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The Abolition of Musical Clefs by E. Globe Ellis

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'facts' or prototypes in nature." This it is which gives to the highest forms of music an indefinable, transcendental, and inaccessible character—the fit outcome of that attitude of isolation and abstraction in which they are conceived in the brain of the composer. It is possible, as we have seen in the case of Mozart, for a man to attain to this state even when surrounded by his fellows and in the midst of distracting influences. But solitude and quiet are in most cases indispensable for the free exercise of the creative faculty, and, as the world grows older, solitude and quiet are increasingly difficult to attain. For, in the first place, the minds and ears of many of us have become so attuned to the noise and bustle of city life that the calm of the cloister would prove disconcerting. There are many, in fact, to whom solitude proves a strain rather than a relaxation, and whose brains are stimulated by the friction of town life. This is true above all of the journalist and literary piece-worker. To use the cant phrase, there is no "copy" to be made out of country life. Those who have tried to do so, even when endowed with real genius, like the late Richard Jefferies, have found it exceedingly hard to make both ends meet. Composers, however, are not under the same obligation to find materials for "copy" outside themselves. The thoughts out of which their works are constructed spring up unbidden in their brains, and the annals of their art go far to show that their productive powers are enhanced and not impaired by the isolation and tranquillity which a life in the country affords. Unfortunately, with a musician the choice of residence is not a mere matter of inclination and preference. He must live where the means of subsistence are most readily afforded, and that in England is, in nine cases out of ten, amid the turmoil of the largest city of the world. We feel convinced that the great musical work of the future to be done in England is that of decentralization. Once the demand for first-rate music in the provincial towns is sufficient to induce first-rate musicians to settle there, one can have little doubt as to the salutary and stimulating effect which this diffusion of talent will exercise on the taste of the public. On good local orchestras, above all, we believe the future of English music to depend. London must always remain the headquarters of the representative side of the art, but it is in the greater quiet and seclusion, attainable either in the country or in country towns that the creative side of our music will be best attended to.

In this connection it is permissible to revert to a point on which we have touched in former contributions to these columns. We refer to the power—say, rather, the privilege—which our cultivated millionaires have of befriending music by establishing private orchestras at their own residences. There are not a few men in this kingdom who are considerably exercised to devise means of getting rid of their riches. They manage to spend four or five thousand a year on a racing yacht, a similar sum on a moor or a deer forest, and certainly not less on their hunters. Then there are their gardens and conservatories to be kept up. Some original minds run to a real tennis court. But what single instance is there at the present day of an English peer or commoner who has conceived the idea of retaining the services of a private Kapellmeister and of keeping up a small orchestra of his own? Life in a great country house is often vapid enough. How far brighter it would be for a daily or even a weekly concert! In such surroundings, always presuming that the musician had a free hand, good work could not fail to be done, if the analogy of Germany holds good to any extent. Failing the advent of such enlightened patronage, we venture to propose that a Society

should be started having for its aim the preservation of young composers of merit by exempting them from the necessity of teaching, and by supplying them with the funds necessary to enable them to study and compose, "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife" in an atmosphere of serene and leisurely seclusion.

MUSICAL CLEFS AND THEIR ABOLITION.

By T. L. SOUTHGATE.

WE are constantly being told that this is an age of reform; institutions and methods, whether social, political, or artistic, are on their trial. If any of these do not come up to, what some deem, the modern enlightened standard, they must be improved away, and something new set up in their place. It is useless to plead that "constitutions" (to employ the word in the sense that Newton, Dryden, and Shakespeare used it) have rendered signal service to humanity in the past; to point out that no mundane system is absolutely perfect, and it not infrequently happens that a complaint advanced against a certain constitution reflects less on that method or institution itself than on the people connected with it. The majority of mankind lack the power of perception, and thoroughness; this deficiency alike affects the judgment of many of our people and causes the indolent school-boy to lament the difficulties of the system he is set to study. It is futile to tell such persons that all consolidated institutions and recognised systems are the outcome of long, well-tried experience, and that they represent the concrete result of satisfied requirements extending from the dawn of civilisation to the wants of to-day. A certain section of mankind constantly demands what are termed "royal roads," and faddists are continually starting up with some *ignis fatuus* to gratify this sort of people for the nonce. The system of musical notation has from time to time afforded a suitable target for the literary shafts of smart iconoclastic writers who dwell upon the difficulties it presents to beginners, and are usually ready with some new plans of their own which they guarantee will make everything simple and delightful.

