Some Contemporary Criticisms of Beethoven

Author(s): Muriel Silburn

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VIOLINS OLD AND NEW: PREJUDICE *VERSUS* FACTS

During the last century or so a controversy has been raging regarding the status of the modern-built violin, a controversy that is becoming more heated as time goes on, and more productive of dispute as the violin-maker of to-day asserts his skill and craftsmanship in the production of the king of all musical instruments.

Probably no other contrivance has ever been the cause of so much joy, uncertainty, lying, or faking as the violin; yet with the passing of time has also passed the fuller understanding of what the violin really is, until to-day it is regarded much in the same light as a piece of furniture, with its tone-value of mere secondary importance. To many this statement may seem somewhat far-fetched, but a study of the facts will bear out the assertion.

Between the years 1550 and 1875 the total number of professional makers of the violin and kindred instruments in Italy and elsewhere was about nine hundred. Of all this number two take the first rank, closely followed by four who take second place, and about a dozen or so who occupy the third position as creators of really fine-toned violins. Assuming that the number of 'old masters' was actually twenty-five—although this far exceeds the figure, as students of violin history well know—we are left with eight hundred and seventy-five luthiers of old times who were simply 'fiddle makers.' Realising, as we must, that these twenty-five old masters turned out very few instruments (and especially the choice specimens of them) when compared with the productions of their more numerous *confrères*, is it not a matter of surprise that so many hundreds of 'old fiddles' should command priority over the modern-built violin of superior tone? How comes it, then, that this prejudice for the old violin has become so firmly rooted?

In the early years of the last century a cult was founded upon the genuine old masterpieces, pioneered by one Luigi Tarisio. Tarisio was a carpenter by trade; he never made a violin, and could play the instrument but indifferently. What he lacked in actual violinistic knowledge, however, he made up for by a keen business ability, so he went through Italy collecting and selling the violins of famous old makers until gradually he spread the craze over France and into England. Originally only master violins were considered, but as the financial side began to dominate, first one and then another of the lesser-known makers was embraced, until now all old fiddles of every country are included, irrespective of the maker and regardless as to whether the instrument has anything other than age to commend it. At auction sales minor old fiddles, many of them worthless from the tonal standpoint, bring as much as fifty guineas, but when we understand the *fons et origo* of this the explanation is not far to seek. The violin to-day is looked upon by experts, dealers, and collectors as a curio rather than a wonderful instrument that is almost human in its appeal. In valuing the violin consideration is given to age, origin, maker (if known), school, condition of various parts, &c.; but the only thing that matters—the tone—is entirely ignored; in fact, without even placing a bow across the strings (in many cases the dealer is unable to play at all) a money value is assigned to the instrument.

Let us look facts in the face. On June 22, 1912, the London *Daily Mail* published the following from its Paris correspondent:

'A contest took place last night which seemed to vindicate the contention that modern violins are as good in tone as those of ancient make, for which thousands are paid by enthusiasts. A number of violins were played in a dark room, and at the end of the competition a vote was taken from the numerous musical and artistic audience present, with the result that the finest was judged to be a Belgium instrument dated 1912, the second was a French 1911 violin, and not until the third came a Stradivarius, valued at more than £3,000.'

The details of the voting (which the *Daily Mail* omitted) were as follows:

- (New) 1. Auguste Falisse, Brussels, 423 points.
- (New) 2. Chenantais-Kaul, Nantes, 422 points.
- (Old) 3. Antonio Stradivari, Cremona, 401 points.

Altogether, there were forty-two violins entered for the test, but from this number six were finally selected to compete with six old ones. There was a large public attendance, and a hundred and sixty-one artists were selected to do the voting. Simonne Filon and Jean Have, two well-known violinists, played, one after the other, on the twelve violins, with the above results.

These are undisputed facts which the prejudiced violinist who scorns the modern-built violin as being inferior to its older cousin would do well to ponder.

