The Music and Musicians of Dickens. II (Concluded)

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'The choice fell on the "Spring Song," which however met with little favour. The audience evidently had no opinion of Mendelssohn. The small children made for their mothers' arms in terror, and were only consoled with difficulty. The general feeling was one of astonishment passing to displeasure. We hastily took off that record and replaced it by a hunting chorus plentifully sprinkled with the blare of horns. This met with a most enthusiastic reception. . . . We went on to the music-halls, and singers, and whistlers, and when the interval was announced after "Fou Rire," the entire audience went off almost convulsed with attempts to imitate it.'

Of the countries of the East that have taken most kindly to Western music Japan is the chief. Fifty years ago Occidental music was unheard and unknown in the land. There existed only the native variety, a good deal of which, incidentally, is very beautiful and acceptable to Western ears. When Japan started to modernise she did it thoroughly, and included music in the scheme. British and French bandmasters were brought in to train army and navy bands. A few years later Western music was introduced into the schools and colleges. Conservatories on Western lines were established, mostly with German teachers, who ran Japan's music for many years. The Japanese proved apt pupils, so much so that they are now quite competent to look after their own music, which they do. There is now very little to distinguish the Academy of Music, Tokio, from similar institutions in European centres. It turns out fully equipped students executively, who are absorbed into the numerous orchestras and bands that exist in the country. Most of its teachers are Japanese, and nowadays Western music has even penetrated into Court circles.

The same thing is gradually happening in China, but to nothing like the same extent, the spread of Western music being generally due to the missionaries and the ubiquitous gramophone.

That the influence which Western music is exerting is to be commended I much doubt. First of all, as already said, it is usually the lower forms of our music that are spreading—rag-time, musical comedy, &c. This element has tended to displace the native music in the affections of the people and push it into the background, as it certainly is doing in Japan and China. The native musician and his music are falling into disfavour, and in the end will die out, to be replaced by the mechanical European variety of the shoddiest kind. In a similar way the beautiful native costumes, materials, and hand-worked goods are being superseded by cheap machine-made European clothes.

I shall not soon forget the shock of one of my first experiences of Western music in the East. I had attended a performance in a little Malay theatre in an out-of-the-way district, the play being one of those old tales that date back hundreds of years. There had been some singing of rather plaintive native music which had interested and delighted me much. Then, to my stupefaction, one of the characters burst out into a distorted version of 'Yip-i-addy-i-ay!' sung to native words! I felt we were answerable for a good deal.

This kind of thing was to become a common experience, and I actually recall one performance of

'Macbeth' done into Malay, where various popular music-hall tunes were introduced, to the frantic delight of the native audience.

Civilization and progress, I suppose! Yes, Western music certainly is exerting a strong influence on the 'unchanging East,' and I for one wish it were not so.

THE MUSIC AND MUSICIANS OF DICKENS

By C. EDGAR THOMAS

(Concluded from August number, page 535)

II.

'Bleak House' provides us with that amusing character Matthew Bagnet, the ex-artilleryman. His appearance was remarkable and his 'musical abilities' were extraordinary. He appears before us 'tall and upright, with shaggy eyebrows, and whiskers like the fibres of a cocoanut, not a hair upon his head, and a torrid complexion.' Upon leaving the service, Bagnet adopted 'the musical business,' becoming a bassoon-player, upon which instrument he often 'blows away.' Occasionally, too, he speaks in short sentences, 'bassoon-like.' But let him speak for himself:

It was the old girl that brought out my musical abilities. I should have been in the artillery now, but for the old girl. Six years I hammered at the fiddle. Ten at the flute. The old girl said it wouldn't do; intention good, but want of flexibility; try the bassoon. The old girl borrowed a bassoon from the band-master of the Rifle Regiment. I practised in the trenches. Got on, got another, get a living by it.

Bagnet's Emporium is a place that every musical Dickensian would have wished to visit. It was one of the little shops in a street in the purlieus of the 'Elephant and Castle,' and had in its window a few fiddles, some Pan's pipes, a triangle, a tambourine, 'and certain elongated scraps of music.' Master Bagnet, too, played very creditably upon the fife.