Some such thoughts as these will probably occur to the minds of our musicians who have perused a singular article entitled "The Abolition of Musical Clefs," which appeared in a recent number of the *Universal Review*, under the signature "E. Globe Ellis." The name of this writer is not familiar to our musical world, and judging from some of his (or her) statements, it is doubtful whether he possesses sufficient acquaintance with the subject of notation to qualify him for dealing with its improvement. True, he obtains a sort of quasi-certificate, for at the commencement of the essay we read:—"This article has been read and approved as suggesting a practical and much-needed reform by several eminent musical authorities.—Ed. *U.R.*" But Mr. Harry Quilter, the editor of the *Universal Review*, is not looked upon as an expert in such matters, and if proof were needed of the value of his knowledge musical, it is aptly afforded in this very issue by the insertion of a coarse picture representing a girl playing a viola (or a fiddle much out of drawing) in the customary position, which bears the title "The Violoncello"! But beyond these accidents, the internal evidence supplied by the article itself cannot but excite a suspicion that its writer has not mastered the subject on which he poses as an authority and a reformer. We meet with examples of this throughout the article. It opens with the following argument:—

"The five musical clefs in use at the present time

are relics of an obsolete method of notation invented by the monks of the Middle Ages. When first devised they formed part of a reasonable plan; the plan itself was a clumsy one, but so far as it went it was complete. In later times, when the awkwardness of the system became evident, a compromise was arranged, and its unity was destroyed. What we now have is an unscientific and accidental method, consequently an imperfect, confusing one; its cause, its origin, are matters of history, known to but one in a hundred performers; its inconveniences are suffered by all. Among the many institutions that still interfere with study, and cry aloud for reform, there can scarcely be found one so irrational, so easily amended, as the division of the musical stave. The five or six clefs now surviving are the G; the C, in the form of soprano, alto, and tenor clefs; and the F clef. Every note in the compass of the piano may be written in five different ways; any one symbol may mean five different things, the distinction lies in the sign that goes before."

Did space permit it might be usefully employed in examining and refuting almost every statement in this introduction, but the errors can only be glanced at. In the first place, there are not, and have never been, "five or six clefs." There are but three, though we no longer call them the *F finale*, the *C acutum*, and the *G superacutum*, as did the "clumsy" monks of the Middle Ages. The clefs or keys (*clavis*) to indicate the particular lines employed, and the method of notation which the old musicians invented, are in no sense of the word "obsolete." The only part of the old system that is obsolete is the distinction that was once made in the form or shape of the clefs, according as they were used for plain-song or for figurate and measurable music. Examples and an explanation of these peculiarities will be found in "*Erotemata Musicæ*," by Lucas Lossius, 1570, and also in M. M. David and Lussy's "*Histoire de la Notation Musicale*." Although Mr. Ellis, in common with others, speaks of the soprano, alto, and tenor clefs, this is a misnomer; *the C clef never changes its position of standing on the middle line of the great stave of eleven lines*, and any consecutive set of five lines can be selected to use with it. The clef really retains, though to the unpractised eye it appears to change, its place; instead, therefore, of speaking of the soprano, alto, and tenor clefs, we ought more correctly to say the soprano, alto, and tenor staves. The two coloured lines of Guido, yellow for C and red for F, that first served to indicate the relative position of the hitherto uncertain pneumas, with the gradual development of music, grew into the great stave of eleven lines, the clefs determining the names of the notes standing on the respective lines on which these indicating "keys" were placed. Mr. Ellis finds fault with the plan, but few others who have thought on the subject are of his opinion. The great stave supplied us with a ladder of steps, picturing to the eye the graduated and exact position occupied by every note that the human voice could sing; it was, in its way, as great an invention as is the art of expressing words in writing. The pictorial stave was a vast improvement on the numerous and multifarious letter system of the Greeks and Romans, and on the ambiguity of the pneumas. For nearly a thousand years it has withstood all the attacks that those who are unable to appreciate its full significance have advanced against it. Justice would seem to require that we ought to be thankful, and admire the old monks who invented it, instead of terming the invention "clumsy," and glibly denouncing it as an "unscientific, awkward, accidental method," just because some complain that they find it difficult to master. There is a desire now-a-days to acquire

