

## THE AMERICAN VIRTUOSO

By J.S. Van Cleve

WE need not extend a journey far into the past regions of English literature to learn that the word virtuoso was used by writers and speakers to mean a man fond of and devoted to strange and unusual things—to curios, to bric-a-brac. All sorts of odds and ends, curiosities, entertaining trifles, were the subject-matter of the activities of the virtuoso. That meaning is now wholly gone out of the word, or if occasionally it chances to be employed in that sense, it has an odd, obsolete ring in our ears. The still older Roman root of the term, *virtus*, from *vir*, man,—that is, manliness,— would catch us still further afield.

I never had a more startling reminder of this change than when once, in reference to a pianist who had thrilled and astonished us all in Cincinnati, I heard a lady exclaim with awe and reverence in the tone of her voice, "Oh, what a man !" Now, the use of the word man without qualification suddenly reminded me that we Americans are inclined to think that the term manliness applies to politicians, to church' dignitaries, to soldiers, to lawyers, to scientists, but not to those highly proficient in the arts.

Here a remnant of the raw culture of the old pioneer days is still in our blood.

But why not, pray, why is not the magical achievement of extraordinary skill in art as well worth respect, and even reverence, as that same application of energy, patience, heroic endurance of drudgery for the sake of achievement in the cause of African exploration, whereby we learn what is in the heart of the Dark Continent ? The great musician is a great man, is a man, even though he should be merely a producer, an interpreter. There is coming to be a vast deal of earnest, and for the most part sane, talk about the cause of the American composer, and why not a word as to the doings of the American interpretative artist?

To understand and benefit by the present paper it is necessary to bear in mind, first, that no resident artist, although a naturalized American citizen, if of foreign birth, can be brought within the scope of the present survey ; second, it scarce need be said that there are scores of most noble and distinguished art-workers who can not be called virtuosi, although they may be most excellent and influential performers ; third, that the gradations are so many and so numerous that great difficulty besets the critic in making a selection ; fourth, that in making all estimates of the art-value of a player, the personal equation, the bias of individual taste, is so influential as to be almost tyrannous ; and fifth, that no one, however favorably situated, has a complete equipment for making an *ex cathedra* and final decision, because while an eminent pianist may have come his way twice or thrice, another of measurably similar rank may have been heard a dozen times. This invalidation of the critic's judgment may be further increased if it chances that one man has been heard in fifty or a hundred compositions and another in only one program. No attempt will be made, nor ought to be made, by any one to speak with a nice gage of estimation scaled down to the tenth of a degree, for the inevitable limitations above cited apply almost as much to the metropolitan critics of the East as to us

provincial small fry of the newer West. One more safeguard of prefatory apology, and I am done with this branch of my subject. Those here included are to be taken not as the whole army, but as specimen officers of America's art-forces.

The piano is the most universal of instruments, therefore the pianists must be first considered. Here comes embarrassment of riches in a marked degree. There is an army of gifted artists scattered throughout the vast land to whom the term *virtuoso* might be applied without greatly stretching it; indeed, without more than putting it to what it is as capable of covering as was the tent given to Prince Ahmed by the fairy Paribanou able to cover an entire army.

When the phrase "American pianist" is uttered one thinks at once of W. H. Sherwood. This great musician is, in all the acceptations of that phrase, a case in point. He is an American of the Americans; born at Lyons, N. Y., the son of a clergyman,—as have been a large percentage of our important men,—of stock which had been long in the land, and was celebrated for the typical American virtues of ambition, energy, industry, and practical sense. He belongs to the country in a preeminent degree and in an absolute way. Mr. Sherwood's artistic powers were developed first under the tutelage of his father, then by the teachings of William Mason, of Deppe, and of Kullak. More than a score of years ago he achieved distinction as a student in Berlin, and ever since his return to his native land his efforts in behalf of musical art in this country have been many-sided and indefatigable.

For a term of years he made Boston, Mass., his headquarters, and while doing teaching enough to tax to the uttermost the strength and the ambition of any man, he yet contrived to play colossal programs, which were amazing for their comprehensiveness, throughout the whole nation, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. These recital and concert appearances carried their beneficial art-influence not alone into the large metropolitan centers,—whither alone the imported nabob condescends to carry his phlebotomising experiments,—but Sherwood, with the true spirit of an artist, and the true spirit of a patriot, went at good, though not extortionate, charges into thousands of smaller towns and into schools of general education. The potency exerted in the direction of high-art piano music by this one virtuoso is incalculable.

