GEORGE T. FERRIS

GREAT VIOLINISTS AND PIANISTS

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Table of Contents

The Ancestry of the Violin.—The Origin of the Cremona School of Violin-Making.—The Amatis and Stradiuarii.—Extraordinary Art Activity of Italy at this Period.—Antonius Stradiuarius and Joseph Guarnerius.—Something about the Lives of the Two Greatest Violin-Makers of the World.—Corelli, the First Great Violinist.—His Contemporaries and Associates.—Anecdotes of his Career.—Corelli's Pupil, Geminiani.—Philidor, the Composer, Violinist, and Chess-Player.—Giuseppe Tartini.—Becomes an Outcast from his Family on Account of his Love of Music.—Anecdote of the Violinist Vera-cini.—Tartini's Scientific Discoveries in Music.—His Account of the Origin of the "Devil's Trill."—Tartini's Pupils.

VIOTTI.

Viotti, the Connecting Link between the Early and Modern Violin Schools.—His Immense Superiority over his Contemporaries and Predecessors.—Other Violinists of his Time, Giornowick and Boccherini.—Viotti's Early Years.—His Arrival in Paris, and the Sensation he made.—His Reception by the Court.—Viotti's Personal Pride and Dignity.—His Rebuke to Princely Impertinence.—The Musical Circles of Paris.—Viotti's Last Public Concert in Paris.—He suddenly departs for London.—Becomes Director of the King's Theatre.—Is compelled to leave the Country as a Suspected Revolutionist.—His Return to England, and Metamorphosis into a Vintner.—The French Singer, Garat, finds him out in his London Obscurity.—Anecdote of Viotti's Dinner Party.—He quits the Wine Trade for his own Profession.—Is made Director of the Paris Grand Opéra.—Letter from Rossini.—Viotti's Account of the "Ranz des Vaches."—Anecdotes of the Great Violinist.—Dies in London in 1824.—Viotti's Place as a

Violinist, and Style of Playing.—The Tourté Bow first invented during his Time.—An Indispensable Factor in Great Playing on the Violin.—Viotti's Pupils, and his Influence on the Musical Art.

LUDWIG SPOHR.

Birth and Early Life of the Violinist Spohr.—He is presented with his First Violin at six.—The French *Emigré* Dufour uses his Influence with Dr. Spohr, Sr., to have the Boy devoted to a Musical Career.—Goes to Brunswick for fuller Musical Instruction.—Spohr is appointed *Kammer-musicus* at the Ducal Court.—He enters under the Tuition of and makes a Tour with the Violin Virtuoso Eck.—Incidents of the Russian Journey and his Return.—Concert Tour in Germany.—Loses his Fine Guarnerius Violin.—Is appointed Director of the Orchestra at Gotha.—He marries Dorette Schiedler, the Brilliant Harpist.—Spohr's Stratagem to be present at the Erfurt Musical Celebration given by Napoleon in Honor of the Allied Sovereigns.—Becomes Director of Opera in Vienna.—Incidents of his Life and Production of Various Works.—First Visit to England.—He is made Director of the Cassel Court Oratorios.—He is retired with a Pension.—Closing Years of his Life.—His Place as Composer and Executant.

NICOLO PAGANINI.

The Birth of the Greatest of Violinists.—His Mother's Dream.—Extraordinary Character and Genius.—Heine's Description of his Playing.—Leigh Hunt on Paganini.—Superstitious Rumors current during his Life.—He is believed to be a Demoniac.—His Strange Appearance.—Early Training and Surroundings.—Anecdotes of his Youth.—Paga-nini's Youthful Dissipations.—His Passion for Gambling.—He

