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Mutual Error

Author(s): Sydney Grew

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first appeared on the boards. Gay probably felt that some explanation was due, so he prefaced it by a scene between the Beggar—the reputed author—and a Player. The Beggar states that it was ‘originally writ for celebrating the marriage of James Chanter and Moll Lay, two most excellent ballad-singers.’ By this the author prepares the audience for the popular song tunes and ballad airs which make up the musical portion of the piece.

It is quite true that Gay intended us to believe that he was having a ‘touch’ on the Italian opera, for the Beggar tells the Player that he has introduced certain similes ‘that are in all your celebrated operas . . . besides I have a prison scene, which the ladies always reckon charmingly pathetick. As to the parts I have observed such a nice impartiality to our two ladies that it is impossible for either of them to take offence.’ This is evidently a good-natured hit at the quarrels between Faustina and Cuzzoni, the former having made her appearance as a rival to Cuzzoni in 1726. The allusion to ‘the prison scene,’ which the ladies find so ‘pathetick,’ is evidently based on a prison scene in Attilio’s ‘Coriolanus,’ produced in 1723.

The immediate success and the lasting popularity of the ‘Beggar’s Opera’ were due neither to political nor musical satire, but to the fact that it provided something that the ordinary person found he had long been deprived of—simple tunes that were familiar and agreeable to him, besides a sparkling and true picture of life. From time to time managers have had to prune some of its plain-speaking, but its essentials must have always remained. Almost every singer of note has from its first appearance in 1728 to the last (before the present revival) in 1886, studied one or other of the principal characters.

In modern remembrance Sims Reeves, in taking the part of Captain Macheath, would introduce such songs as ‘Tom Bowling’ and similar old English ditties—anachronisms justified only by Reeves’ inimitable singing of such lyrics.

Gay sold the copyright of his ‘Fables’ and the ‘Beggar’s Opera’ for something under a hundred pounds to John Watts and Jacob Tonson, the booksellers. John Watts was a printer of plays and minor works near Lincoln’s Inn Fields, with whom Benjamin Franklin had worked as journeyman. The press that in all probability struck off the sheets of the first edition may be seen in the South Kensington Museum.

My own copy of this scarce first edition now lies before me. It is an unpretentious little pamphlet in octavo of 58 pages, with an additional 16 pages of rudely-engraved music, being the treble of the airs. The printed date of the book is 1728.

The second edition, also dated 1728, has this music cut on wood blocks and inserted in the text, while for the first time the Overture is added. The third edition, dated 1729, is in quarto, with the music beautifully engraved on copper plates. After this editions of all dates are to be found with or without the music. A very notable edition of the music is ‘The Excellent Choice,’ being a ‘Collection of the most Favourite Old Song-Tunes in the Beggar’s Opera, set for 3 voices in the manner of Catches.’ This was published by Walsh about 1740-50 in oblong folio.

At a later date Dr. Arne arranged the ‘Beggar’s Opera’ for performance at the theatres, and set ‘new basses to the songs.’ This was published in oblong folio for the harpsichord by Longman & Broderip about 1780.

Dr. Pepusch probably had no hand in the selection of the tunes, but he set basses to them (which appeared in the third edition), and Dr. Burney remarks that he ‘furnished the rude, wild, and often vulgar melodies with basses so excellent that no sound contrapuntist will ever attempt to alter them.’ The Overture, which Pepusch composed, is upon the old air ‘The Happy Clown’:

One evening having lost my way,

which Lucy sings to words beginning:

I’m like a skiff on the ocean tost.

As to the sixty-nine tunes that were selected for Gay’s verses—verses often rather puerile—a very great deal of interesting matter is available. I hope to deal with this in a second article.

MUTUAL ERROR

By SYDNEY GREW

For fifty years past writers on musical matters have occupied their leisure in collecting mistakes made about music by novelists, poets, and non-musicians in general. The articles resulting from this have been mildly amusing, but rarely instructive; and I think the time would have been better employed if the plan had been to collect, not foolish things, but evidences of wisdom. In one unanticipated respect, however, this phase of musical criticism has been both amusing and instructive. It has demonstrated that writers may be ignorant even of matters strictly within their own province, and that musicians may accuse a non-musician of error which is no error.

I have not observed in general periodical literature any parallel writings on such a subject as ‘Musicians and General Knowledge.’ Were such work undertaken, those occupied in it would have a more ample supply of errors than musical writers have discerned: for it is a notable fact that the average musician is not well-informed concerning science, history, philosophy, and the rest, and that the average musical critic is on dangerous ground the moment he moves out of the path of his own art.

I give here a few instances of the errors of writers on music which parallel the errors made by novelists and poets. Several of these are errors within errors—errors made in correcting the (apparent) errors of others. My object is to afford consolation to non-musicians, and to assist the development of a desirable modesty in musical critics.

Milton is constantly chastised for his:

There let the pealing organ blow
To the full-voiced quire below.

This, says the musician, is wrong; the organ is blown, but it certainly does not blow, and Milton was nodding Homerically. If, however, Milton is wrong, wrong also is Pope in his:

While in more lengthen’d notes and slow,
The deep, majestic, solemn organs blow;

and many other 17th and 18th century writers; also such highly-cultured 19th century men as Hawthorne, one of whose characters once ‘blew a fitful note upon the organ.’