For the last ten years Mr. Sherwood has resided in Chicago, and his labors there have been of the same high and comprehensive character. Mr. Sherwood is one of the most ardent and most aggressive champions of the cause of native American composition, and few interpretative artists have worked so enthusiastically or so long as he to bring to adequate performance the creations of Americans. Of late there have been certain clear indications which point to a change of the conditions hitherto so adverse to the real interests of the nation. Over and over again the "flying foreigner," and not always a "Flying Dutchman," has not obtained the big lump of lucre which made America so charming in his eyes, and, furthermore, Mr. Sherwood had a fine engagement with the great Chicago Orchestra, under Mr. Theodore Thomas, and on this occasion his success was so overwhelming as to at once, and incontestably, prove the competence of native artists for those high places of the world of interpretative art from which so long and so unjustly they have been tabooed. Although the particular topic under

consideration is the question of virtuoso performance, it may not be aside from the purpose to add that Mr. Sherwood has, through years of patient study, observation, and experiment, wrought out many original ideas of moment in the specialty of piano-playing, to which he has turned his chief attention.

Another pianist of very high rank, who is a native American, of typical, old-established American stock (he is of Puritan ancestry), is Edward Baxter Perry. Mr. Perry is an artist whom one would almost unconsciously class with Mr. Sherwood ; not that there are various radical differences in their natures and their work, but because they have labored toward similar ideals along practically the same path. The lecture-recital has been claimed as a discovery by many pianists now before the public, but, whoever happened first to hit upon the idea of dissolving the crystals of music in the liquid of talk, no one has united the two elements of this unique form of art-function so equally, so naturally, and so perfectly as Mr. Perry. The quantity and dispersion of his work also must create wonder, for he has, since the commencement of his career, in 1880, given well-nigh two thousand recital lectures, and has extended his educational labors throughout the length and breadth of the land. The scattering of sound artistic seed, such as may spring up and clothe American lives with smiling blossoms of refined happiness, has been carried on by these scholarly pianists for a double decade, and has been a priceless boon to the nation. The repertoire of each of these gentlemen is ample, and that of Mr. Sherwood is of almost incredible amplitude. Mr. Perry has recently returned from an entire season spent recitalizing in the great cities of Europe, and to read the ringing emphatic paragraphs of critical approval from the highest sources for an American in Europe is a refreshing variety. His most celebrated teachers were Clara Schumann and Kullak.

A rank of the very highest belongs to an American lady of the most exceptional gifts and of marvelous attainments. This shining talent is Mme. Julie Rivé-King. She was born at College Hill, near Cincinnati, and her first instruction was from her mother, a distinguished piano teacher of Cincinnati, and Mr. Andres, one of its cleverest and most celebrated pianists. She afterward studied abroad with Liszt and Blassman.

When we come to regard the personality and the specific work of this dazzling pianist the word virtuoso seems peculiarly appropriate. From the days when I used to hear her do the "Æolian Murmurs " of Gottschalk, at Woodward High School, in Cincinnati, to the present time, she has been preeminent by the virtuoso qualities of her performances. By this I do not mean that there has been anything meretricious in her playing, or any condescension to the demands of a crude taste, for her repertoire has been coextensive with piano literature, and there is a wonderful repose as well as brilliancy in her playing. She certainly ranks as far away the greatest woman pianist of American birth, and is only to be named in the same sentence with Teresa Carreño, who is a South American by birth, and with Fanny Bloomfield-Zeisler, who was born in Austria, although both of them are counted among American pianists, their early training and reputation being American. The work of Mme. Rivé-King is distinctively and wholly that of a performer, and the quantity as well as the quality of her public playing strikes one dumb with amazement. It is stated on good authority that she

has played in nearly four thousand concerts, and that of this vast number, five hundred were with orchestra. It is also stated upon the same authority that her actual repertoire has never been surpassed except by von Bülow and Rubinstein. These are samples of what native Americans have come to in the fascinating but eminently useful realm of the piano, and the nation need not hang its head, for, with such to lead, and scores of others only less than these to follow, the nation is of most honorable rank in the universe of tone-art.

