do-si-la-sol-fa-mi-re-do.

"'Now, the diapason is the *ad interim*, or interval betwixt and between the extreme of an octave, according to the diatonic scale. The turns of music consist of the appoggiaturas, which is the principal note, or that on which the turn is made, together with the note above and the semi-tone below—the note above being sounded first, the principal note next, and the semi-tone below last—the three being performed staccato, or very quickly. Now, if you will keep these simple proportions clear in your physical minds, there is no power under the broad canister of heaven which can prevent you from becoming succinctly contaminated with the primary and elementary rudiments of music.

"'With these few sanguinary remarks, we will now proceed to diagnosticate the exercises of the mornin' hour. Please turn to page thirty-four of the Southern Harmony.' (And we turned.) 'You will discover that this beautiful piece of music is written in four-four time, beginning on the downward beat. Now take the sound sol-mi-do. All in unison, one, two, three, sing:

"'Sol-sol-me-fa-sol-la-sol-fa-re-re-re
Ra-mi-fa-re-mi-fa-sol-fa-mi-do-do-do,
Si-do-re-re-re-mi-do-si-do-re-do-si-
la-sol,
Si-do-re-re-mi-fa-sol-la-sol-fa-mi-do-
do-do.'"

appreciation and was repeatedly recalled. The press declared the rôle of *Aida* as specially well suited for Mrs. Murray, both vocally and dramatically. The singer is under the management of Annie Friedberg, who has already booked her extensively for concerts next season.

Alma Simpson, the operatic soprano, has of late been meeting with marked success on a short tour through New York State.



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