

## AN APPROXIMATION TO THE TRUTH ABOUT AUGUST WILHELMJ

ONE hot summer day, now many years ago, I walked through the brown linoleumed passages of the Guildhall School of Music to choose a violin-master for my friend, Reginald Hills, and the accident happened which spoilt for ever my own violin playing! The light streamed harshly through high windows on to ugly walls and on to the lifeless linoleum. Pianos and violins were faintly heard on all sides. Suddenly there rang out a violin passage, high on the E string. What tone! Full, brilliant, fiery and yet smooth! The dynamic stress of the phrasing, the rocking rhythm were a revelation! Had this been all, it had been enough, but it was not all, for, in the quality of tone there was something quite strange, though obscured perhaps a little by its brilliancy and power. I felt it instantly, and for ever after that I could no more think of this violinist and class him as a violinist of any known school or tendency than a naturalist could accept the assurance of people around that a certain animal, newly arrived, was the finest elephant at the Zoo, when actually a mastodon stood before him! With what mixed feelings, were this thing possible, would he not pay his twopence for a ride on its back; with what mixed feelings hear around him the complacent chatter about the fine new elephant! The mood of his fellow passengers, its bright stale vulgarity in blending with the note of awe and religious gloom, struck in his own mind by the sight and movements, by his contact with this life-in-death monster of bygone æons, would bewilder him with strange feelings of wonder. At times, for fleeting instants, would he imagine himself dreaming, until, a sense of reality and everydayness gaining the upper hand, he rushed off to the authorities to demand an explanation concerning this newly-arrived and ill-understood creature.

And so it has been with me. Ever since that day I have been rushing to and fro, *virtually speaking*, seeing what authorities I could find, questioning them and myself, in vain almost. I am indebted to Mr. Gordon Tanner for the saying, "Not a king, but a god of violinists," as an apt *aperçu*: one which points the right road. And the great Liszt, speaking out of his deep instinct, said, on hearing the sixteen-year-old Wilhelmj play, "Aye, indeed, you are predestinated to become a violinist; so much so that *for you the violin*

*must have been invented had it not already existed.*" It is significant that in this connection Wilhelmj invariably spoke of contemporary great violinists as great musicians—very fine musicians, but not violinists. Ysaye, however, he admitted, was essentially a violinist, so too was Sarasate; but they had limitations, for they only brought out certain aspects of violin tone. And the accident—well, that was a trifling matter, and merely this, that, hearing Wilhelmj was the end of me as a violinist—like the frog, I burst in endeavouring to swell myself to the size of the bull.

Born at Usingen, in Nassau, on September 21, 1845, August Wilhelmj was the son of a lawyer, owner of famous vineyards on the Rhine. His mother was a pupil of Chopin, and, though his father played the violin in a bold and powerful style, it was to his mother that the young Wilhelmj owed his first initiation into the mysteries of music. Subsequently he went to Fischer of Wiesbaden. In 1854 Henrietta Sontag called him the German Paganini, when (aged nine) he played at Limburg. But his father was averse from allowing the boy to become a professional musician, he deemed the life a wretched one for all save the gifted few capable of creating a public *furor*.

During the next seven years, taking his violin studies in his stride, so to speak, and developing rapidly on the interpretative side, it yet remained quite uncertain what was to be the boy's fate. At last, however, determined to obtain his father's consent to his adopting the concert platform as his life's work, he begged his father to decide. "Go," said the old man, "and consult some eminent musician; he shall decide for us what is to become of you." Young Wilhelmj elected to go to Franz Liszt.

When Liszt was a young man he had heard Paganini play, and had forthwith determined that he himself would become the Paganini of the piano. He had heard Paganini and yet he could find it in his honest open heart to say to the sixteen-year-old Wilhelmj (who in that time was not in full practice, who was still, in fact, an amateur): "Aye, indeed, you are predestinated to become a violinist; so much so that *for you the violin must have been invented had it not already existed.*" And, shortly after, he presented the boy to Ferdinand David, whose pupil he remained until 1864, when he took lessons in harmony from Richter and Hauptmann, and later also from Joachim Raff. The meeting of Wilhelmj and Raff leaves me quite undecided as to whether Wilhelmj's peculiar violin playing influenced Raff's subsequent compositions, or whether Raff influenced Wilhelmj's playing more. If one is to judge from the second great concerto for violin, subsequently re-arranged by Wilhelmj, it would seem the influence was equal and reciprocal. Raff had leanings towards the