knowledge with the least possible amount of exertion, and to grudge time occupied in continuous study. A protest may well be uttered against this mania for making everything so easy and simple; we see examples of what this feeling leads to in such announcements as "The piano taught in twelve lessons"—"How to vamp accompaniments for one guinea"—"German (or French) acquired in six months." In opposition to Mr. Ellis, it may be maintained that our staff notation is scientific, ingenious, and rational. As to being able to write "every note in the compass of the piano in five different ways," one would like to see these two notes so dealt with—without employing so inordinate a number of ledger lines that the eye could not readily take count of them—let us see these in five different ways:—

That this five-way statement is not a thoughtless piece of assertion is apparent from an after sentence (page 227), where the writer tells us that "every note of the scale must be learnt five times over, and may be looked for in any of its five various forms." On such extraneous evidence as that the early Italian musicians put their words (not notes) in detached syllables on a set of parallel lines, Mr. Ellis, speaking of the various clefs "apparently representing the same sound"—the note between the staves (C)—says, "For the invention of this ingenious muddle we are indebted to the Romans." Now, as a matter of history, the stave and its clefs, as a means of representing the absolute pitch of a note were wholly unknown to the Romans. Our writer opines that "No person in his right senses would have sat down to deliberately plan such a jumble." But there is no "jumble" or "ingenious muddle"; the great stave was designed to represent all the sounds required for vocal music, and it completely carried out its purpose. The reason why all the eleven lines were not constantly used is simple. As men and boys were not always banded together in singing two, three, or four-part music, it was not necessary to use all these lines. An appreciation of this fact supplies the clue to the whole situation. Sometimes the top portion of the stave was used, sometimes the middle, and sometimes the bottom, the three clefs were the keys (as the origin of the words tells us) to settle just what portion of the stave was in use, and the lines on which they were respectively placed ingeniously indicated the very sounds associated with the fourth, sixth, and eighth lines of the great stave. It will thus be perceived that any set of five consecutive lines could be employed, the clef pointing out just which set was in use; thus useless lines were discarded, and the eye was not perplexed with having to look at a lot of lines not required. This species of natural selection was a clever, certainly not a jumbling, one as our writer terms it. By the way, in his illustration, page 225, he places the "Alto Clef" on the fifth line of the great stave; this is wrong, it should stand upon the sixth line. In order to enforce his (or her) arguments as to the blundering of our ancestors, and the dread of innovations they have from time to time exhibited, Mr. Ellis contrasts the modern ironclads with the old ships of war with ornamental prows, rowed with oars, and asks if alterations have been made in our build of ships, why "our clefs remain the same"? He does not explain what is the necessary analogy between ships and clefs, unless indeed he considers that they both have to do with the *sea* (C); he is particularly severe

upon this clef, stigmatizing its defenders as exhibiting "a limpet-like clinging to senseless mouldy custom." Logicians will term such a line of reasoning *argumentum ad absurdum*. At page 228 we meet with the singular statement "Trombones are tuned in three keys," a piece of information likely to prove a *crux* to our students in orchestration. On the difficulties of reading a full score owing to "the practice of scoring the lines for transposing instruments in the keys in which they appear to the performer," Mr. Ellis dilates at considerable length; he expresses much pity for "the unfortunate conductor who is called upon to translate C into E flat, A, B, &c., in pursuit of his transposing horns." He makes merry over the process recommended by Dr. Marx for facilitating the reading of these transposing scores, characterising it as "a large order for the imagination when carried out for various instruments through the *thirty* (*sic*) major and minor keys." In conclusion, he declares that "the subject is involved, and between the transpositions and the clefs any attempt at a lucid explanation is as likely to fail as an illumination in a pea-soup fog." "As regards the clefs, let them be abolished for ever; we have outgrown them." The employment of the word "fog" is suggestive. Musicians will ask what is the necessary connection between clefs and crooks; and why players on instruments of the mutation type should be specially aggrieved at having to read all their music in one set key. That the necessary transposition on these instruments is mechanical, and not a mental effort, seems to have escaped Mr. Ellis's consideration. Musicians well understand the value of the identical fingering of the transposing brass and wood-wind instruments; their peculiarity presents no valid reason why this feature should be advanced as an argument for "the abolition of musical clefs."