Recently a test was made by a well-known violinist on four old and four new violins, one of which was an old Italian fiddle valued at £500. The palm was awarded to an instrument by Robert Alton, a British violin-maker. The Alton violin was built in London in 1913.

All who have drawn the bow across the strings and have thrilled at the throbbing response will readily admit that the only true standard by which a violin should and can be measured is the tone; and by the tone, then, let us proceed to judge its merits. Violin dealers of world repute have asserted that it is easier to sell an imitation old violin than a new one of better tone, and their assertions are only too true.

To-day the machinery of German fiddle factories turns out 'old' violins by the thousand, while a few makers of considerable reputation, weary at last of fighting against the terrific odds of prejudice and the curio-hunting fraternity, have taken to 'ageing' their instruments by artificial means, knowing that these fakes will sell more readily and bring a higher price than fiddles that are frankly new.

Violin-players should bestir themselves and realise that their instrument is on a higher plane than furniture, and that the only way to judge a violin with any degree of justice is to test its tone, not its age. When they are prepared to do this, and to discard prejudice and face facts, they will have a higher standard of violin, and will finally rid themselves of the violin faker. J. W.

SOME CONTEMPORARY CRITICISMS OF BEETHOVEN

BY MURIEL SILBURN

Humour is not precisely the quality looked for in serious criticism of music, but to modern eyes some of the early notices of Beethoven's works are decidedly, though unconsciously, humorous. Besides their unintentional humour, we find in these critiques an almost childish *naïveté* and a most refreshing candour. What modern critic of good standing would admit that, in an *Andante* of nineteen bars, 'seven . . . are so strange that with humility we confess our inability to comprehend them'? Whatever may be his inner sensations, the critic of to-day apparently understands, and can interpret to his readers, the most involved and abstruse composition. His interpretation may be in direct opposition to the composer's original intention, certainly; but that of course is an insignificant detail.

A point which evidently occasioned very serious perturbation in Beethoven's early critics is the extreme length of many of his works. This is shown in the following extract from a criticism of the *Pastoral* Symphony, given by the Philharmonic Society on May 5, 1823:

'Opinions are much divided concerning the merits of the *Pastoral* Symphony of Beethoven, though very few venture to deny that it is much too long. The *Andante* alone is upwards of a quarter of an hour in performance, and, being a series of repetitions, might be subject to abridgment without any violation of justice either to the composer or to the hearers. In saying this we do not mean to undervalue the work, but range ourselves on the side of those who think that it abounds in traits of singular genius and in beautiful effects; though we certainly never heard it through without rejoicing, on account of its prolixity, at its termination.'

The seventh Symphony, given on June 2 of the same year, gave the unfortunate critic occasion to bewail himself in an extremity of boredom in his final sentence:

'The Symphony by Beethoven, in A, is indebted for its reputation to the movement in A minor, which is one of the brightest gems in the author's diadem. The other parts of the composition are without any settled design, confused, full of harsh combinations; and, what is worse than all, the time occupied by the whole is at least fifty minutes!'

A notice of the Sonata, Op. III, is so interesting that it must be fully quoted later; but we may here observe the sad fact that 'the *Arietta* extends to the extraordinary length of thirteen pages'—much to the discomfort of the weary critic.

Again, of the performance of the *Eroica* on February 23, 1824, the much-enduring one writes:

'The *Heroic* Symphony of Beethoven abounds in traits of genius, and the Funeral March which forms one of the movements is full of dignified feeling; but three-quarters of an hour is too long a time for the attention to be fixed on a single piece of music; and, in spite of its merit, the termination of it is wished for some minutes before it arrives.'

A curious feature of the majority of these early criticisms is their entire lack of any genuinely critical detail concerning the performance or construction of the works under discussion. As an example, we may take the remarks on the C minor (fifth) Symphony, alluded to above: they could be hardly less illuminative or more commonplace if written by an intelligent school-child:

'The Symphony in C minor is generally considered as Beethoven's *chef d'œuvre*, and by ourselves amongst others. It is certainly the most elaborate and scientific of his works, and if sublimity were his object in writing it, he attained it, all must allow.'