But there is no error here. Obeying a ceaseless law of language—the law of change—the word *blow* has lost certain significances, and we cannot now use it in Milton’s way. Yet this is no excuse for the musical critic who pillories as error a contemporary

use of a word. His only excuse is ignorance, which is a poor plea, especially in the circumstances.

There are two explanations of this use of *blow*—one direct, the other indirect. The latter is that the word has the sense of *breathe*. Hear Pope again :

Descend, ye nine, descend and sing,
The breathing instruments inspire :

these instruments being trumpets and the like. The direct explanation is that formerly the word had the pure and compact significance of 'to sound with being blown.' In 'Paradise Lost' comes :

Nor with less dread the loud
Ethereal trumpet from on high 'gan blow.

We are told in Joshua (vi. 4) that 'the priests shall blow with the trumpets.' We still say poetically, 'Let the trumpets sound,' and our expression is only one remove from the older, 'Let the trumpets blow.' What is right for the trumpet is right for the organ. Milton knew both English and music.

Another word which has been the cause of mistakes within mistake is *quaver*. I have seen instances of the 'misuse' of this word quoted from writers ranging from Addison to Thackeray. In every case, it seems to me, the context intimates a special meaning in the word, and a meaning no less concrete than that which attaches to it as a term of musical notation. Addison, for example, says: 'Whether we consider the instrument itself, or the several quavers and *graces* which are thrown into the *playing* of it.' And Lamb says that after practising 'God save the King' all his life, he had still not 'arrived within many quavers' of it. There is no need to analyse this 'error.' A use of the word by Bacon which I have noticed gives the clearest explanation: 'The *division* and quavering, which please so much in music, have an agreement with the glittering of light playing upon a wave.' (This dictum of Bacon's, by the by, is an argument of use to musical pictorialists.) In former times, the florid vocalists in Italian opera were called *quaverers*. Even to-day we say we are 'all of a quiver and quaver.'

After these two examples we can allow Charles Reade to describe a typical slow movement of the early 18th century as 'a sparkling *adagio*.' And when we learn that pre-Bach fugues often had a double-bar with repeat at the close of the first section of the piece (as is the case with a familiar canzona of Kerl), we can excuse Browning's:

Where is our gain at the Two-bars ?

in his poem on the fugue ('Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha'), and cease to charge him with perverting fact for sake of rhyme.

In 1917, the editor of a musical periodical organized a competition on the subject 'Novelists' Blunders in Music.' He gave the prize to a competitor who attributed the forty-year old 'Mr. Barnes of New York' to 'Ouida.' If the competitor or the editor had been wiser than the novelists they laughed at, they would either have read this book first or have discovered that it was by A. C. Gunter. This slip would amuse literary readers of my imaginary essay on 'Musicians and their Blunders.' And medical readers would be interested in the pathological ideas of the musical critic who in 1920, out of an ardent desire to advocate the new music of to-day, brought out the sentence :

As Germany has become synonymous with a *sterile*
tradition which I view as an artistic *cancer* . . .

There is honour for the man who can bring sterility and cancer together. This instance of the ignorance of musicians would appear twice in my supposed essay, the second time in the section devoted to mistakes about the simple meanings of words; because it presents the error that things can be synonymous, and not (as the non-musical would understand) words only.

But the finest catch of all which this literary fisherman might hope to get from the waters of musical criticism is the following (also written in 1920):

. . . ordinary language is a fixed thing . . .
a word is always the same word, and always means the
same thing . . . whereas the same chord means a
hundred different things according to how it is
approached and quitted, and what its function is
in a series of ideas.

There are some words with meanings so diverse as to become contradictory; all but simple concrete terms change in meaning generation by generation; language, and literature also, may remain fixed in form, but never in significance, which is why religious texts and creeds suffer fresh interpretations from time to time; and the same word will mean a hundred different things according to how the writer uses it, and according to its function in varying series of ideas. So little is the meaning of words fixed, that we have to read the old masters with a glossary, and a new master of unusual type of mind with a dictionary or analytical explanation.

Everything has its complements. There is no musical blunder made by the literary man but has its counterpart in a general blunder made by the musical man. Yet neither need be discouraged: the fact proves their humanity.

CONCERTS AND CRITICS

BY THOMAS MOULT

It is our custom, if we live away from a city, or from a capital, to envy our more fortunate cousins and sigh for the time when we too shall be able to have at our beck and call all the arts and all the artists. But there is at least one critical observer freshly come to town who has very quickly realised that in music, at any rate, the fact of being able to choose between, say, half a dozen concerts in a single evening is not altogether an unmixed blessing. To bundle his invitation tickets into a hat and draw one of them out at random, this to suffice for a single evening, is to make a drastic clean-cut through the bewilderment; but it is the only method if he is to make any headway at all. Even then a large proportion of concerts worth attending is bound to be neglected, the odds being that important musical events will have clashed; but it is a better method than any other. For if on the one evening he is confronted by the announcement of half a dozen recitals whose principals are quite unknown to him, and he dares to make a choice on the strength of the programme (his only method), he is pretty certain to find himself at a performance by one of those charmingly accomplished young soloists whose only ambition is to make at least one public appearance in the metropolis. It may matter a good deal to the critic with very little time to waste, but it matters nothing to these young soloists that their success is restricted to a sheaf of generous and unexacting press paragraphs so long as they get them. And if only their concerts are advertised in certain