Some Recollections: XII. Ferdinand Hiller

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Cremona before he settled down in Mittenwald, just about the time when Bach and Handel were born. According to a recent writer, "The small town was then in a state of great poverty, but Matthias, taking advantage of the famed pine woods around, in which he found just the material he required, employed numbers of workmen to make cheap violins, which were afterwards hawked round from house to house and sold at extraordinarily low prices. As a rule, each workman made one and only one of the required parts of the instrument, other workmen being employed in putting the parts together into one whole. Mittenwald soon rivalled Markneukirchen in Saxony and Mirecourt in the Vosges in this industry, and the fortune of the town was made. The tone of the instruments is not bad, but the yellow-brown varnish is of poor quality, and the sound-holes are rather small.*

Though Otto styles him "Stainer's best pupil," the quality of Matthias Klotz's fiddles is generally allowed to have been not more than second-rate. According to Hart's book, much of the wood he used was cut at the wrong season, and is consequently worm-eaten. However this may be, the fame of Matthias as a master was surpassed by his son, Sebastian; but none the less have his fellow-craftsmen two hundred years after his time done well to commemorate him by the spirited bronze statue (by Romel) that stands in front of the church, looking down the main street of which a picture accompanies this article. That the industry he established still flourishes is a strong testimony to his work, and how greatly it flourishes finds some indication in the fact that this fine monument has been erected by the Mittenwald Guild of Instrument-makers (*Geigenmacher-verein*) of to-day. It is pleasant to walk along the streets of the quaint little place, and to see every now and again at an open window a craftsman who is fitting the neck of a violin, or varnishing a zither, or putting together the parts of a guitar. According to some accounts, Mittenwald is not altogether free from the suspicion of the manufacture of spurious antiques; but it is hard to credit these reports when one comes under the *genius loci*. The little town is not only beautiful, it is a clean, wholesome, and industrious place, where one feels inclined to linger much longer than the day, or it may be the few hours, one allots to it in the course of a continental tour.

I shall not, I trust, be suspected of being in league with the landlady of the chief inn in the place, "Zur Post" (the large house on the left in the street view), if I add that this ancient hostelry, which must date from the Middle Ages, is not its least attraction. It has ample staircases, intricate corridors, stone-vaulted passages in abundance; but its most charming feature is a little garden, three of the four sides

of which are surrounded by a sort of cloister. The walls of this cloister are covered with paintings, mostly landscapes and scenes of village life *à la Teniers*; but on one wall is a series of most spirited drawings in monochrome of the wild beasts and birds of the Alps, the deer, chamois, bears, eagles, owls, and the like, by the famous German animal painter, Meyerheim.

But all this has a suspicion of Bædeker, to whom the reader desirous of further information may safely be referred. I will only add that, if he should find his way to Mittenwald on his next summer holiday, I think he will admit that I deserve his thanks for putting him on the track of so delightful a spot.

H. T.

SOME RECOLLECTIONS.

XII.—FERDINAND HILLER.

I BEGAN to feel a strong personal interest in this, at one time, very conspicuous musician on the 13th day of March, 1871. It may be asked what enables me to fix so precise a date for the start into being of an emotion. The answer is easy. At the time named Dr. Hiller, then on a visit to London, gave a concert of chamber music in Hanover Square Rooms, having as his chief colleagues in performance Clara Schumann, Joseph Joachim, and Alfredo Piatti. Hiller probably thought that so brilliant a combination of talent would bring about a rush to the ticket office and secure a record attendance. The actual result was something very different. A mere handful of people gathered in the famous old concert-room. The mass cared nothing for two celebrated pianists, the leading violinist, and the first of 'cellists. But we must not look across the intervening twenty-eight years and recklessly throw words of scorn at an unresponsive public. Hiller made up a programme exclusively from his own works, and English amateurs of that day, much more than their present successors, shied at a novelty as a badly broken horse starts at a piece of paper in the road. The public knew nothing of Hiller's *Suite de Pièces* (Op. 118), or of his "Operetta without words," for four hands on one pianoforte. And they did not go to hear them, despite the fame of the executants. Now, of course, such artists would draw a crowd whatever the theme of their discourse. All the same it was hard upon the pianist-composer, and I sympathised with him in his discomfiture — sympathised even unto hot indignation. It may be bad form for a man to quote himself, but I will risk it. Writing in a morning paper I said: "The scant attendance was a disagreeable fact for those who talk largely of English art-progress. . . . Are, then, the pessimists right, and is there no such thing among us, in any appreciable degree, as a genuine love of high-class music? We are sometimes told that when classical

* C. Stainer: "A Dictionary of Violin Makers," p. 52.

works do succeed in England, it is only because steady persistence in playing them creates an idea that they are succeeding, which, in turn, suggests the desirableness of 'swimming with the tide.' About the truth of this we offer no opinion, but to see a concert like Dr. Hiller's given to a beggarly account of empty benches is to be reminded of the observation." From that time, in my small way, I did what I could for Hiller and such of his works as appeared to me deserving.