In the same programme the Overture to *Fidelio* was given. It may perhaps interest the present-day musician to learn that this is 'a very eccentric composition, full of genius, and never fails to please the *cognoscenti*'—the critic himself evidently being numbered amongst the elect. The 'eccentricities' of *Fidelio* prepare us for the remarks on *Coriolan*:

'It is a specimen of Beethoven's wildest and most original flights: his mind must have been full of uncommon imagery when he wrote it. It always brings to our view Blake's illuminations of Blair's poem, *The Grave*, or some of Fuseli's designs for *Paradise Lost*. But it will ever please those who have acquired a taste for the highest branches of instrumental music, though there are few orchestras in which it would be prudent to attempt a work of so unusual a character, and so difficult to perform well.'

It may safely be asserted that no member of a modern audience would associate Beethoven's work with either Blake or Blair, but the most illuminative point lies in the last sentence, which we have italicised. What a suggestive picture of the state of the orchestra and orchestral playing of the period is revealed in these words!

In a review of the pianoforte arrangement of the Overture to the *Ruins of Athens* in the May issue of the *Harmonicon*, the critic is once more delightfully ingenuous:

'This adaptation has just appeared, and as we have never heard or seen the score we must form a general opinion of the composition from the arrangement. It begins with an *Andante* of nineteen bars, the first seven of which are so strange that with humility we confess our inability to comprehend them. . . . Genius has its eccentricities, and if they occur but seldom we are bound to respect them. The favourite cat of Domenico Scarlatti walked over the keys of his harpsichord, and sounded a few notes at most irregular and forbidden distances. Her master, however, pleased with her débüt, noted down the feline solo, made it the subject of a Fugue, and produced a composition that is delicious to the ears of all experienced harmonists. Some such accident may have suggested to Beethoven the commencement of this Overture; but he has not equally profited by the hint. A very short March follows this whimsical opening, and ushers in the

principal movement, which consists of but five pages, and is in a more familiar style than we are accustomed to in this great composer's overtures. It is, nevertheless, a very animated piece of music, and by a tolerably skilful performer may be made to produce a brilliant effect.'

That the critics of Beethoven's day were prepared to accept the new only if it were judiciously diluted with the old is abundantly clear from the following notice of the performance on April 21, 1823, of a 'New Overture (MS.) never before performed in this country—Beethoven.' [This proves to be *Die Weihe des Hauses*, Op. 124, which was given on the above date by the Philharmonic Society]:

'The New Overture, by Beethoven, has recently been composed for this Society. It opens with a kind of "March Religieuse"—a divine piece of harmony, free from all violent modulations, and calculated to delight and soothe at the same time. The principal movement is a Fugue of elaborate construction, in which the author appears inclined to show his knowledge of the learned works that have issued from the great schools of Handel, Sebastian Bach, and the two Scarlattis. It is a very scientific production, and so well mixes the ancient and modern styles that the partisans of both join in applause.'

The Sonata in C minor, Op. III, has already been alluded to: on it the critic has poured out a flood of half-annoyed bewilderment:

'Every genuine lover of music, every real admirer of genius, owes to the great composer whose work is now before us a large debt of gratitude for his vast contribution to an art of so much importance to society, the influence of which seems to be gaining strength and spreading wider every day. Beethoven is not only still numbered amongst the living, but is at a period of life when the mind, if in *corpore sano*, is in its fullest vigour, for he has not yet completed his fifty-second year. Unfortunately, however, he is suffering under a privation that to all who endure it is sufficiently afflicting—to a musician is intolerable—he is almost bereft of hearing; inasmuch that it is said he cannot render the tones of his pianoforte audible to himself. This, if true, accounts for some of the combinations—the crudities, as Dr. Burney would have called them—which appear in his later publications; for though the design of a composition ought to be formed in the mind, without any aid from material sounds, yet its effect should be accurately heard upon some instrument before adoption. This Sonata consists of two movements; the first, in C minor, begins *maestoso*, and then passes into an *Allegro*. It betrays a violent effort to produce something in the shape of novelty, is scientifically written [our critic dearly loves "scientific" music: it appears to be one of his highest terms of praise], rather in the fugue style, and is very difficult to execute, particularly for the left hand. In this are visible some of those dissonances above alluded to, the harshness of which may have escaped the observation of the composer. [An example of the "dissonances" is then given.] The second movement is an *Arietta*, *adagio*, and extends to the extraordinary length of thirteen pages. The subject of this is not inelegant, but its ramifications are noted down in so unnecessarily perplexing and discouraging a manner that we may without hazard foretell only a few very dauntless, persevering enthusiasts will ever attempt it. [Here the "ramifications" are shown in a short excerpt.] The greater portion of it is written in the same time (*i.e.*, $\frac{1}{16}$); but a part is in $\frac{6}{8}$, and about a page in $\frac{3}{2}$. All this is really laborious trifling, and ought to be, by every means, discouraged by the sensible part of the musical profession. Too many difficulties are already thrown in the way of those who wish to acquire practical skill in the art; it is the true policy of musicians to lessen, not to multiply, obstacles. But if it be for a moment granted that the introduction of such unprecedented times is attended by advantages that counterbalance

the evils arising out of their strangeness, how, even then, shall we be able to understand them as employed in this Sonata? In the $\frac{1}{8}$ time, for instance, we find all the bars thus composed in respect to measure. [Example given.] We have devoted a full hour to this enigma and cannot solve it. But no sphinx ever imagined such a riddle as the $\frac{1}{8}$ time presents. Here we find twelve demisemiquavers and eight double demisemiquavers in one bar; twelve demisemiquavers and twelve double demisemiquavers in another; ten demisemiquavers, nine double demisemiquavers, and two semiquaver rests in a third, &c.—and all without any appearance of a misprint! The general practice of writing notes apparently very short, then doubling their length by the word *adagio*, is one of the abuses in music that always increases the difficulties of performance, often produces confusion, and loudly calls for reform; but the system of notation pursued in this *Arietta* is “confusion worse confounded,” and goes on, as we have before stated, to the extent of thirteen pages, and yet the publishers have in their title deemed it necessary to warn off all pirates by announcing the Sonata as “copyright.” We do not think they are in much danger of having their property invaded. Let us, however, do them justice and acknowledge the spirit with which they embark their capital on works the circulation of which must be very limited, and that consequently promise no great return of profit. The connoisseurs are indebted to them for many, which but for their enterprise they could only have obtained in a very circuitous and expensive manner, and it is in the very nature of speculation now and then to meet with disappointments.’

On a par with the foregoing criticism is the notice on *Thirty-three Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli*, composed by L. van Beethoven, Op. 120:

‘We had scarcely finished the foregoing article when we received through an obliging friend a copy of this air with variations—which is Beethoven’s latest work. It fills forty-three pages, and is, we fear, confirmatory of the report, which we reluctantly alluded to above, of this great composer having from deafness lost some of that discriminating judgment which he possessed in so striking a degree before his sense of hearing was impaired. We pass over several unaccountable irregularities in this work, and can only allow ourselves to observe generally that while it manifests either an entire loss of that sense so needful to a musician, or a degree of neglect in the engraver unparalleled and incredible, it shows that its author had not yet quite exhausted the fund of ideas, exclusively his own—upon which, for the benefit of mankind, he has been drawing nearly thirty years. Among the music published in our present number will be found the subject, by Diabelli, upon which these variations are written. The air in itself is very pleasing, and derives additional interest from having been selected as a theme by the greatest musical genius of the century.’