The same book—'Bleak House'—introduces us to that irrepressible comic vocalist and character artist, Little Swills, the prototype of many engaged at those curious public-house sing-songs. With his gags and patter—as a true artist, mostly spontaneous—this worthy was a great success at the 'Sol's Arms.' When the Harmonic assemblies at that hostelry were suspended, Little Swills appeared at the 'Pastoral Gardens down the river,' where he sang comic songs, calculated, *vide* the bill, 'not to wound the feelings of the most fastidious mind.' Another member of the 'Sol's Arms' coterie was Miss M. Melvilson, the 'noted siren,' who, notwithstanding 'some pretensions to musical ability,' did not allow her artistry to interfere with her domestic affairs, for she had her baby clandestinely conveyed to her every night to receive its natural nourishment during the entertainment. It is interesting to note that on one occasion the once popular song of 'King Death,' with 'Chorus by the whole strength of the company,' formed the week's special Harmonic attraction. The words of this song were by Barry Cornwall, and it was a great favourite of John Leech, the artist, who used to sing it. Mention must also be made of Little Swills's rendering of 'Listen to the Waterfall'—or, to be colloquially exact, 'Listen, listen, listen, Tew the wa-ter-fall,' which comes from Lord Mornington's glee, 'Here in cool grot.' Another song mentioned by Dickens in 'Bleak House,' is the famous Scotch air, 'We're a' noddin'.'

The Micawbers are a most important family of Dickensian singers. First of all the eminent Wilkins could both warble and hum, and complacently dispense many musical urbanities. His devoted spouse, too, was no mean vocalist, and her 'Little Taffline' and 'The Dashing White Sergeant,' among other efforts, no doubt helped her husband to bear with equanimity his many misfortunes. We read that Micawber cherished a particular liking for such ditties as Dibdin's 'Lovely Nan,' and 'Auld Lang Syne,' and Dickens has given us a picture of him leading with gusto the chorus of 'Gee up, Dobbin.' The musical abilities of this amusing couple were not denied to their offspring, the hopeful young Master Wilkins, who possessed of a remarkable 'head' voice, after failing to obtain a position as chorister in Canterbury Cathedral, descended—such is fate!—to singing songs across the fetid atmospheres of bar-parlours. David Copperfield has recorded that young Wilkins exhibited 'a certain expression of face as if his voice were behind his eyebrows,' when, 'as an alternative between that and bed,' he sang 'The Woodpecker Tapping.' Later he became a very creditable amateur singer, and we take leave of him after his rendering of 'Non Nobis' at the dinner given in honour of his sire at Port Middlebay, bowing to the plaudits of the select company.

In 'Little Dorrit' we may read of Frederick Dorrit. In his better days he had been a musical amateur of no small merit, and his house had ever been open to singers and musicians. When, together with his brother William, he fell from fortune, he contrived to maintain himself in part by playing a clarinet 'as dirty as himself' in the orchestra of a small and obscure theatre. The novelist tells us that 'he had been in that place six nights a week for many years, but had never been observed to raise his eyes above his music-book.' His brother William in former days had been a pianist—a fact that gained for him the good offices of the Marshalsea turnkey. Of him that dignitary says :

Brought up as a gentleman, he was, if ever a man was. Educated at no end of expense. Went into the Marshal's house once, to try a new piano for him. Played it, I understand, like one o'clock—beautiful.

'The Woodpecker Tapping,' already mentioned in connection with Master Micawber, is also referred to in 'Little Dorrit': 'Papa . . . is sitting prosingly breaking his new-laid egg in the back parlour over the City article, exactly like the "Woodpecker Tapping."' The song, it may be noted, is further alluded to in the 'Sketches' and in 'Martin Chuzzlewit.' 'Who passes this road so late,' the song associated with that redoubtable villain Rigaud, alias Blandois, was translated from the French by Dickens himself, and set to music by H. Dalton. Young John Chivery, Little Dorrit's humble lover, was evidently something of a dandy, for Dickens is careful to tell us that his pantaloons were so 'highly decorated with side stripes, that each leg was a three-stringed lute.' Many years after their engagement had been broken off, Mrs. Finching simperingly refers to a copy of the popular duet 'Paul and Virginia,' which should have been returned to her by her former *fiancé* Arthur Clennam; and the advice of that 'floury' widow Mrs. General to Amy Dorrit on deportment, &c., indicates that she might have gone far as a teacher of correct facial expression in singing :

You will find it serviceable in the formation of a demeanour, if you sometimes say to yourself in company—on entering a room, for instance—Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism.

