Mr. Ernest Newman on 'The Piano-Player'

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Letters to the Editor

MR. ERNEST NEWMAN ON 'THE PIANO-PLAYER'

SIR.—At last we have a really practical and sensitively-musical book on the piano-player, and Mr. Newman's quite admirable work should be in the hands of every intelligent user of a piano-player. There are but few points on which I should venture to disagree with the author, but as an old 'pianolist' who has worked through all its models, I may perhaps have a helpful word in commentary.

Mr. Newman rightly says that the instrument could be made far more responsive and sensitive, but that it is not a good commercial proposition to do so, as only a comparatively small number would then be able to use it. Yet could not the music student be catered for in a specially suitable type of construction? The pianoforte maker does not make his instrument on the assumption that it will be used mainly by schoolgirls and learners; he makes it in the hope of meriting the advertising encomiums of a Paderewski, a Pachmann, a Hofmann, &c., so that that argument is disposed of.

Anyhow, I myself soon got so tired of the mechanical unresponsiveness of my pianola that I experimented and hit upon a method of improving it which I commend to any of your readers who are similarly dissatisfied with their instrument. Briefly it is this (and it can be adapted to any player at a trifling cost): The bellows that fill the wind-chest are worked by springs; normally the bellows contain two springs of 14-lbs. each. These are provided so as to ensure sufficient air in the wind-chest to make all the notes sound, and to run the motor evenly. But this means that there is always too much air in the chest; no real *pp* or *ppp* can be got, and no change of touch or accent by foot-pressure is possible except in, say, every two or three notes. To ask of the ordinary player a series of single notes *pp*, and each with a different accent, quality, or touch, is to demand the impossible; and yet if such cannot be procured, real nuance, phrasing, grading, or accent are impossible, and the player is almost useless musically.

It occurred to me that it should be possible to put only as much air in the wind-chest as was needed for the chord or note to be played, and if the spring-pressure were lightened it should be possible to make foot-pressure alone responsible for the touch and accent. I had one of the 14-lb. springs removed, and at once proved the truth of my theory; I then had the 14-lb. spring replaced by a 7-lb. spring, with the delightful result that I can now play a chord or a single note either *pp* or *ff* by foot-pressure alone; and can make the notes in a passage of single notes all different, and of whatever strength I desire, from *ppp* to *fff*. All that has to be learned is never to let the bellows go slack, to keep each foot tight against the other, so that enough air is always in the chest for any note needed, the feet feeding each other as the notes pass by, each providing for what is to come. Nearly every note in a piece is thus given its own distinctive foot-pressure; one *makes* each note as it comes, as do the fingers. This method also gives complete control over phrasing—building up a sentence, as Mr. Newman has it. *Crescendos* and *diminuendos* are perfectly under control, ensuring perfect grading and therefore perfect phrasing. The work is so personal, so direct, and so human that it is far less fatiguing and a thousand times more enjoyable. We are really playing our pianoforte instead of merely 'operating a pianola.'

Part-writing also becomes much clearer; one hears the 'stuff' all over the keyboard. The muddy, thick effect so common in pianola playing disappears. The joy of perfect grading is very great—e.g., the *Scherzo* of Chopin's B minor Sonata can be interpreted with nearly all the free, intangible phrasing one desires.

But I must emphatically differ from Mr. Newman when, on p. 138, he says, 'There is nothing easier than to incorporate phrasing in the roll by means of the metrostyle. By the flicking of the tempo-lever all degrees of retardation and acceleration can be obtained; this is the way indeed in which the musician phrases on the piano-player.'

If so, I feel like saying, 'The less musician he.' Phrasing is the elocution of music, and is a question of emotional stress far more than rate of movement. A phrase is made *cres.* and *dim.* by its grading. Play a passage with a level tone, and no amount of tempo-lever flicking will give a feeling of phrasing. Also there are countless passages where no *rubato* of the least sort is permissible, and yet they must be perfectly phrased or be meaningless. As an instance chosen almost at random, play Fugue No. 22 of Book I. of the 'Forty-eight.' This needs the most intimate phrasing, but must be played in strict time. If Mr. Newman could get on his player the freedom of grading and accent I do on mine, he would not, I feel sure, have given this advice. It is the inability to get this full, free, spontaneous grading that tempts the pianolist to rely on the tempo-lever for his effects, leading to an abuse of *rubato*, and spoiling the natural rhythm of the passage.

