

THE VITALITY OF MELODY

WHEN we come to think about it we are astonished to find so much vitality in melody. Even some of the most puerile tunes have centuries of popularity behind them, while higher class, and presumably, better work has died almost without leaving a trace behind.

We find snatches of airs which were commonly known two or three hundred years ago as fresh in their appeal as those of to-day. If a music hall were to take for its fare the melodies of a couple of hundred years ago, the streets would be ringing with the tunes that amused the town of George the First's day, or Queen Anne's. We find *Lillibulero* as popular a tune with today's Orangemen as it was when it so aided the fortunes of William of Orange in Ireland in 1688.

To give another example we find the 16th or 17th century tune *Joan's Placket is torn* figuring to-day as *Cock o' the North* exactly as it was played in the 17th century. This is an example typical of many an air, and has rather a curious story attached to it.

There is a tradition that it was played while Mary Queen of Scots was led to execution. However devoid of authentic history the tradition has something to suggest foundation. It is eminently a trumpet tune and one that was always played as a mark of defiance or derision. It is not generally known that the trumpeters who are part of the Judges of Assize's entourage, had more to do than simply to glorify the function of the Court. Originally their office was to sound a fanfare on their trumpets when the death sentence was pronounced upon a prisoner. For anything we know 'Joan's Placket' may have been a melody in Queen Elizabeth's time that was so used.

We first hear of it through Pepys mentioning it in his diary.

The monarch Charles II. was not very particular in the payment of his sailors, and as a consequence his fine ship *The Royal Charles* was abandoned by the crew in the Medway in 1667, while we were at war with Holland. The Dutch promptly took possession of it, and we learn that a Dutch trumpeter sounded from the deck the fanfare 'Joan's Placket,' in triumph of the bloodless victory they had obtained.

We next find it, later in the seventeenth century, as the tune to which political lampoons were written. How it afterwards got into the British Army and how it changed its name I confess my ignorance. During the Indian Mutiny, 1857, the City of Lucknow was besieged by the Sepoys, as was also the Residency, a mile or so distant from the city walls. It was the practice to exchange flag signals from Lucknow to the Residency, and the story goes that after the signalling a drummer boy named Ross climbed to the roof from whence the signalling was done in Lucknow, and sounded on a bugle 'The Cock o' the North,' amid a hail of bullets from the Sepoys. This was a note of defiance which kept alive the tradition which had always been associated with the melody, for 'The Cock o' the North' was 'Joan's Placket' with scarce a note altered.

We next hear of the melody in a plucky fight on the Indian frontier when the piper, shot in the leg, crouched behind a stone and played 'The Cock o' the North,' not only in defiance of the enemy, but as a cheering tune to the men of his regiment - who were rushing to the onslaught. After this incident we heard it from every piano and organ in the country, and it was whistled by the errand lads.

Many similar examples ought to be cited if we were to go deeply into the question. For example there is the fine Irish tune which set to the words 'A Rose tree in full bearing,' occurs in the ballad opera, 'The Poor Soldier,' 1783.

This was used by a celebrated song writer and became part of a very popular set of verses, while the Irish religious faction made it one of their party tunes.

Then the eighteenth-century tune 'Bow, wow, wow,' a good tune in its way, had a revival years ago as a tune for a comic song, the theme of which was 'By studying economy I live like a lord.' 'Calder

Fair,' too, which appeared in Captain Simon Fraser's book of *Highland Airs*, 1816, has had a wonderful popularity through being set to all sorts of songs, generally comic, from 'Sing a Song of Sixpence,' to a more modern ditty of not so refined a class.

Captain Fraser gives it as 'The Hawthorn Tree of Cawdor,' and mentions under what circumstances it was sung at Cawdor Castle. We have found that 'Derry Down' has had at least two if not three centuries of continuous popularity, and 'Gee ho Dobbin' has almost equalled it. The reason why these tunes have survived is because they are vitally alive, and carried forward many different sets of verses which would never have attained any degree of favour had they rested on their own merits.

If I were as foolish as those compilers of 'One Hundred Best Books,' I should make a list of 'One Hundred Best Tunes,' and should certainly include 'The King of the Cannibal Islands.' It was originally called 'Vulcan's Cave,' and was the composition of John Charles White, a music seller of Bath. It is strongly original and goes with a swing; it has carried many sets of verses.

Let one recall the air 'The Country Bumpkin.' The seventeenth-century tune is even popular to-day, and formerly was united to a comic song by Thomas Hudson, 'When a man's a little bit poorly,' a bit of homely wit well worth knowing.

In conclusion I contend that for clever melody, and melody which will live, we have yet to rake among the lyrics of the seventeenth and the eighteenth periods. No modern air has anything like the vitality in it that is found in the scores of tunes that are but too little known in their original form.

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