For some reason or other the Cologne musician never got on well in this country. But it was characteristic of him that, with first-rate ability, and knowledge of his art such as very few acquire, he was never able, even in his own land, to thrust himself into the first rank. Yet the greatest German masters of his time admired and praised his works. Mendelssohn, as many letters show, acknowledged his distinction, and Schumann made no secret of very cordial appreciation. Yet most of the music to which such men paid homage is now as dead as the dodo. At long intervals one hears a solitary example of his best work; the rest, at all events for the most part, is silence. Hiller, though his works are sometimes "dry," betraying more effort than inspiration, was by no means a rigid conservative in art. Schumann saw in him leanings towards the future, and Fétis remarked a fondness for innovation. But this made no difference in the result. He was not quite great enough for fame, and too great for the sort of popularity which is profitable. Like the planet Mercury, he revolved near the sun and was lost in its light; while others, much farther off, caught men's eyes. Nevertheless Hiller did not despair; and though, in London, his name was hardly one to conjure with, he came here to try its effect from time to time, giving recitals in Hanover Square Rooms, where he was aided, on more than one occasion, by Clara Schumann. At some of these he displayed his powers as an improviser at the pianoforte. That was occasionally done in Hiller's time, but the practice has fallen into disuse, not, I should say, through lack of fancy or skill, but because pianists, whose whole time is taken up in acquiring modern "virtuosity," are hardly so well grounded in music as were their predecessors. It was Hiller's custom to announce beforehand that he would improvise on themes handed up to him by the audience, and sometimes half-a-dozen subjects would be spread out before him. His treatment of them was always remarkable, often wonderful. He would take, not one theme, but two, and even three, weaving them into a fabric so ingenious that it seemed the result of mature reflection rather than an achievement on the spur of the moment. If the subject were adapted for contrapuntal treatment, a fughetta would now and then vary the exercise; but Hiller's greatest strength lay in combining the most diverse melodies into a

harmonious whole by means of what I may call astounding rhythmical jugglery. He was the last of the public improvisors of high rank, and all that has been accomplished since his day, as far as I know it, amounts to nothing in comparison. Mendelssohn, it may be remembered, had the same remarkable power of almost instinctive development and combination—a fact to which Hiller, in some of his writings, bears admiring witness.

I first made acquaintance with Hiller on the occasion of a visit paid by him to J. W. Davison. For some years I was in the habit of spending two afternoons of each week in Davison's rooms at 36, Tavistock Place. During that time we were supposed to edit the *Musical World*, and, as a matter of fact, something in the nature of editing accomplished itself. But the operation was fitful, and carried on more or less in the intervals between pianoforte duets, or bouts of gossip or discussion. Often, too, there were visitors, cronies of Davison's for the most part, others finding admission difficult, and then the stream of talk ran high, swamping the *Musical World*, save in so far as I stuck to my task, and performed the difficult feat of listening to one thing while writing about another. How many eminent musical people have I seen in my old friend's paper-littered room! and how I used to enjoy their inquisitive glances towards the quiet man who, at the editorial table, went silently and steadily on with his work! Shirley Brooks, who had a favourable opinion of his own conversational powers, could not understand my apparent detachment from his witticisms, and, one day, entering the room when I was not there, he exclaimed, "Why, Jim, where's your paper-weight?" Never mind. It was good in such company to be all ears and no tongue. But I am wandering from Ferdinand Hiller, and return to him by observing that he never visited London without calling upon the powerful critic of *The Times*, who, moreover, was a friend of many years standing. The two men had a bond of union made up of various strands, such as common admiration, and delightful recollections of Mendelssohn; general agreement regarding the musical movements of the time, the essentials of legitimate pianoforte playing, and so on. Both Hiller and his friend would, by the hour, compare their experience of Paris and eminent Parisians, vying with each other in stories of Rossini, Auber, Berlioz, and many more. To hear all this the silent man at the table, like *Desdemona*, "did incline," much, I fear, to the detriment of the *Musical World*. But how could I close my ears against two such Ancient Mariners?

