

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSCRIPTIONS IN GUITAR LITERATURE.

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WHILE the importance of transcriptions in guitar literature is, and has been, recognised and fully appreciated by all the great guitarists of the past and present and those of all nations and schools—there is a certain coterie among the amateur class of guitar devotees who, following the so-called “purists” of all instruments—feel that only original music should be played on any instrument. In other words, this class look down upon any transcriptions with the utmost disdain, regardless of their beauty or appropriateness to the instrument for which they may be transcribed.

Inasmuch as they expound their opinions with a great show of authority and with more or less of a “holier than thou” attitude, it seems that the untenability and impracticality of their contention should be shown. The most that they can give in the way of an argument to support their opinions is usually that “the composer wrote it for that particular instrument or that particular combination and, therefore, in that combination or on that instrument it should remain until the end of time, untouched by the hands of any who might seek to transcribe the beauty of the musical thought for other instruments.”

It is seldom or never taken into consideration that often the composer writes or expresses his musical thought for a particular instrument solely because that may happen to be his chief medium of expression, the instrument with which he is most familiar. Nor is it ever considered by the “purists” that perhaps the composer at a particular time has written for a certain combination because he at that time had certain friends who enjoyed ensemble playing—perhaps with the composer. Yet many of the odd combinations in chamber music have been composed solely with that idea in view. Seldom would the composer himself say or even think that his work would not have sounded as well on certain other instruments.

In fact, it is a well-known fact that many composers have afterwards transcribed their own works for various other instruments or perhaps a solo composition for an entire grand symphony orchestra with effects that have greatly added to the beauty of the original work and greatly also to the popularity of the work—to say

nothing of the added joy which the hearing it in its various forms has given to music lovers and the performers of the various instruments all over the world.

There are certain works which are distinctly composed in the idiom of a particular instrument, and so strongly so that they are not always adaptable in their highest effects to another instrument, but these works are relatively few. Music is music, on whatever musical instrument, and melody is melody, and harmony ever remains harmony, whereas rhythm cannot be sacrificed and retain the skeleton of a composition—hence it follows that most works have possibilities of adaptation to other instruments than the one or ones for which they were originally composed. One who would maintain that this is not so might just as well contend that the Bible should never be read or preached except in the original Hebrew, the various great Hindu works should be read only in the original Sanscrit, and “The Rubiat” of Omar should not be translated into English but read only in the original Persian. In fact, there might be far more validity in contentions of those concerned with the spoken language of speech and tongue, for unlike music, the “universal language,” there really are certain words in one language which contain certain shades of meaning which are untranslatable, whereas in music no such thing exists. Music begins where words leave off, and those of all languages and all nations may sit together in the same room or concert hall and enjoy to the same degree (if equally susceptible to the charms of music) the very same musical compositions.

The late Dr. Harry Ellington Brook once said: “To the Puritan all things are impure.” That may seem a far cry to a discussion of music; nevertheless, could there be even a “purist” with musical “soul so dead” that he would vote to eliminate from musical literature the delightful transcriptions of Fritz Kreisler for the violin of the old Hungarian folk songs, and of many of the lost works of Mozart and others of the great composers which were not originally created for the violin? Or, of the delightfully sweet and sustained melody of Chopin’s Nocturne Op. 9, No. 2, which was written for the piano by the one pianist who is acknowledged to have written more distinctly in the piano idiom than any other who has preceded or followed him? Would even a “purist” suggest that Liszt’s dashing Hungarian Rhapsodies, which were written originally for the more or less colourless piano, have lost a whit of their charm by being played by the grand symphony orchestra where every colour

of tone in the tonal spectrum can have full play to give light and shade to the composition? Again, who would wish to lose for the orchestra the delightful Weber’s “Invitation to the Dance,” even though he originally wrote it as a piano solo? The orchestra would lose some of its finest, most beautiful and most popular works in its repertoire if its conductors would follow out the ideas of the “purists” who deride transcriptions, such as the interesting Handel-Harty “Water Music,” the prodigious Bach-Busoni Fugue and the other fascinating Bach transcriptions by Sir Henry Wood, which, it seems to the writer, that any unprejudiced hearer must admit are more interesting as well as more beautiful than in their original form.

Composers, even the greatest of them, are not so dictatorial nor so narrow-minded as to believe that only one certain man-made instrument is capable of producing the proper effect of a certain melody. Music is deeper than that. It cannot be circumscribed to any one instrument in most cases. It is usually only the more virtuoso type of music, written not so much for the real musical depth but rather for the showing off of a certain colour or timbre or technical idiom of a particular instrument, which is the only music not suitable to be transcribed for one or more instruments. Of course, an aria of the old *bel canto* school of Bellini and Rossini, originally written full of roulades for a colouratura soprano and her light agile voice, would not be becoming or “in the picture” for a basso profundo, even if it were transcribed to his own vocal register, and for the same reasons, naturally, taste and a sense of the fitness of things must be shown by the one who is to transcribe any given work to another instrument or combination, both in his ability to do the work involved so that the true ideas of the composer are carried out, and in his selection of the work itself.