acquires his Wonderful Guarnerius Violin.—His Reform from the Gaming-table.—Indefatigable Practice and Work as a Young Artist.—Paganini as a *Preux Chevalier*.—His Powerful Attraction for Women.—Episode with a Lady of Rank.—Anecdotes of his Early Italian Concertizing.—The Imbroglio at Ferrara.—The Frail Health of Paganini.—Wonderful Success at Milan where he first plays One of the Greatest of his Compositions, "Le Streghe."—Duel with Lafont.—Incidents and Anecdotes.—His First Visit to Germany.—Great Enthusiasm of his Audiences.—Experiences at Vienna, Berlin, and other German Cities.—Description of Paganini, in Paris, by Castil-Blaze and Fetis.—His English Reception and the Impression made.—Opinions of the Critics.—Paganini not pleased with England.—Settles in Paris for Two Years, and becomes the Great Musical Lion.—Simplicity and Amiability of Nature.—Magnificent Generosity to Hector Berlioz.—The Great Fortune made by Paganini.—His Beautiful Country Seat near Parma.—An Unfortunate Speculation in Paris.—The Utter Failure of his Health.—His Death at Nice.—Characteristics and Anecdotes.—Interesting Circumstances of his Last Moments.—The Peculiar Genius of Paganini, and his Influence on Art.

DE BÉRIOT.

De Bériot's High Place in the Art of the Violin and Violin Music.—The Scion of an Impoverished Noble Family.—Early Education and Musical Training.—He seeks the Advice of Viotti in Paris.—Becomes a Pupil of Robrechts and Baillot successively.—De Bériot finishes and perfects his Style on his Own Model.—Great Success in England.—Artistic Travels in Europe.—Becomes Soloist to the King of the Netherlands.

—He meets Malibran, the Great Cantatrice, in Paris.—Peculiar Circumstances which drew the Couple toward Each Other.—They form a Connection which only ends with Malibran's Life.—Sketch of Malibran and her Family.—The Various Artistic Journeys of Malibran and De Bériot.—Their Marriage and Mme. de Bériot's Death.—De Bériot becomes Professor in the Brussels Conservatoire.—His Later Life in Brussels.—His Son Charles Malibran de Bériot.—The Character of De Bériot as Composer and Player.

OLE BULL.

The Birth and Early Life of Ole Bull at Bergen, Norway.—His Family and Connections.—Surroundings of his Boyhood.—Early Display of his Musical Passion.—Learns the Violin without Aid.—Takes Lessons from an Old Musical Professor, and soon surpasses his Master.—Anecdotes of his Boyhood.—His Father's Opposition to Music as a Profession.—Competes for Admittance to the University at Christiania.—Is consoled for Failure by a Learned Professor.—"Better be a Fiddler than a Preacher."—Becomes Conductor of the Philharmonic Society at Bergen.—His first Musical Journey.—Sees Spohr.—Fights a Duel.—Visit to Paris.—He is reduced to Great Pecuniary Straits.—Strange Adventure with Vidocq, the Great Detective.—First Appearance in Concert in Paris.—Romantic Adventure leading to Acquaintance.—First Appearance in Italy.—Takes the Place of De Bériot by Great Good Luck.—Ole Bull is most enthusiastically received.—Extended Concert Tour in Italy and France.—His *Début* and Success in England.—One Hundred and Eighty Concerts in Six Months.—Ole Bull's Gaspar di Salo Violin, and the Circumstances under which he acquired it.—His Answer to the King of Sweden.—First Visit and Great Success in

America in 1848.—Attempt to establish a National Theatre.—The Norwegian Colony in Pennsylvania.—Latter Years of Ole Bull.—His Personal Appearance.—Art Characteristics.

MUZIO CLEMENTI.

The Genealogy of the Piano-forte.—The Harpsichord its Immediate Predecessor.—Supposed Invention of the Piano-forte.—Silbermann the First Maker.—Anecdote of Frederick the Great.—The Piano-forte only slowly makes its Way as against the Clavichord and Harpsichord.—Emanuel Bach, the First Composer of Sonatas for the Piano-forte.—His Views of playing on the New Instrument.—Haydn and Mozart as Players.—Muzio Clementi, the Earliest Virtuoso, strictly speaking, as a Pianist.—Born in Rome in 1752.—Scion of an Artistic Family.—First Musical Training.—Rapid Development of his Talents.—Composes Contrapuntal Works at the Age of Fourteen.—Early Studies of the Organ and Harpsichord.—Goes to England to complete his Studies.—Creates an Unequaled Furore in London.—John Christian Bach's Opinion of Clementi.—Clementi's Musical Tour.—His Duel with Mozart before the Emperor.—Tenor of Clementi's Life in England.—Clementi's Pupils.—Trip to St. Petersburg.—Sphor's Anecdote of Him.—Mercantile and Manufacturing Interest in the Piano as Partner of Collard.—The Players and Composers trained under Clementi.—His Composition.—Status as a Player.—Character and Influence as an Artist.—Development of the Technique of the Piano, culminating in Clementi.