introduction into music of quarter-tones, and in this way, as well as in spirit, his music was the diametric opposite of Debussy's music. High, harsh and brilliant above other compositions is the music of Raff; but not more so than the music of Debussy is low, soft and slack. Invariably Raff seems to have arranged his compositions, by instinct, to ring fiercely with upper partials, just as Debussy seems with equal craft to subordinate these, thus obtaining smooth, simple pure sounds similar to those of the tuning fork, and as devoid of strife and meaning as the bleating of goats and lambs, or the idle whinnying of colts.

After leaving Raff, Wilhelmj travelled, in 1865, through Switzerland and Holland. What the Swiss thought of him I do not know. The Dutch, whom I venture to call the soundest intuitive critics in the world where music is concerned, were amazed. Yet he came upon them too suddenly. Much was written about his immense tone, and much about his entirely personal, yet thoroughly consistent, methods of interpretation; but little was decided critically. The King, the father of Queen Wilhelmina, expressed himself profoundly moved and astonished. Wilhelmj continued his travels, passing on to Russia and America. In Russia, naturally, he created the very deepest impression, and critics wrote endlessly on his excellence, but with very little discrimination as to his singularities of style. The violin is for most musicians an acquired taste and, unfortunately, very few critics have been violinists. His excellence possibly was exaggerated, his significance but very vaguely apprehended. Wilhelmj passed over to America. Now, in the United States, especially in those days, only the negroes were musical. He was greatly appreciated, but mostly, one suspects, on account of his air of vigorous and massive mastery. The United States saw in him a cold and resolutely efficient performer.

He returned to Germany, where he led the first violins for Wagner's first Bayreuth festival.

Wagner's testimony, in a letter to Wilhelmj, goes to show (what, indeed, must always have seemed likely to violinists) that characteristic playing (on any instrument, even) may lead a composer on to new ideas. Wagner had never before heard the violin, so he wrote. Previously he had, indeed, heard music on the violin, but now it seemed to him he heard for the first time the violin on music, so to speak, a new world of sound (quintessentially violin sound), and it furnished him with a whole new field of sensation whereon new compositions would in time grow to harvest.

Now, whatever readers (if this article ever have any) may think of me, the testimony of Wagner and Liszt cannot be lightly brushed aside, and the most interesting part of their testimony is that relating to Wilhelmj's playing as "something new under the sun—new and

beautiful." Both Wagner and Liszt had heard Joachim. Liszt, who influenced Joachim greatly, urged upon that most musicianly violinist the need for a greater technique. Wagner, who heard him much later, thought him better than others (excluding Wilhelmj), but better only along much the same lines. He did not impress Wagner as Wilhelmj did, that is to say, as the very incarnation of the spirit of the violin. Liszt had also heard Paganini.

Why, then, in spite of this evidence—great in quality, if small in quantity—is Wilhelmj so comparatively little known?

I think it is sufficient to say, in explanation thereof: firstly, that his active career was too short; secondly, that all inventions or innovations require much time for their full appreciation, for the full appreciation of the greatness of the inventor and of his paving-the-way labours.

Consider, again, in connection with the first reason, how difficult it is to overcome the inertia of public opinion. Much time and many appearances will be required of an artist before this inertia is quite overcome. Men become famous usually just as they are beginning to be too old to live up to their fame—they have been sowing, but the soil is slow. By the time they are too weary to sow further the harvest is ripe. Their fame is in every field, but the spinal cord has run dry. In literature, it is plain, one man has succeeded where another failed merely because he wrote more; he threw enough gold dust and some of it stuck.

Now Wilhelmj, far too critical of himself and horrified by the example of artists whose skill had vanished long before their fame, resolved upon an early retirement. No one ever could persuade him that he had retired too soon.

