

THE COLLECTOR ON DESCRIPTIVE MUSIC

"AS the fool thinks, so the bell tinkles," said the Collector meditatively.

'No doubt,' answered the Musician. 'You musicians,' continued the Collector, 'are excellent, but simple-minded, creatures.'

'Thanks, my dear Socrates; but why these pearls of proverbial wisdom cast at my unworthy feet?'

'I was thinking,' said the Collector, 'of that paragraph in the September CHOIR (p. 176) regarding the fancified names that composers give to their compositions, and also pondering how Debussy in his new prelude, 'Hommage à S. Pickwick, Esq.,' would express, in musical notation, Mr. Pickwick's spectacles ('A tied semibreve,' interjected the Musician) and bland smile?'

'You must grant, my dear fellow,' argued the Musician, 'that the great composers know their own trade - or art. I see that in a leading musical journal one of the greatest of the moderns devotes many pages to an explanation of his forthcoming work, and gives illustrative passages indicating what the hearers are to understand by such-and-such passages. With this foreknowledge you can't possibly get off the track, and the pencil of the analytical programme-writer is guided to a right interpretation of the composer's musically-expressed ideas.'

'I leave the understanding of the higher flights of musical composition severely alone. I acknowledge such are above my old-fashioned mind. My comprehension does not soar beyond the descriptive music of the old Georgian and Victorian periods. When I hear a tinkle, tinkle in the higher treble notes, I know the piece has something to do with "rippling rills in the woodland," and if the young lady who favours the company with the piece plumps heavily down among the lowest bass notes and wriggles thereon, I quite understand it means storm at sea - the darkness relieved by flashes of forked treble. But all this is past now; and, as I pull forth my bundles of programme music, I sigh for those glorious old days when battles and naval victories were reproduced on every parlour piano to the edification of the domestic circle. See,' he continued, 'this is the sort of thing - "The Battle of Prague," the king of them all, you of course know - this is what thrilled our ancestors.'

Here the Collector produced a folio and read:

'Nelson's Victory, a Characteristic Sonata, with Tambarine accompaniment, expressly composed and dedicated to Baron Nelson by D. Corri in honour of the ever memorable 1st of August, 1798. Expressing the sailing of the French from Toulon, the arrival of Bonaparte at Alexandria; engagement with the English fleet - and the brilliant and signal victory gained in the Bay of Shoals.'

'We have in addition to this title an engraving of the two opposing fleets, and certain shore labelled "Part of Egypt," with a void named "One of the Mouths of the Nile." Let us turn the leaf and see how Domenico Corri brought the Battle of the Nile before the young lady pianist of the days of 1798.'

'Don't,' feebly protested the Musician.

The Collector was, however, deaf to protests.

'First we have "The French fleet salutes the Toulon forts, and sets sail." Then "A gale of wind," followed, naturally, by a "Calm" and "Arrival at Alexandria, and the landing of Bonaparte." This hero lands to that showpiece in ladies' schools' "Bonaparte's Grand March." The French fleet, having got into musical shoal water, departs from Alexandria, and Admiral Nelson arrives in the Bay of Shoals." He does this with a great deal of chromatic work.

"Preparing for the Engagement" occupies a page of stern, though quiet, music. "The Engagement" lasts two pages, and "L'Orient is blown up" by the simple expedient of sliding the forefinger from the low bass notes to the higher treble, a very ingenious method of blowing up an enemy in naval

warfare. "The groans of the wounded" are in "ragtime," and the thick strokes of the demi-semiquavers mark the intense agony endured.