MOSCHELES.

Clementi and Mozart as Points of Departure in Piano-forte Playing.—Moscheles the most Brilliant Climax reached by the Viennese School.—His Child-Life at Prague.—Extraordinary Precocity.—Goes to Vienna as the Pupil of

Salieri and Albrechtsburger.—Acquaintance with Beethoven.—Moscheles is honored with a Commission to make a Piano Transcription of Beethoven's "Fidelio."—His Intercourse with the Great Man.—Concert Tour.—Arrival in Paris.—The Artistic Circle into which he is received.—Pictures of Art-Life in Paris.—London and its Musical Celebrities.—Career as a Wandering Virtuoso.—Felix Mendelssohn becomes his Pupil.—The Mendelssohn Family.—Moseheles's Marriage to a Hamburg Lady.—Settles in London.—His Life as Teacher, Player, and Composer.—Eminent Place taken by Moscheles among the Musicians of his Age.—His Efforts soothe the Sufferings of Beethoven's Death-bed.—Friendship for Mendelssohn.—Moscheles becomes connected with the Leipzig Conservatorium.—Death in 1870.—Moscheles as Pianist and Composer.—Sympathy with the Old as against the New School of the Piano.—His Powerful Influence on the Musical Culture and Tendencies of his Age.

THE SCHUMANNS AND CHOPIN.

Robert Schumann's Place as a National Composer.—Peculiar Greatness as a Piano-forte Composer.—Born at Zwickau in 1810.—His Father's Aversion to his Musical Studies.—Becomes a Student of Jurisprudence in Leipzig.—Makes the Acquaintance of Clara Wieck.—Tedium of his Law Studies.—Vacation Tour to Italy.—Death of his Father, and Consent of his Mother to Schumann adopting the Profession of Music.—Becomes Wieck's Pupil.—Injury to his Hand which prevents all Possibilities of his becoming a Great Performer.—Devotes himself to Composition.—The Child, Clara Wieck—Remarkable Genius as a Player.—Her Early Training.—Paganini's Delight in her Genius.—Clara Wieck's Concert Tours.—Schumann falls deeply in Love with her, and Wieck's

Opposition.—His Allusions to Clara in the "Neue Zeitschrift."—Schumann at Vienna.—His Compositions at first Unpopular, though played by Clara Wieck and Liszt.—Schumann's Labors as a Critic.—He marries Clara in 1840.—His Song Period inspired by his Wife.—Tour to Russia, and Brilliant Reception given to the Artist Pair.—The "Neue Zeitschrift" and its Mission.—The Davidsbund.—Peculiar Style of Schumann's Writing.—He moves to Dresden.—Active Production in Orchestral Composition.—Artistic Tour in Holland.—He is seized with Brain Disease.—Characteristics as a Man, as an Artist, and as a Philosopher.—Mme. Schumann as her Husband's Interpreter.—Chopin a Colaborer with Schumann.—Schumann on Chopin again.—Chopin's Nativity.—Exclusively a Piano-forte Composer.—His Genre as Pianist and Composer.—Aversion to Concert-giving.—Parisian Associations.—New Style of Technique demanded by his Works.—Unique Treatment of the Instrument.—Characteristics of Chopin's Compositions.

THALBERG AND GOTTSCHALK.