I have made scores of converts to this light spring method, and all are genuinely grateful for the enormous increase in spontaneity, and in the personality it has conferred on the piano-player. An old argument against it was that accent should be got by the accent levers plus a full wind-chest. I found, however, that this was a very difficult method to acquire, especially to any with feeble wrists or fingers, and nowadays it is quite out of the question, by reason of the themodising of so many notes. If both levers have to be held back to soften the accompaniment, how can they be used for accenting without the accompaniment becoming loud also? And I was told that it would make the tempo of the motor unsteady; but it does this in so slight a degree as to be negligible. The slightest turn of the tempo-lever instantly corrects it. Till we get the ideal player in which the motor is driven independently—a method I advocated twenty years ago—this method of mine seems as far as we can go in sensitiveness of response. The performer does very largely what he wants to do, and this grows with practice. Of course such manipulation calls for continual study, but that is where the fun comes in, and progress is quickly made. I always combat the dictum that it is too sensitive for the ordinary person, by saying that as his great difficulty is in playing a passage twice alike, he has to search for and choose which way he likes it best, and the power to do so soon comes. He is exercising choice, even sub-consciously.

Mr. Newman makes a good point when he complains, as I have long done, that rolls are not 'barred.' Copyright cannot exist here, as all new music cut is paid for in royalties, and the old classics are surely so long out of all copyright as to make that no defence, especially when a perfect mechanical device for it has been patented.

Mr. Newman has some good advice on the sustaining pedal, and complains, rightly, of its difficulty in the piano-player. I realised this difficulty, and made mine (both in extended leverage on my 'grand' and in extra ease of spring in the pianola) so that I can work my pedal lever with the little finger. It is so light and instantly responsive as to seem to be broken. But pianofortes differ in their ease of adjustment in this direction.

I venture to disagree with Mr. Newman's theory that we should regard the piano-player as an instrument that should have music composed or arranged specially for it. This idea came about, I believe, from the difficulty of getting any real approach to the delicate grading of finger-playing. 'Accent in *pp* is impossible, &c.,' say some people. 'Give it up, then, and let us try only for what it *can* do—big, noisy orchestral arrangements.' Mr. Newman says the player can do so much more than ten fingers that rolls should be cut giving fuller transcriptions of orchestral pieces than the usual pianoforte arrangement. But if we go too far in this direction only noise will result; the labour, and the amount of air needed to make so many notes sound, preclude all delicacy or intimacy of rendering. One may as well ask six people to sit down to one pianoforte and play. I prefer music to musical noise, and the orchestral rolls I can really enjoy are very few and far between.

A great deal of pianoforte music is impossible on the pianola. The 'Reconnaissance' in Schumann's 'Carnaval' with its multitude of short repeated notes with a delicate melody over, is impossible of adequate interpretation by any

player-mechanism. The 'Pantalon' is equally impossible; so why ask for more notes to be cut when to be played at all they must be given *ff*?

In fact I refuse to regard my pianola as more than a substitute for fingers. I want to play my pianoforte, the pianola is merely the intermediary, and it must express *me* or I will have none of it. Monochrome renderings of polychrome orchestral works are so unsatisfactory that in cutting such rolls the ideal should always be the most pianistic rendering, a translation into the terms of the pianoforte, not the fullest rendering of the orchestral notes. Numberless works can be found containing quadruple shakes, impossible to play properly with even any amount of noise. We must not forget it is the pianoforte we are playing: the player is merely a substitute for our fingers, and must be improved in that direction only, or else we shall falsify our beautiful instrument, the grand pianoforte. Of course there are cases where one can add notes impossible from stretch of fingers, *e.g.*, bass octaves giving great depth. I frequently do this when cutting transcriptions from Bach's organ works; but even then one does not transcend the pianistic effect proper. It is these noisy orchestral renderings, plus the heavy spring and its turn-a-handle monotony of effect, that make the piano-player so often an intolerable nuisance to all—but the performer!—Yours, &c.,

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Acton, W.3.

'EXTREMISTS *versus* THE REST'

SIR,—May I be allowed, as a regular reader of your paper, to express regret that the pages devoted to 'Correspondence' should, in the December number, have been reserved for the petty quarrels of two of our leading musical critics. This section of the paper is surely intended to be a medium through which readers may express their views on music, or seek information, and ought not to be used by a critic for the purpose of saying what he thinks of another critic. This battle of wits has now been going on for some time, in various papers, and I feel sure that the musical public in general is beginning to be tired of it, and will agree with me in suggesting that your valuable space could be put to better use.—Yours, &c.,

J. N. G. ESCOMBE.

[We sympathise with Mr. Escombe's complaint, and while welcoming free and frank discussion, we must ask contributors and correspondents to bear in mind that they are disputing themselves in a forum, not in a prize ring.—ED., *M.T.*]

'SYSTEM IN MUSICAL NOTATION'

SIR,—Dr. Ferris Tozer is not entirely correct in supposing that I had not read Mr. Elliot Button's book. Actually, I have read at least a good part of it (unless my memory is gravely at fault) in past numbers of the *Musical Times*; but I admit that this was not in the least in my mind when I wrote my letter. I did not, indeed, set out to write a criticism of Mr. Button's work, but merely to make a comment suggested by an article in the *Musical Times* which happened itself to be a review of the book. However, if, as Dr. Tozer suggests, I have chosen 'two of the most convincing examples in the book' for criticism, no harm has been done. To attack a man's book at its strongest points gives, surely, little cause for complaint. Criticism deliberately directed against the weakest points might perhaps be regarded as carping.