As for the second reason for his relative obscurity, the peculiarities of his style were indeed felt and even worshipped, but everyone was baffled to express those peculiarities; consequently people held their peace or merely added praise to praise until this admiration became as nauseous to Wilhelmj as it did to those who had never heard him. Here, thought the latter, we have a fine example of party-spirit and overdone loyalty to a chosen master. Such an explaining away of Wilhelmj's merits had, of course, special power in England, where *esprit de corps* is almost a fetish. Anyone hearing a Wilhelmj pupil praise Wilhelmj merely bowed to the great idol *Esprit de Corps* and courteously dismissed the whole matter from his mind.

No one, it would seem, need be ashamed of not having at once perceived the full import of a new idea, a new feeling or an invention.

Napoleon I. scorned the steamboat; Wellington thought railways were mere toys. Few people (even amongst mathematicians) besides Briggs foresaw the full scope of logarithms. We have no time, and we know this instinctively, to be deeply impressionable even about many of those things which most deeply concern us. Here and there, however, someone happens to be already disposed by nature to be impressed along the lines required. On such a person, then, develops the duty of post-herald or advertiser, should he live to see the genius he thinks he understands, or the idea (not his own) for which he is hopeful, overlaid and in danger of oblivion.

Exactly how tall and how broad Wilhelmj was I do not know, and if I knew I should not tell it here; for he always created upon me the impression of being a giant, a creature of a different race. This feeling was greatly increased for me when I watched him playing. His chest measurement, if I must speak statistically, was doubtless inferior to Zbysco, or even Hackenschmidt; his height was undoubtedly less than Goliath's, or even Jess Willard's. But he kept up the character of giant, of fee-faw-fummism more consistently than those I have mentioned (if I may omit Goliath)—far better than these men of more inches. The massiveness was in his sensory nerve system as much as, if not more than, in his dreamy wisdom and gracious unconcern for the commonplace in life. This imparted to all his movements a massive, smooth deliberateness. One saw skill where one anticipated clumsiness, as one does in the case of bears and elephants, as one did in the case of Dr. W. G. Grace. Many a time, as a boy, have I seen Grace move to field a ball, too late and too slow as I thought; but no, he was there just in the very nick of time, without hurry or apparent effort. Many a time have I seen Wilhelmj's fingers come down too late for that swift bowing of his. But no, just in time! I could scarcely trust my eyes. Those big elephant fingers would never hurry for that lightning bowing. And behind that curious act of skill one felt the large, firmly established passional system of feeling, which supported the act and gave occasion to all his other peculiarities in music. The sweeping swinging tone, the deep breath glides, the rocking rhythm, the incredibly bold relief given to significant phrases, the handsome richness of tone on the lower strings, the brilliancy and incisiveness on the E string, all these were no mere loose accretions, but part of a strange underlying system, weapons in the armoury of a unique physico-psychic bias; and, most wonderful to relate, they were neither destructive of the music nor wholly subordinate to it, but in some way co-ordinate with it. The violin was made to hold equal rank with the music. Joachim subordinated the violin and its mysteries of tone.

Paganini subordinated the music to the needs of the violin. They were the supreme instances. Wilhelmj, alone of all players, gave violin and music equal value, without perceptible loss to either; nay, with unique gain to both. Nurtured on his playing, educated by his teaching, innumerable pupils have picked up his methods and his effects, but when they endeavoured to assume the underlying cause or system of causes which led Wilhelmj by degrees to his discoveries in violin rendering they found that they had to swell their natures until they burst, as did the frog who wished to show she was as big as the bull. The machinery they have and the method they know, but the motive power is not there, and with a substitute fuel the machine wears out. This has been my case. Of all players, Wilhelmj and Ysaye were the most thoroughly in tune. Next in order, in my opinion, come Albert Sammons and Achille Rivarde. But about the two former there could have been no doubt. Yet anything more horribly out of tune than Wilhelmj and Ysaye playing together would have been impossible inside the ranks of the virtuosi. The timbre of tone was so different between the two. Wilhelmj's tone emphasised different upper partials and lay on the road which terminates in the tone produced by brass instruments. Ysaye's tended towards the woodwinds and towards the simple musical purity sought by Debussy (the composer). If these two had played together, Wilhelmj would have sounded too sharp, Ysaye too flat (assuming, of course, they made no attempt at compromise of their usual styles). Playing solos with orchestra, Ysaye made the orchestra seem slightly sharp, Wilhelmj made it seem slightly flat, and this more noticeably in upper register work high on the E string in both cases. The feverish voluminous brilliancy of Ysaye's tone had for basis a rich and ample organic sensibility, devoid, perhaps, of any strong bias for differentiation in tone-sounds. In keeping with the general tenor of his physique, the basilar membrane of his ear was broad and richly supplied with neural termini or sensitive spots, more richly than in the case of any other player within my knowledge, but in other respects the auditory membrane was normal. In the case of Wilhelmj there was, I venture to suggest, a pronounced abnormality, *e.g.*, a longer and relatively narrower basilar membrane equally, or nearly equally, richly supplied with neural points, possessed actually a greater number from its superior length, which enabled him to detect higher register notes in new relations to still higher upper partials, which only he could hear, but which altered for him the proportion or perspective of the normal scheme of tone pitch. In other words, the colouring of upper partials (practically beyond hearing range of other violinists) tempered for him the colouring of all notes below. I remember particularly being told by