Mr. Ellis's commiseration for conductors who, besides "carving the air with a *bâton*," have to "read and understand simultaneously twenty-two parts," is quite touching; these unfortunate persons will doubtless be as much surprised as a Chinaman must be over his denunciation of "the obscure Chinese typography of their terribly complicated letters"; and our Teutonic friends will be amused at his censure of them:—"Though the Germans are a degree more enlightened than the Chinamen, they cannot bring themselves to accept the Roman alphabet. Its introduction would seriously damage the spectacle trade, and, as a protectionist country, Germany no doubt feels herself bound to guard the interests of that deserving industry." Many more extracts from this article might be culled if unlimited space permitted, but it is necessary now to proceed to examine Mr. Ellis's proposal of what to do when we have got rid of the "obscure, hieroglyphical clefs."

At the outset it may be stated that his scheme is not original, nor is it workable. In the first part of his article he prints from *Knight's Encyclopædia*, 1861, a short extract giving a brief account of a reform attempted in the reign of Charles the Second, by a distinguished mathematician, the Rev. Thomas Salmon, M.A., of Trinity College, Oxford, and rector of Mepsall, Bedfordshire. This proposal was violently opposed by musicians of the day, and so this "simple feasible plan and rational attempt to remove much of the difficulty attending the practice of music was strangled in its birth." That is nearly all that Mr. Ellis says of this scheme, the evident prototype of his own; but a few more words as to what took place may be added here. Salmon, in the title of his essay, stated that his object was "the casting away the perplexity of different clefs and uniting all sorts of musick in one universal character." He laid down

the thesis that the lowest line of every stave should be called G, and in order to distinguish the relative places of the several parts of a composition, he marked the treble with the letter T, "the mean" with M, and the bass with B. He permitted the occasional use of a few ledger lines, but if there were many notes together above or below the staves, he put them on the lines and spaces of the same name, prefixing the appellation of the octave to which they belonged. For Salmon's book, published by J. Carr, in 1672, John Birchensha, a notable musician of the time, wrote a preface recommending the method—which, by the way, the Royal Society seems to have approved of. The scheme attracted the attention of Matthew Locke, who issued a small octavo, "The present practice of music vindicated against the exceptions and new way of attaining music lately published by Tho. Salmon." Here the proposed plan was proved to be untenable; it was shown that it would introduce more difficulties in music than it would remove, and that in some cases it could not possibly be put into practice. Salmon replied in "A Vindication," and was then attacked by J. Phillips in his "Duellum Musicum," and reduced to silence, a letter of Playford's closing the dispute, which was marked throughout by the intemperance of language and personal abuse characteristic of the contentions of the day. Copies of these publications are to be found in the old Sacred Harmonic Society's Library, now attached to the Royal College of Music. Thus ended the first notable amateur effort to abolish the clefs. Space would fail to cite all the attempts that have been made to tinker musical notation. A few only may be mentioned. Thomas Delafond, in 1725, suggested the exclusive employment of the F or bass clef. In 1811 R. Rootsey, in an attempt to "simplify notation," discarded all clefs. About the year 1840 Miss S. A. Glover, of Norwich, wrote a pamphlet advocating the Tetrachordal method, and essentially ignored the clefs. The eventual outcome of this was the Tonic Sol-fa system, which is practically a modification of the old Roman and later letter tablature plan; it was not designed to abolish clefs, but for a very different object. Galin-Chevé and the Belgian Meerens methods both modify the clef signs. According to a report issued a few years ago by a learned society at Zurich, there are some fifty systems of musical notation. Those interested in this question will find further historical particulars and suggestions in the published papers that have been read before "The Musical Association" by W. Sedley Taylor, John Hullah, Dr. W. Pole, Sir John Stainer, Rev. T. Helmore, Mr. Arthur Hill, and others.

Among other systems mentioned, one author refers to "the chromatic or keyboard stave . . . brought out in a special number of a musical magazine some two years ago, together with the portrait of a nameless gentleman in a beard (*sic*), presumably the inventor." As to which it may be observed that the method in question was invented by a Mrs. L. Reid, that an instrument cleverly constructed to work with this plan was shown in the Paris Exhibition of 1867, and that an account of it, with a drawing, appeared in the *Musical Standard* in the November of that year.