Not alone the potency of the piano, but its omnipresence, made it necessary to allot so much space to the granddaughter of the harp ; but the organ—grandest of instruments, the voice *par excellence* of religion—should be named with equal honor. The greatest obstacle in the way of organ-culture is the expensiveness of the instrument, and the consequent inaccessibility of the organ for the practice-hour. Another depressing influence is the usually crude taste of the average religions congregation in matters pertaining to taste in the arts, and the constant insistence of the music committee upon things for the vulgar taste, and the satisfaction of the society with the lame work of stumbling amateurs. Despite these and other discouraging considerations, America has developed if not many, at least a few, organists of virtuoso rank.

Among them I mention with the utmost respect that famous performer, teacher, and composer, George E. Whiting. This gentleman, now resident at Boston, Mass., was five years at the College of Music in Cincinnati, being chosen for the organ department in collaboration with Mr. Thomas. On the mighty organ of the Music Hall at Cincinnati he gave many recitals, the programs of which swept the whole range of music, for the organ, besides its own legitimate literature, can do more in reproducing the immense realm of the orchestra than any other single instrument. As an organ virtuoso Mr. Whiting has an enormous technical mastery which finds no part of the threatening and bristling hedge-wall of difficulties in any smallest degree impeding. His compositions are models of their kind.

In the West, at Chicago, another celebrated American-born organist, Mr. H. Clarence Eddy, has been a great figure for a quarter of a century. When first establishing his name he undertook to give a series of organ recitals the programs of which should include one thousand compositions. Just think of it—one thousand ! This colossal task was brought to full realization.

Mr. Eddy also has carried the name and fame of his native land into foreign lands, and, besides giving the initial concert upon more church organs than any other artist in the country, he has played in England, France, and Germany, being made the recipient of countless marks of distinguished consideration by that organist of organists, Guilmant.

Such other eminent men as Mr. E. M. Bowman, of Brooklyn ; Mr. W. Middleschulte, of Chicago ; Mr. David D. Wood, of Philadelphia ; Mr. J. W. Bischoff, of Washington, and at least a dozen more, have proved that in the deep, abstract, laborious realm of the pipe-organ. as well as in the scintillant realm of the concert-pianoforte, Americans, simon pure Americans, Americans of the representative American bloods, can do work as high in every particular as the very first of Europeans.

In the orchestral world America also has mounted high. We not only have in our country four orchestras of world-wide fame,—and at least two of them not surpassed anywhere, even in Europe,—but we have produced players of the highest proficiency. On the violin there are many, but two may be mentioned as of preeminent rank—viz., a man, Max Bendix, and a woman, Maud Powell.

Mr. Bendix, the son of an orchestral musician, was born at Cleveland, but received his education under S. E. Jacobsohn at the College of Music in Cincinnati, where as a boy of fifteen he took the honors of the class of 1881. He afterward studied with various masters abroad, especially with Sauret. Bendix was for years concertmeister of the Thomas orchestra, and has done a vast amount of solo-playing. He has a wonderful technic, a tone which unites power and refinement, and a certain commanding aplomb which is regal.

Miss Powell was the daughter of a public school teacher in Washington, and, like most American students, acquired her art both at home and abroad. Her style is the *ne plus ultra* of sweetness and grace, and there are no stiff or difficult passages in her work. As a lovely romantic artist she has only one superior in the world—Sarasate.

The latest to acquire international reputation is Miss Leonora Jackson, who won the Mendelssohn Scholarship in Berlin in 1897. She studied with Joachim, and has won golden opinions abroad.

As for American vocalists who might also be classed as virtuosi, there are too many of them for our space to do them justice, even with a catalogue.

Such artists as the darling of contraltos, famous at the May-first festivals of Cincinnati, Cary-Raymond—who ever heard a lovelier voice ? Then, among sopranos, just call to mind De Vere-Sapio, and Eames, and Nordica. This last-named songstress has scaled that most dangerous and dazzling of eminences, the festival at Bayreuth. It was an honor of the very highest moment that she was engaged for that august work. And among noble oratorio bassos, who is there greater than M. W. Whitney ?

The latest to win international reputation in the world of opera is Mr. David Bispham, of Philadelphia, who has gained the highest recognition in Wagner's music dramas, both by his fine vocal art and for his rare histrionic ability. Mr. Bispham comes of old Pennsylvania Quaker stock.

In the foregoing survey no mention has been made of that first and most original of American virtuoso pianists, L. M. Gottschalk, because he is well known to the whole musical world, and his niche is forever secured in the Temple of Fame. Truly, O my native land, thou home of the brave, thou land where Freedom has planted her sublimest hopes, thou needest not to blush for what thy children have done already as utterers of tonal beauty. And the ideal, O Columbia, is thine no less than all the actual good of the world !