In case, however, it might seem from Dr. Tozer's letter—if read alone—that I had written in depreciation of Mr. Button's work, I should like to say that I have since found an opportunity for looking through it (in complete form) and find much in it is valuable that—especially in the more elementary parts, about which there can of course be little dispute. The more contentious parts, too, are interesting and stimulating; but between saying this and agreeing with all Mr. Button states—and especially accepting all his various 'conditions'—there is a great gulf fixed.

Dr. Tozer makes a mistake, if I may say so, in appealing to the authority of Sir Edward Elgar. I rather doubt if Sir Edward would support *everything* Mr. Button writes;

but apart altogether from this, the great charm of Mr. Button's book lies in the youthful exuberance with which he throws overboard all authority altogether. He appeals not to authority, but to reason, system, and logic. (The very title of his work proclaims this.) To fall back, then, after all, on authority is rather to knock the bottom out of his case. Moreover, it leaves it open to me to make the obvious retort that if Mr. Button has Sir Edward Elgar on his side, I, at any rate, have Bach, Beethoven, and the rest of them, on mine!—Yours, &c.,

A. R. CRIPPS.

10, Ambrose Place, Worthing.

December 11, 1920.

VINCENT D'INDY'S VIEW OF HARMONY

SIR,—Mr. Thelwall will find M. d'Indy's demonstration of his Lower Harmonic series in vol. i., pp. 98, 99, of the 'Cours de Composition.' It is similar to that in Riemann's 'Harmony Simplified.' M. d'Indy, in his chapter 'The History of Harmonic Theories,' credits Zarlino with discovering (arithmetically) the true basis of the Minor Mode. Tartini and his resultant tones, and Arthur von Oettingen ('Harmoniesystem in Dualer Entwicklung') are the chief of the later supporters he marshals. His last paragraph on p. 142 points to a hope in a physical demonstration of the whole lower series:

'Our ideas, our knowledge, and our nature itself are eminently modifiable if not perfectible, and who can deny that a theory like ours has a great chance of being true when it assembles in its favour all the distinguished minds whose laborious research we have just retraced? May each of us now verify it, absorb it, and still add to it by his personal toil of reflection and application.'

I ought to say that M. d'Indy does not call his lower harmonics 'partials.' The sentence Mr. Thelwall quotes ('If one cannot hear them in nature, one is to realise them "by second nature,"' &c.) was not a translation from M. d'Indy, nor was it given as such, though I think it fairly enough renders his teaching.—Yours, &c.,

London, December, 1920.

RICHARD CAPELL.

SIR,—In the *Musical Times* for December I see a letter from Mr. Walter Thelwall, in which he says:

'I am somewhat sceptical as to these multiple tones. . . . I hope that this letter may have the effect of eliciting evidence upon the subject.'

Has Mr. Thelwall tried the effect of playing the lowest note on the organ pedals with only a 16-ft. stop out, then adding the note a 5th higher? The lower octave of the C is then plainly audible. Is this not a proof—even to the unscientific—that these lower partials do exist?—Yours, &c.,

The Look-out, Clevedon.

ENID PAYNE

December 1, 1920.

(Mrs. Walter Morris).

'LETTERS OF GREAT COMPOSERS'

SIR,—I crave an inch of your valuable space to reply to Mr. F. Sinclair-Terras and Mr. R. B. Kettlewell, whose letters concerning my article appeared in the November and December numbers of the *Musical Times*. Mr. Terras has apparently misread me. The edition of Mendelssohn's letters he mentions is the identical one I possess, and from which my quotations were taken. I merely expressed a wish that some of our enterprising publishers of to-day who issue reprints of the world's classics would include a selection from the correspondence of Mendelssohn.

In reply to Mr. R. B. Kettlewell's reference to my not having treated of Brahms' letters, I may say that, from considerations of space, I confined myself to four selected composers. In a future article I hope to deal with a further four composers, when I shall certainly include the Herzogenberg correspondence of Johannes Brahms.—Yours, &c.,

WILLIAM PEARSON.

323, Victoria Road,

Alton Park, Birmingham.

December 5, 1920.