Thalberg one of the Greatest of Executants.—Rather a Man of Remarkable Talents than of Genius.—Moseheles's Description of him.—The Illegitimate Son of an Austrian Prince.—Early Introduction to Musical Society in London and Vienna.—Beginning of his Career as a Virtuoso.—The Brilliancy of his Career.—Is appointed Court Pianist to the Emperor of Austria.—His Marriage.—Visits to America.—Thalberg's Artistic Idiosyncrasy.—Robert Schumann on his Playing.—His Appearance and Manner.—Characterization by George William Curtis.—Thalberg's Style and Worth as an Artist.—His Piano-forte Method, and Place as a Composer for the Piano.—Gottschalk's Birth and Early Years.—He is sent to

Paris for Instruction.—Successful *Début* and Publie Concerts in Paris and Tour through the French Cities.—Friendship with Berlioz.—Concert Tour to Spain.—Romantic Experiences.—Berlioz on Gottschalk.—Reception of Gottschalk in America.—Criticism of his Style.—Remarkable Success of his Concerts.—His Visit to the West Indies, Mexico, and Central America.—Protracted Absence.—Gottschalk on Life in the Tropics.—Return to the United States.—Three Brilliant Musical Years.—Departure for South America.—Triumphant Procession through the Spanish-American Cities.—Death at Rio Janeiro.—Notes on Gottschalk as Man and Artist.

FRANZ LISZT.

The Spoiled Favorite of Fortune.—His Inherited Genius.—Birth and Early Training.—First Appearance in Concert.—Adam Liszt and his Son in Paris.—Sensation made by the Boy's Playing.—His Morbid Religious Sufferings.—Franz Liszt thrown on his own Resources.—The Artistic Circle in Paris.—Liszt in the Ranks of Romanticism.—His Friends and Associates.—Mme. D'Agoult and her Connection with Franz Liszt.—He retires to Geneva.—Is recalled to Paris by the Thalberg *Furore*.—Rivalry between the Artists and their Factions.—He commences his Career as Traveling Virtuoso.—The Blaze of Enthusiasm throughout Europe.—Schumann on Liszt as Man and Artist.—He ranks the Hungarian Virtuoso as the Superior of Thalberg.—Liszt's Generosity to his own Countrymen.—The Honors paid to him in Pesth.—Incidents of his Musical Wanderings.—He loses the Proceeds of Three Hundred Concerts.—Contributes to the Completion of the Cologne Cathedral.—His Connection with the Beethoven Statue at Bonn, and the Celebration of the Unveiling.—Chorley on Liszt.—Berlioz and Liszt.—Character

of the Enthusiasm called out by Liszt as an Artist.—Remarkable Personality as a Man.—Berlioz characterizes the Great Virtuoso in a Letter.—Liszt ceases his Life as a Virtuoso, and becomes Chapel-Master and Court Conductor at Weimar.—Avowed Belief in the New School of Music, and Production of Works of this School.—Wagner's Testimony to Liszt's Assistance.—Liszt's Resignation of his Weimar Post after Ten Years.—His Subsequent Life.—He takes Holy Orders.—Liszt as a Virtuoso and Composer.—Entitled to be placed among the most Remarkable Men of his Age.

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Table of Contents

THE VIOLIN AND EARLY VIOLINISTS.

Table of Contents

The Ancestry of the Violin.—The Origin of the Cremona School of Violin-Making.—The Amatis and Stradiuarii.—Extraordinary Art Activity of Italy at this Period.—Antonius Stradiuarius and Joseph Guarnerius.—Something about the Lives of the Two Greatest Violin-Makers of the World.—

Corelli, the First Great Violinist.—His Contemporaries and Associates.—Anecdotes of his Career.—Corelli's Pupil, Geminiani.—Philidor, the Composer, Violinist, and Chess-Player.—Giuseppe Tartini.—Becomes an Outcast from his Family on Account of his Love of Music.—Anecdote of the Violinist Veracini.—Tartini's Scientific Discoveries in Music.—His Account of the Origin of the "Devil's Trill."—Tartini's Pupils.

I.

The ancestry of the violin, considering this as the type of stringed instruments played with a bow, goes back to the earliest antiquity; and innumerable passages might be quoted from the Oriental and classical writers illustrating the important part taken by the forefathers of the modern violin in feast, festival, and religious ceremonial, in the fiery delights of battle, and the more dulcet enjoyments of peace. But it was not till the fifteenth century, in Italy, that the art of making instruments of the viol class began to reach toward that high perfection which it speedily attained. The long list of honored names connected with the development of art in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries is a mighty roll-call, and among these the names of the great violin-makers, beginning with Gaspard de Salo, of Brescia, who first raised a rude craft to an art, are worthy of being included. From Brescia came the masters who established the Cremona school, a name not only immortal in the history of music, but full of vital significance; for it was not till the violin was perfected, and a distinct school of violin-playing founded, that the creation of the symphony, the highest form of music, became possible.