my friends Reginald Hills and Ernest Earle that a certain pupil—a Mr. Bevan, I think—stoutly maintained against Wilhelmj himself that that latter was out of tune almost immediately he played on the E string. Wilhelmj as stoutly held that Mr. Bevan was always flat anywhere on any string except the G. This is splendid evidence for my suggestion; I could never hope to manufacture any half so good. On the G string, of course, very high upper partials, unheard by Mr. Bevan, *operate least*, if at all. There both Wilhelmj and Mr. Bevan could almost agree. But even away on the lower register Wilhelmj was the master of Mr. Bevan, for he could hear musical notes from locomotives as they entered and left tunnels provided they were puffing. These notes are too low; the bat's squeak is too high for average human hearing. That Wilhelmj ranged both ways beyond average hearing was established for him by scientific tests he underwent at the hand of some pupil of the celebrated Von Helmholtz—at least, so he told me, and I cannot see any justification for doubting it.

I, too, had been left wondering at times at Wilhelmj's intonation; but common sense, not modesty, told me that it must be I who was at fault. Allowing for his limitations, Mr. Bevan was right; but, as landladies say, "circumstances alter cases."

On the basis, then, of an abnormally complete apparatus for hearing music, Wilhelmj from childhood up, of course, was left to erect his superstructure of art; that is to say, he took the world and re-modelled it nearer to his heart's desire, as every artist must do, in music. But he had more building materials—or, practically speaking, different building materials—from any of his predecessors.

And the superstructure he built was noble in design, beautiful and strange in material. It was spacious, yet towering and Gothic. It inspired three composers: Liszt, Raff and Wagner. It gave to the world many imitations: imitations which resemble as the toadstool resembles the mushroom, plausible and poisonous resemblances. Some violinists used his bricks, others his stones, some used his design but with unsuitable material; the giants' palace we shall never have again, I think. All that he introduced into violin playing is now the commonplace of Kubelik, Mischa Elman, to a certain extent of Kreisler. For such men, one glance at Wilhelmj's phrasing or paraphrasing of any well-known violin piece was sufficient to give them what otherwise they never would have had. Yet, weighed in the balance, they are found relatively wanting, great as they are. They are not sustained, one feels, by the underlying passional system, in all its logical completeness, which gave such consistency to Wilhelmj's interpretations and which led him ever onward to fresh discoveries in interpretation. Each phrase fails in their case to amplify, confirm and enforce the whole.

Whosoever they use his method they are merely powerful, bright, hard, hollow and stereotyped, or, at the best, like him, indeed, yet inferior in degree. Instinct or some felicitous combination of faculties forced Wilhelmj to express the subconscious within him with amazing, and till then unattempted, fidelity. It was that intimate and clearly expressed relation of every aspect of his playing to his emotional or æsthetic world, which led hearers on to find correlation in their own, so that some of his most characteristic sudden strokes of analysis in interpretation shook the listener's own kingdom of emotion from end to end, as no mere undesigned tickling of the ears can. It was not a mere matter of sense perception, but one of emotional and æsthetic inference; of that vast life below the surface, the emotional and æsthetic life, arranged by passion according to its own swift unerring logic into an incomparable system which, taken in its entirety, constitutes our private life, our religion.