The dominant musical personality of Dickens's unfinished novel 'Edwin Drood' is John Jasper, with Mr. Crisparkle a good second. At times much controversy has waged over the precise position occupied by the former at Cloisterham Cathedral, but with that question we are not now concerned. What 'lay precentor' or 'lay clerk' may mean is immaterial; suffice it to say that Jasper had gained a reputation as a teacher of singing. Evidently he became tired of his Cathedral appointment, for we find him confessing to his nephew that 'even a poor monotonous chorister and grinder of music—in his niche—may be troubled with some stray sort of ambition, aspiration, restlessness, dissatisfaction, what shall we call it?' Going home to his bachelor rooms in company with Neville Landless and Edwin Drood, Jasper 'walking in the centre, hand to shoulder on either side, beautifully turns the refrain of a drinking song.' Jasper's knowledge of the old songs and melodies was considerable, and Dickens has presented him to us in two widely divergent musical silhouettes. To Mr. Sapsea, the pompous auctioneer, he once sang songs to his own accompaniment :

. . . no kickshaw ditties, favourites with national enemies, but gave him the genuine George the Third home-brewed; exhorting him (as 'my brave boys') to reduce to a smashed condition all other islands but this island, and all continents, peninsulas, isthmuses, promontories, and other geographical forms of land soever, besides sweeping the seas in all directions. In short, he rendered it pretty clear that Providence made a distinct mistake in originating so small a nation of hearts of oak, and so many other verminous peoples.

On another occasion he chants choir music 'in a low and beautiful voice for two or three hours':

Mr. Jasper is in beautiful voice this day. In the pathetic supplication to have his heart inclined to keep this law, he quite astonishes his fellows by his melodious power. He has never sung difficult music with such skill and harmony as in this day's Anthem. His nervous temperament is occasionally prone to take difficult music a little too quickly; to-day, his time is perfect.

The Rev. Mr. Crisparkle at various times openly avows his admiration for Jasper's musical and vocal talents. After service he remarks :

I must thank you, Jasper, for the pleasure with which I have heard you to-day. Beautiful! Delightful! You could not have so outdone yourself, I hope, without being wonderfully well.

Crisparkle was actively associated with the 'Alternate Musical Wednesdays Society,' which body seemingly included glee-singing among its activities. Once we find him thus addressing Jasper :

We shall miss you, Jasper, at the 'Alternate Musical Wednesdays' to-night, but no doubt you are best at home. Good-night. God bless you. 'Tell me, shep-herds, te-e-ell me; tell me-e-e, have you seen (have you seen, have you seen, have you seen) my-y-y Flo-o-ora-a pass this way.' Melodiously good Minor Canon the Reverend Septimus Crisparkle thus delivers himself, in musical rhythm, as he withdraws his amiable face from the doorway and conveys it downstairs.

Probably he sat up that night, as frequently he did, softly playing his piano and practising concerted vocal music.

'Sketches by Boz' were Dickens's earliest publications, and it is not a little curious that in these, in some instances immature pieces, he should have contrived to introduce quite a deal of amiable musical fun. In the very first of them—'Mrs. Joseph Porter'—we are given a highly-coloured but nevertheless extremely amusing picture of contemporary amateur theatricals. In choosing the *locale* of a suburban villa as the scene of his satire Dickens only did the obvious thing—notwithstanding that a still more obvious place could have been found in the boarding-house, that furnishes quite an excellent setting for a skit upon the vocal accomplishments, or lack of them, of the guests. Have we not all met the young gentleman—so beloved of musical-hall comedians—who sings 'The Wolf' in the drawing-room and acts it in the dining-room? and cannot we all call to mind an evening in which we mentally writhed under the obliging musical favours of certain fellow-boarders?

'The Boarding-House' gives us Mr. Wisbottle, engaged as a clerk in the Woods and Forests Office, and in his private time an inveterate whistler, with a great idea of his singing powers. When we first encounter him he is whistling 'Di piacer,' previous to which he has raised the wrath of a fellow lodger by whistling songs early in the morning. 'Sentiment' calls to mind Signor Lobschini, the singing-master with the splendid tenor voice, and Miss Lætitia Parsons, the brilliant musical executant who plays 'The Recollections of Ireland'—unanimously declared to be 'almost equal to that of Moscheles himself.' At the ball, it will be remembered, the 'harp' came in a state of intoxication. 'The Steam Excursion' includes a racy description of the musical entertainment contributed by those on board the 'Endeavour' at the water-party.