An extract from *A Day with Beethoven*, by Ed. Schulz (1824), emphasises the attitude of the English critics of the period towards Beethoven’s finest works:

‘It is worthy of remark that this great musician cannot bear to hear his own earlier works praised, and I was apprised that a sure way to make him angry is to say something complimentary of his Septets, Trios, &c. His latest productions, which are so little relished in London but much admired by the young artists of Vienna, are his favourites. His second Mass he looks upon as his best work, I understand. He is at present engaged in writing a new opera called *Melusine*.’

The enthusiasm of the more discriminating ‘young artists of Vienna’ is again evident from the *Harmonicon* for January, 1825:

‘The new (ninth) Symphony of Beethoven, composed for and now in the possession of the Philharmonic

Society, is characterised in a Vienna journal as the *ne plus ultra* of this master’s orchestral works, according to the unanimous opinion of the first-rate professors of that capital. In the last movement is introduced a song—Schiller’s famous *Ode to Joy*—which forms a most extraordinary contrast with the whole, and is calculated to excite surprise certainly, and perhaps admiration.’

Under the date August, 1823, is to be found in the *Harmonicon* a truly wonderful specimen of the ‘flowery’ writing of the period. The *Quarterly Musical Magazine* (vol. v., 1823) declares the paragraph to be taken from a German paper:

‘The collection of the works of Beethoven made by M. Haslinger, to which a further addition of two large folios has been made, and which is unique in its kind, is said to have been purchased and on its way to England. Is there, then, in the whole of Germany not a single Mæcenas to be found to dispute with the proud Briton the possession of one of the greatest of musical rarities? Shall he have the glory of spending his guineas in the purchase of productions of art, while the German turns over his dollar again and again before he parts with it? Happy Albion! When posterity shall have formed a due estimate of the merits of Beethoven, it will be necessary to journey to thy shore in order to survey with astonishment the numerous creations of the genius of this sublime master, united in one handsome and masterly collection. Yet worthy art thou to call excellence like this thine own; to thee it is known how to ennoble true merit—does not Handel rest by the side of thy kings?’

Enough extracts have been given to show the ‘crudities’—as Dr. Burney would have called them—of the musical criticisms of Beethoven’s contemporaries, and the conspicuous lack of theoretical knowledge which they displayed. The veriest tyro nowadays can discourse fluently—though perhaps not always wisely—of technique, musical idiom, and a hundred other things of which the critics of Beethoven’s day knew little or nothing. But after all, when the ‘whirligig of time’ has turned for another hundred years, probably the musical *cognoscenti* of 2020 will smile over the criticisms of to-day with an air of amused superiority, while he congratulates himself on having been born in the age of true enlightenment and learning. In music, as in other matters of this life, the enthusiasms of to-day are the ‘back numbers’ of to-morrow.

Music in the Provinces

BRISTOL.—The British National Opera Company opened a two weeks’ season at Colston Hall on September 11, with a performance of *Samson and Delilah*. The chief feature of the repertory was a cycle of *The Ring*.

CARDIFF.—Mr. Garforth Mortimer opened his third season of Sunday concerts on September 3. The orchestra, which has been augmented, was assisted by Mr. Peter Dawson, vocalist.

HARROGATE.—Mr. Howard Carr is forming a large choral society for performance of oratorios, cantatas, madrigals, and part-songs, and Princess Mary has become the first patroness.

LIVERPOOL.—In recognition of his long services to Welsh music, Mr. J. H. Roberts—who has written many part-songs which have been sung throughout the Principality—has been presented with a cheque.

MANCHESTER.—At the mid-day concert on August 15, Madame Sobell Dorville, a former pupil of Madame Schumann, gave a pianoforte recital, including Chopin’s *Valse posthume*, Debussy’s *Minstrels*, and Cyril Scott’s *Water Wag-tail*.—On August 22 a vocal and pianoforte recital was given by Madame Bella Baillie and Miss Mary Haslam.—The programme on August 29 consisted entirely of the songs of Edmondstone Duncan, sung by Miss Millicent Holbrook