One's first letter from father or mother received during the first week at a boarding school is very dear to one: it urges patience for the homesick and breathes the love of the parents, however carefully that love may be disguised. And good music is like a letter from our Father in heaven which bids us have yet a little more patience and speaks of the joys to come. The written music, the works composed, these are indeed the words of the Father, but the instruments which play them recall the very accents of the beloved voice which we must have heard in some mysterious way before. In so far forth as a player is able to make these accents of the beloved voice seem real to us, in so far is the player performing as divine a function as the composer. There is nothing to choose between them, surely! But it is a rare thing for this to take place. Usually we must help the illusion by drawing from the illimitable depths of our inner lives the accents we so wish to hear. But the voice of an earthly father has different tones on different occasions; even so the tones of great players vary and yet seem the tones of the Father of all.

Dr. Johnson could not understand, so he said, why a woman like Mrs. Thrale should waste herself on so contemptible a being as an Italian fiddler. I am not going to justify Mrs. Thrale's choice, for the man's sex-appeal probably had far more to do with it than his violin-playing; but he who sees no more in violin-playing than playing on the violin knows nothing of the importance of the subconscious mind and its treasures, and consequently never dreams how much more likely it is that therein lies the true escape to heaven. The back door, not the front portals, of conscious intellect shall let out the poor prisoner.

Every violinist worthy of the name is a great guide and philosopher : his logic is the infallible logic of passion. By passion I mean everything in the nature of an expansiveness of one's whole being : the projecting of one's soul into the universe, the stretching forth of the hand towards the illimitable, intuitive life, religion, and every gracious impulse. Passion in the sense of anger is a contraction of one's self, and the very negation of what is here meant by the "passional underlying system of our lives."

I have said every violinist ; I mean, of course, every instrumentalist. But instrumentalists must beware how they copy : they must be themselves. No human being who is not true to himself can have æsthetic value, whatever other values he may possess. Wilhelmj, then, is no less a figure to me, even on a purely intellectual estimate, than are Newton or Schopenhauer. But he was a violinist, a mere fiddler, and will soon be forgotten ; he did not even play to a gramophone, as modern players can do now to perpetuate their deeds and memory. I will conclude by adverting to Wilhelmj's use of the right arm. His whole soul seemed to be in the right arm. All violinists have told us this should be so ; but I have never seen that it was so, save in Wilhelmj's case. He lifted his bow from the strings perhaps more than most violinists, and he bowed with inconceivable swiftness when playing detached whole-length notes. The fingers of his left hand were the slaves of his bow-arm. With Ysaye the direct opposite was visibly the case. Wilhelmj's *allargando* passages exceeded one's utmost expectations in grandeur. In rendering the *arpeggio* passage of Bach's "Chaconne" he hypnotised the listener to feel that the passage would *go on for ever*, that *nothing could arrest it* ; where double-stopping occurred, the solemnity of tone startled ! The sombre glory of his playing on the G string was well-nigh unbelievable, the cutting speed of his short detached bowing in quick-note passages was a violent stimulating tone and always, in the man himself, it seemed there reigned a great absent-minded calm, as if he were immersed in far greater things, and these were but a faint suggestion of what lay below, waiting to be expressed.

But, the reader may say, nearly all the great violinists have a powerful tone, a fine skill with the bow, and, indeed, most of all the qualities you mention. They have, but not only have they not got them to the same extent, but what is much more, they do not throw into relief the particular qualities which the music may call for at any moment, as he did, but allow these qualities to war against one another, so to speak, to strut the stage mechanically all the while. Violinists fall into two classes in respect to their uses of violin beauties of tone, as people who are

fond of dressing well do. You have the girl who puts on many things beautiful which yet detract from one another's beauty when in juxtaposition; people of no particular taste laugh and call these vulgar. You have, on the other hand, the woman who is careful to wear only things called suitable things, which, without being beautiful themselves, yet together please our sense of fitness. The latter effect, however, is on the whole unsatisfying, insipid. These two classes seem incompatible, mutually destructive—they are so in dress, but in violin-playing Wilhelmj united these differing aims and so achieved the incredible. And I take the liberty of conjecturing that he is the only violinist who has ever wanted to do this sufficiently to have succeeded in doing it.

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