If the ideas of the “purists” who howl for original compositions only on all instruments were to be carried out, musical literature for all of the legitimate instruments would suffer incalculably. One of the first things that would have to be done in the “purists” house-cleaning process would be to eliminate the greater part of the immortal songs of Franz Schubert, for they are so well known to-day with piano accompaniment that the average musician, even fervent Schubert lovers, think of course that they were written with piano accompaniment by Schubert in his original conception, but such is not the case. Schubert wrote most of his songs originally for guitar accompaniment, afterwards transcribing them for

piano accompaniment at the insistence of his publisher, Diabelli, after the piano became more popular. John Dowland, whom, according to Canon Horace Fellows (the greatest living authority on Elizabethan music) is ranked by the world's greatest modern music critics as one of the three greatest song writers who ever lived, wrote all of his songs originally for the lute, which was the only instrument he could play. These songs were sung in his lifetime only to the lute accompaniment but, in the past few years, musicians browsing over his gorgeously lovely songs have discovered that they are all pearls of priceless musical worth and, as such, they have mostly been transcribed with piano accompaniment.

Poor old John Dowland, the lutenist of the Kings of both England and Denmark, would doubtless "turn over in his honoured grave" if he had to come suddenly back to earth and hear those songs conceived with the haunting and seductive lute accompaniments, plucked as they were, with delicate fingers, pounded out on a percussion instrument with a key-board, such as the piano, but for all of that, musicians who have learned to know them in that form and who have never heard a lute and perhaps who do not even know what such an instrument looked like, would let John Dowland turn over and roar his protest, but would not give up the opportunity they now have to play and hear his lovely songs played even with piano accompaniment.

Bach thought so well of certain movements in his two Lute Suites (originals of which are in the Brussels Museum to-day with his own autograph) that he later used one as a movement in one of his violin Sonatas and the other for a well-known 'cello Sonata. These works are so much to-day and for many years past, a *tour de force* of violinists and 'cellists that perhaps most of them do not realise that they are playing transcriptions from works which Bach originally conceived and created for the lute!

Liszt, the greatest piano virtuoso of his day and perhaps the greatest that ever lived, thought so well of some of the Schubert songs that he transcribed them for the piano and played them at his concerts, and they are used to-day by the greatest pianists. Among these are "Hark! Hark! the Lark" and others.

On every legitimate concert instrument it is the same. The greatest exponents of all periods have freely used transcriptions.

When it comes to the guitar, while its original literature is of a very high quality and much larger than the average musician on other instruments or the young student of the guitar itself usually supposes, nevertheless, its literature has also been greatly enriched by transcriptions of high

merit by its old masters as well as by the modern masters and exponents of the instrument. In fact, some of the greatest composers' names in the guitar world have been built chiefly upon their transcriptions, as for instance Mertz (who while writing many original works of merit) is known chiefly by his operatic fantasies, and Tarrega, the modern Spaniard, who composed very few works and only perhaps three or four which are of great musical value, but who achieved his great reputation for his transcriptions of the works of the various masters for the guitar, particularly the classic composers, such as Bach, Beethoven, Haydn, Schumann, etc. The late Tarrega's pupils, Llobet, Pujol, Fortea and others have followed in their master's footsteps, and not only have made extensive transcriptions themselves for the guitar and use them in their concerts, but have constantly used in their programmes, works which were originally written for other instruments.

In fact, it is through this persistent use of the well-known and revered classics for other instruments, and also through the use of the best known of the works of such modern Spanish composers who have gained world-wide recognition, such as de Falla, Albeniz and others, on the guitar programmes of these artists that a modern recognition of the merit of the instrument has to any extent taken place.

Segovia, the famous Spanish guitarist, who has toured all over Europe, Russia and North America in the past few years, has achieved more recognition for the guitar among musical critics (in America particularly) through his inclusion of Bach works in his programmes, than through all his charming playing of the original Spanish works, which so suits his instrument, and which he plays with such native charm and *esprit*. Had Segovia played chiefly or solely these original Spanish works for the guitar (which are always included in his programmes, and which always charm his audiences) he would have perhaps gained much of the well-deserved recognition of his own art which he now has, and a general concept of the beauty and fascinating charm of the guitar as an instrument for the expression of the Spanish idioms and rhythms, etc., but it is certain that he would not have achieved for his instrument the same respect of the critics which he has brought it through his playing of Bach, Haydn and other classic composers. Segovia's works are in much demand among modern guitarists, but they are nearly all transcriptions of works originally written for other instruments; he has published very few original works, and these are of a small character.

The writer has been told by more than one pianist of reputation that the Chopin Prelude Op. 28, No. 20, which she transcribed for the guitar and which appears in her "Seven Solos for the Guitar," pleased them even better than its rendition on the piano, for which it was written by the most idiomatic of all piano composers!

There are many compositions of various classic and modern composers which are eminently fitted to grace the repertoire of the finest of guitarists, and there are many more which have not yet been made available for the instrument, which it is one of the objects of The American Guitar Society to give to the guitar world in the future. The guitar being an instrument capable of carrying its own melody and accompaniment and of full and complete harmonic structure, together with its innate beauty of tone and the many and varied effects that are possible upon it, can in itself give a very creditable account of many compositions which, when transcribed from their original piano or orchestral settings, would take *two* instruments otherwise to give the complete feeling and intent of the original composition.

In closing, the writer would like to quote from an editorial in the "*Musical Courier*" (New York), possibly the most noted musical journal in the world, as follows: "Transcriptions and modernisations often have the virtue of interesting present day listeners in music which otherwise might sound unattractive to them because of lack of tonal fullness and paucity of colouring. Extreme purists object to any change whatsoever in the original creation of a composer, but more sensible persons recognise that a transcribed or modernised work heard often and liked extensively is more useful than the same opus neglected, unheard, and mouldering in the dust of oblivion."

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