A different type of musical character has been etched by Dickens in 'The Uncommercial Traveller' in his portrayal of Mr. and Mrs. Banjo Bones. The former is a comic Ethiopian minstrel of a distinctly unprepossessing appearance, with blackened face and limp sugar-loaf hat. The latter is introduced to us 'in her natural colours—a little heightened,' the while sipping rum-and-water. The description of a sailors' singing-house at Liverpool is vivid and realistic. Peering through the rank atmosphere we can recognise Antonio the swarthy young Spanish guitar player, 'whose cracked guitar raises the feeblest ghost of a tune'; and that un-named young girl 'of a delicate prettiness of face, figure, and dress,' who plays a piano accordion and sings to the instrument, first a ballad about village bells and how they chimed, then a song about going to sea, and finally an imitation of the bag-pipes. And the landlord, 'a sharp and watchful man. . . . with tight lips and a complete edition of Cocker's arithmetic in each eye,' has surely been faithfully depicted; who

when he heard of talent, trusted nobody's account for it, but went off by rail to see it. If true talent, engaged it. Pounds a week for talent—four pound—five pound. Banjo Bones was undoubted talent. Hear this instrument that was going to play—it was real talent! . . . On delicate inquiry as to salary paid for item of talent under consideration, Mr. Victualler's pounds dropped suddenly to shillings—still it was a very comfortable thing for a young person like that, you know; she only went on six times a night, and was only required to be there from six at night to twelve.

Mention should be made of Pip and the 'Harmonious Blacksmith':

. . . I informed him in exchange that my christian name was Philip. 'I don't take to Philip,' said he, smiling. . . . 'I tell you what I should like. We are so harmonious, and you have been a blacksmith—would you mind it?'

'I shouldn't mind anything that you propose,' I answered, 'but I don't understand you.'

'Would you mind Handel for a familiar name? There's a charming piece of music by Handel, called the "Harmonious Blacksmith."'

The songs and ballads referred to throughout the novels would comprise a lengthy list indeed, but space may possibly permit a few comments. 'The Bay of Biscay' is mentioned at least three times; 'Believe me, if all Jarley's Waxworks so Rare' was a parody of Moore's once very popular 'Believe me, if all those endearing young charms.' Micawber quotes 'The death of Nelson,' which song is also mentioned by Dickens on two other occasions. Byron's 'Fare thee well, and if for ever' ('Old Curiosity Shop') has had several original settings; and the same poet's 'My boat is on the shore' ('David Copperfield') was set to music by Cratherne; while Bayly's 'O give me but my Arab steed' was for long sung by Braham. 'The Old Curiosity Shop' provides the only mention of Carey's 'Of all the girls that are so smart'; and the 'Sketches' contain a reference to Dr. Arne's 'The soldier, tired,' which, first sung by Miss Brent, remained for years a favourite item with sopranos. Other songs mentioned at length, or referred to, include 'The Ratcatcher's Daughter'; the Jacobite song, 'Over the water to Charlie'; 'Polly put the kettle on'; 'Wapping Old Stairs'; Dibdin's 'All's well'; 'Cheer, boys, cheer,' one of Henry Russell's most successful songs; 'My heart's in the Highlands,' the words of which are attributed to Burns; the familiar 'Though lost to sight, to memory dear'; 'I am a Friar of orders grey'; 'God bless the Prince of Wales'; 'A Cobbler there was,' sung in 'The Beggar's Opera,' 1728; Ben Jonson's 'Drink to me only with thine eyes'; Moore's 'When in death I shall recline,' and several others of his Irish melodies.

A vast subject such as Dickens and Music can here be sketched only in a very broad and general manner, and much has of necessity to be omitted. One would wish to write of Horatio Sparkins, who could play the pianoforte and violoncello as well as render his own compositions 'with taste'; of Captain Cuttle, whose musical favourite was 'Lovely Peg'; and of Sampson Brass and his vocal snatches 'compounded of the "Evening Hymn" and "God save the King." Again, there are Mr. Wopsle; and Dick Swiveller and Mr. Chuckster, who combined in a rendering of the duet 'All's well'; Mr. Pancks and his part-singing; and Mr. Morfin, who so annoyed Carker with his violoncello and his frequent humming and whistling. On Morfin's own showing, he once whistled accurately the whole of a Beethoven Sonata.

Our excuse must be that the present canvas is not sufficiently large to accommodate all the fascinating musical characters of Dickens, and that these articles (brief in comparison with the subject) do not in any way pretend to be complete. Such as they are, however, they will have served their purpose if they are successful in stimulating an interest that is well worth pursuing.