Now for Mr. Ellis's plan. He proposes the addition of one line to the great stave, claiming for this scheme that "every note on every part of the piano [why the piano only?] would be represented by a single sign which could not be mistaken or altered for another by any preceding figure; . . . one note would mean one thing in any octave instrument or key." This thesis is not particularly clear, and some statements are open to dispute, but let us examine

the illustrations furnished in support of his scheme. Here they are :—

EXAMPLE 1.—PROPOSED METHOD. PIANOFORTE SCALE.

EXAMPLE 2.—THE SEVEN PIANOFORTE OCTAVES WRITTEN ON ONE STAVE.

The first thing that strikes one in glancing at this "perfected" system is that the stave has at its head one of the much abused clefs, the G; next, that in Example 1, a multiplicity of "confused fumbling ledger lines" is still employed, and thirdly that the various octaves being represented by the same signs occupying identical positions on the five-line stave, it has become necessary to mark off these different octaves by a series of figures placed above or below the stave, as the case may be. Now what has been gained by "the adoption of this universal character," as Mr. Ellis terms his proposed system? He claims that "instead of learning two sets of notation the beginner would need to master but one, and children fighting with their rudiments would be spared their confused fumbling between the upper and lower staves"—which reminds us that children have to learn a good many things more difficult than the names and positions of the notes on our staff. For instance, they have to "fight" until they acquire a knowledge of the difference between the shape of the capital and small letters of our alphabet, both as to written and printed characters, amounting to 104 in all. We pay no attention to the complaints of the stupid and lazy as to the trouble and difficulty they experience in acquiring this necessary knowledge; they must fight with their ignorance and wrestle with their fumbling until they have succeeded in mastering this commencement of a civilised education. But alarming as may be this embryotic condition of the rudiments of learning, it is as nothing to the after prospect of those boys and girls who go on to acquire German, Greek, and possibly Hindostanee, and who will have to hold in their mind some 500 characters! Such unfortunates ought doubtless to be objects of the deepest commiseration. By the way, dilating on the "obscure, terribly complicated Chinese typography," our author writes:—"Any attempt at printing with ready-cast letters, as we do it in Europe, would in that language be beyond the powers of a compositor." This is, indeed, a strange assertion. The Chinese print plenty of books in their peculiar characters, and Mr. Ellis will no doubt be surprised to learn that our British and Foreign Bible Society issue from the Mission press at Shanghai several portions of the Scriptures in Chinese, and the setting of their type characters appears to be quite within the powers of our London compositors. However all this may be, it is impossible to admit that there is any net gain in the adoption of Mr. Ellis's plan; indeed, besides the tiresome foisting in of figures, there is a distinct loss. One great advantage of the linear system of notation is that it presents a ladder of sounds; the eye perceives in a moment whether the progression from any note to the following is up or down. Now, if the entire compass of sounds is to be cut up into octaves, apparently repeating themselves, and all identical in position on the five lines, being only distinguished from one another by certain letters or figures, and if a passage is so constructed that it goes through two or more octaves in its course, under this new plan its picturesque progression becomes lost, and we may get a downward motion on paper, whereas the melody really ascends. This is just what happens now when the music dodges about among the ledger lines; surely it would not be a gain to amplify and perpetuate this exceptional feature of our present custom! Mr. Ellis does not explain his plan very clearly, so we may be mistaken in supposing that for the transposing instruments in a score he proposes to use some novel shaped clefs, calling them by some unpronounceable names. What analogy exists between such queer words as "Uyir, Txhhg, Swggp, Rvffo, Zmqxsvme, Xkevgtkc, and Wjdupsjb," and our three clefs, and what illustrations they furnish to

indicate the difference between the written and the produced sounds by instruments, transposing or not, it is impossible to perceive. Mr. Ellis fails to describe or illustrate his scheme so fully as he might have done, and so the old warning applies, "Brevis esse laboro, obscurus fio." He prints the impressions of some conductors whose opinions he invited over his improvement. Dealing with these in a perfunctory manner, he declines to accept the dictum of such accomplished artists as Sarasate and experienced teachers on the ground that "they are practically incapable of throwing back their mind to the primitive blank state when they were first made aware of the clef's existence"; but he contents himself with dedicating his method to beginners in their first three weeks, who, he believes, will "welcome his proposal with tears of joy." Possibly Mr. Ellis may be a believer in the wisdom which a certain authority instructs us is to be found in the mouth of babes and sucklings; such a contention only serves to amuse an unregenerate world. However, in this country we do not consult children as to what system of education they prefer to adopt and what text-books they deem proper to study.