After some time I found myself in a certain sort admitted to the friendship of Hiller, and received from him an invitation to attend a Festival of the Lower Rhine, then appointed to be holden at Cologne, under his direction. I accepted, and found the master very busy and

very cordial. It was my first German festival, and he was anxious that I should carry away as favourable an impression as possible. But courtesy did not spontaneously extend as far as free tickets. Accustomed to liberal treatment of press representatives in England, I had fondly imagined that the doors of the concert-hall would open at my approach, almost of themselves. They did not, and, if I rightly remember, a complimentary pass was not forthcoming till after I had made a representation to Hiller on the subject. I am not going to describe the festival, nor could I do so without reference, inasmuch as my surviving impressions of it as a musical display are limited to Handel's "Joshua" and the "Choral" Symphony. The conductor was, of course, very much in evidence on the lofty perch assigned to him. At the "artists' concert" which wound up the proceedings he found that commanding structure prettily decorated with flowers and greenery, from amid which his squat, stout, prosaic figure looked out with something of incongruity in effect. When all was over, the chorus rained blossoms upon their chief till it seemed likely that he would be buried in them. It was all very pretty, very cordial, and imbued with the sentiment which is so strong an element in Germanic human nature. I am far from sure that Hiller did not weep—that I did not see him, like the soldier in the ballad, wipe away a tear. That evening, chorus and orchestra sat down to a truly German supper under the presidency of Hiller, who had very courteously invited myself and my travelling companion to share the meal. For some reason or other, of which I have now no very decided recollection, we were late in presenting ourselves. To the best of my belief we could not find the place of hospitality; anyhow, when exploring a certain street I heard my name called from a passing cab. The voice was that of Joseph Joachim, and the person of the great violinist was on its way to our hotel, intent to discover what had become of us. Jumping into the cab we were soon in the supper-room, to which, indeed, we might easily have been guided by the clatter of several hundred German voices belonging to as many elated men and women. Throughout the protracted meal Ferdinand Hiller was seen at his best. Always a good raconteur, always witty and, just then, brimming with high spirits, the veteran kept the tables in a roar. He was not the only speaker, alack! Everybody desired to be heard. The occasion was a virulent outbreak of speech-madness, which manifested itself in instalments between the courses. But nobody seemed to weary. The company took food and speech in alternate layers, while the face of the president beamed "Bless you, my children!"

I remember that some arrangements of the feast struck me as peculiar, apart from the tantalising procedure of making speeches after

one dish and before the next. Though familiar with eating in Germany, at the Rhineland hotels for example, I was then innocent of knowledge on the point of German eating, and because of this ignorance I expected, after the first course, that my plate would be changed and, with it, my knife and fork. But, as it turned out, that was not at all an order of the evening. The plate that had served for one dish was considered good enough for the next, and for all. What mattered a confusion of flavours? I watched the result with much interest and, let it be confessed, with a repugnance which my fellow-guests would possibly have denounced as "insular" had I declared it. Those to the manner born made their platter as clean as they could, and passed the knives through a piece of bread before again putting them in their mouths. There was nothing to do but follow the example, and accumulate beside my plate a row of pieces of bread more or less coloured by the prevailing hue of the viands. It is all a matter of custom, of course, and certainly the appetite of my neighbours did not appear to suffer in the least from primitive usages. A jolly evening thus crowned the festival, and when the *convives* trooped homeward through the quiet streets many who had not shared were probably aware of it.

The next morning I called at Hiller's house to bid him farewell, and found him suffering from very natural reaction. In *deshabillé* and an easy chair, the veteran seemed disposed to rest and be thankful. But he was quite ready to talk, especially about some works of his which he hoped to have performed in England. I saw Hiller in London once, and I think only once, after the Cologne experience. He died, as the biographers tell us, in 1885, and in him death removed a singularly able man, who only just fell short—unaccountably short—of greatness.

JOSEPH BENNETT.

GRATIFYING tokens frequently reach us that THE MUSICAL TIMES is appreciated. One of the most recent of such pleasant communications comes from an uttermost part of the earth—the North-Eastern-most portion of China. The Bishop of Corea, in a letter to Mr. George Riseley, of Bristol, says:—

"I have just seen a copy of THE MUSICAL TIMES for last February, and cannot resist the temptation of writing a line to you from far-off Manchuria, to add my regrets to the many you must have received at the loss of the fine organ. How well I remember its opening by Best in 1869 (?); I know it was just after the loss of H.M.S. Captain. . . . Well, may success—such success as is good for you—and all happiness attend you always. That notice in THE MUSICAL TIMES has brought back to me the days when we used to sing together as boys."

The Bishop of Corea, the Right Rev. Charles John Corfe, is a son of the late Dr. Corfe, organist of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford. He was formerly an assistant-master of St. Michael's College, Tenbury, in Sir Frederick Ouseley's time.