"Striking Colours to the English" is an airy passage, while "Great News - the cry of the post-horn" brings us back to Old England, and we join in "Rejoicings" in a passage of musical fireworks almost equal to the genuine pyrotechnic display. We conclude with "Rule Britannia," "Firing at the Tower," "Bells Ringing," more "Rejoicings" and "Trumpets." Altogether a very enlightening piece of programme music. Now here,' said the Collector, quickly taking up another sheet. 'We have "The Coronation of His most Excellent Majesty, King George the Fourth." It is "A characteristic divertisement" by John Parry. Here we find it expressed that early rising is an essential in attending a coronation, for there are "Birds Chirping," "The Dawn of Day - a Welsh Air" (which, by the way, it is not), "The Rising of the Lark" (and what a glorious lark it must have been). Then comes "The Bells of Different Churches Ringing." "Trumpets of the Heralds," "Procession moves from Westminster Abbey," and Handel is dragged from his grave to furnish "King George's March," while in the middle of "The Banquet Scene" "The Champion enters suddenly and throws down the gauntlet," which no one picks up. The feast commences; and then there is "Ora nobis, Domine," and "God save the Kin" (with new words) and a page and a half of "Rejoicings and General Illuminations." That is the sort of thing the moderns are evidently trying to do; the chief difference is that they don't put explanatory references to the pieces as these have. But see I'll show you more--

'My dear old boy, I pray to goodness you will not; I'm not strong, and I beg you'll let me off easy this time. I couldn't possibly stand any more of that sort of thing.'

'Well, well; I'll let you down gently this time. What do you think of this? and the Collector passed his friend a slip of music paper.



The notes marked * must be plucked with the finger. The rests to be sounded by the nut-end of the bow on the corners of the fiddle alternately; one knock for each rest.

'It seems harmless enough,' replied the Musician, glancing over it.

'Yes, but highly descriptive.'

'I confess I can't see it.'

'No, you haven't an artistic imagination. Suppose you realize that it indicates a man, having a wooden leg, carrying a keg of whisky, and running away from an exciseman?'

'It would take the whole keg to make me do that.'

The Collector for reply reached down his fiddle that his neighbours had so frequently and so heartily cursed; and, with a professional rasping and flourish, played the tune over.

'You see the whole thing lies in the fact that you, in turn, knock with the nut-end of the bow, upon the four corners of the fiddle where the rests are, having plucked with your finger the preceding note.'

The Musician laughed, and granted the wooden leg, but not the whiskey and the exciseman.

'Of course,' said the Collector, 'there are many little things like this known to country fiddlers among whom the thing I have just played is common. There is one akin to this in Bremner's "Curious Collection of Scots Tunes" (1759); and you may remember that the song "Caller Herring" is merely words put to Nathaniel Gow's arrangement of the Edinburgh street-cry. He heard it mingling with church bells, which were at practice, and the idea came of making the combination into a harpsichord piece. We can go back along way in regard to descriptive music. You will find that John Munday wrote a fantasia for the Virginals, which is included in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* (early seventeenth century), and this fantasia is merely a musical description of varied weather - "Faire Wether," "Thunder," "Lightning," &c. Just the sort of thing the Victorian young lady more than two hundred years later would select for "a piece.'"

'Why did those Victorians torture inoffensive airs with variations?'

'They do as wicked things now on the piano,' asserted the Collector.

'Do you remember that funny description in *Happy Thoughts* of the rendering of *Rousseau's Dream*?'

'Beautiful melody by itself, fine, clear and distinct, only the slightest possible intimation of the coming variations given by one little note, which is not in the original air. Then the author describes "a peculiar harmonized version of the air - two notes at a time instead of one." The lady's hand "swoops down on the country occupied by left-hand, finds part of the tune there, and plays it Left-hand, makes a revengeful raid into right-hand country, bringing its part of the tune up there and trying to divert the enemy's attention from the bass ... Rousseau snoring - Rousseau after a hearty supper - Rousseau in pain - General idea of Rousseau vainly trying to catch the air in his own dream - Rousseau kicking in his sleep - Grand finishing up as if Rousseau had got out of bed, asked all his friends suddenly to a party, and was dancing in his dressing gown." But there, you must read it for yourself.'

'You remind me of Thackeray's description of a similar young lady who performed the once popular negro air, "Sich a getting up stairs as I never did see."

"She spun upstairs, she whirled upstairs, she galloped upstairs, she rattled upstairs, and then, having got the tune to the top landing, as it were, hurled it down shrieking to the bottom floor, where it sank in a crash," and so forth; but do read the *Book of Snobs*, it's worth it.'

'But,' asked the Musician suddenly, 'why the name "programme music" for the class of descriptive music we have been discussing?'

'The reason is evident, because it never should form part of a programme.'

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