By way of showing Mr. Ellis's system as applied to a full score, he is satisfied to give two bars of illustration. The first of these he terms "an imaginary octave of A," a vague description, but which, when we look at the imaginary octave, seems to be the four A's from the first ledger line above the treble stave to the second space of the bass stave, allotted to various instruments. It suffices to say that all the parts are written on the treble stave, the various octaves being indicated by figures, and no heed is paid to the exigencies of the transposing instruments. Despite his condemnation of ledger lines the tenor trombone appears—

the violoncello—

while the bassi part is written—

all of which we are expected to accept as a much needed improvement. Then he gives us in score the first bar of the concluding *Prestissimo* of Beethoven's "Choral Symphony"—

which, as he naïvely observes, "is not exceptionally complicated." The "Present Method" and "Proposed Method" are printed side by side; the new treatment is like that already commented on above; all the notes, both for voices and the orchestral instruments, are in the G clef, their respective octaves being indicated by figures underneath. It looks odd, not to say anomalous, to note that the tenor is placed an octave higher in the stave than the alto, thus

(although Beethoven gives them both the same note to sing)—

but, of course, the new figure sign 1 that the inventor imposes on his followers sets the matter quite right, and renders it all delightfully simple and easy.

These are all the illustrations Mr. Ellis ventures on, and wisely. There is not much difficulty in making people understand a simple fragment of melody in alphabetical, linear, figure, or whatever system it may be written. But as to the elaborate pianoforte and organ music of to-day he is silent. We ought to have some examples as to how such complicated music would look in this, both-staves-alike, and sectionised octave scheme, and then we should be in a better position to judge of the vaunted improvements. And examples might be given of such pieces as, *e.g.*, Schumann's Novelette in F and the "Nachtstücke," Mendelssohn's "Rondo Capriccioso," Thalberg's "Home, sweet home," Moszkowski's "From Foreign Parts," Grieg's "Ballade," some of Liszt's Studies on octaves and tenths, Best's Organ Fantasia in D, Jensen's "Wanderbilder," Chopin's Impromptu in A, a fragment of Wagner's instrumentation, or his "Rhapsodie Hongroise," and the full score of the opening movement of Sullivan's "Golden Legend." The putting of these into intelligible notation will test the feasibility of the scheme. Mr. Ellis asks that "finished musicians should unlearn a little for the benefit of generations to come"; he appeals to someone of influence in the musical world to take up his "universal notation," and considers that an "institution like the Academy, the Royal College, or the Guildhall in England, or some Conservatorium on the Continent—or better still in America, where innovations are not looked upon as inventions of the devil—ought to insist that every pupil should play only from the new method." He then indulges in a prophetic rhapsody as to the eager publishers who would speedily enter the field to supply the best standard works in the new notation, and believes that certificated teachers would spread the reformed system over the country and win adult converts. As he pathetically puts it, the reform must come from the powerful, for "infants of seven years when they are beginning the piano cannot issue newspapers or hold public meetings." But before all this glowing success can take place, Mr. Ellis will have to demonstrate the advantage of his system, and must convince the experts and authorities in the musical world that it is feasible under all conditions, and an improvement on the system which has stood the test of well nigh a thousand years' use. Until he has done this we shall regard his plan as yet another outcome of zealous faddism, and relegate it to the limbo where rest many such crude and impracticable experiments of the past.

Although in olden times the clefs were moved about to suit various compasses and instruments, they are now definitely settled. Musicians appreciate the clef system as an ingenious method for extending a limited stave, and defining the precise compasses of the various tone-members of the complete orchestra, whether they be instruments or voices. Granted that it requires intelligence, study, and practice fully to appreciate and master the scheme, in the absence of any better plan there is little likelihood that so useful and exact a system will be abolished.