The violin-makers of Cremona came, as we have said, from Brescia, beginning with the Ama-tis. Though it does not lie within the province of this work to discuss in any special or technical sense the history of violin-making, something concerning the greatest of the Cremona masters will be found both interesting and valuable as preliminary to the sketches of the great players which make up the substance of the volume. The Amatis, who established the violin-making art at Cremona, successively improved, each member of the class stealing a march on his predecessor, until the peerless masters of the art, Antonius Stradiuarius and Joseph Guarnerius del Jesû, advanced far beyond the rivalry of their contemporaries and successors. The pupils of the Amatis, Stradiuarius, and Guarnerius settled in Milan, Florence, and other cities, which also became centers of violin-making, but never to an extent which lessened the preeminence of the great Cremona makers. There was one significant peculiarity of all the leading artists of this violin-making epoch: each one as a pupil never contented himself with making copies of his master's work, but strove incessantly to strike out something in his work which should be an outcome of his own genius, knowledge, and investigation. It was essentially a creative age.

Let us glance briefly at the artistic activity of the times when the violin-making craft leaped so swiftly and surely to perfection. If we turn to the days of Gaspard di Salo, Morelli, Magini, and the Amatis, we find that when they were sending forth their fiddles, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, Titian, and Tintoretto were busily painting their great canvases. While Antonius Stradiuarius and Joseph

Guarnerius were occupied with the noble instruments which have immortalized their names, Canaletto was painting his Venetian squares and canals, Giorgio was superintending the manufacture of his inimitable maiolica, and the Venetians were blowing glass of marvelous beauty and form. In the musical world, Corelli was writing his gigues and sarabandes, Geminiani composing his first instruction book for the violin, and Tartini dreaming out his "Devil's Trill"; and while Guadognini (a pupil of Antonius Stradiuarius), with the stars of lesser magnitude, were exercising their calling, Viotti, the originator of the school of modern violin-playing, was beginning to write his concertos, and Boccherini laying the foundation of chamber music.

Such was the flourishing state of Italian art during the great Cremona period, which opened up a mine of artistic wealth for succeeding generations. It is a curious fact that not only the violin but violin music was the creature of the most luxurious period of art; for, in that golden age of the creative imagination, musicians contemporary with the great violin-makers were writing music destined to be better understood and appreciated when the violins then made should have reached their maturity.

There can be no doubt that the conditions were all highly favorable to the manufacture of great instruments. There were many composers of genius and numerous orchestras scattered over Italy, Germany, and France, and there must have been a demand for bow instruments of a high order. In the sixteenth century, Palestrina and Zarlino were writing grand church music, in which violins bore an important part. In the seventeenth, lived Stradella, Lotti, Buononcini, Lulli,

and Corelli. In the eighteenth, when violin-making Avas at its zenith, there were such names among the Italians as Scarlatti, Geminiani, Vivaldi, Locatelli, Boccherini, Tartini, Piccini, Viotti, and Nardini; while in France it was the epoch of Lecler and Gravinies, composers of violin music of the highest class. Under the stimulus of such a general art culture the makers of the violin must have enjoyed large patronage, and the more eminent artists have received highly remunerative prices for their labors, and, correlative to this practical success, a powerful stimulus toward perfecting the design and workmanship of their instruments. These plain artisans lived quiet and simple lives, but they bent their whole souls to the work, and belonged to the class of minds of which Carlyle speaks: "In a word, they willed one thing to which all other things were made subordinate and subservient, and therefore they accomplished it. The wedge will rend rocks, but its edge must be sharp and single; if it be double, the wedge is bruised in pieces and will rend nothing."

II.

So much said concerning the general conditions under which the craft of violin-making reached such splendid excellence, the attention of the reader is invited to the greatest masters of the Cremona school.

"The instrument on which he played
Was in Cremona's workshops made,
By a great master of the past,
Ere yet was lost the art divine;
Fashioned of maple and of pine,
That in Tyrolean forests vast
Had rooked and wrestled with the blast.

"Exquisite was it in design,
A marvel of the lutist's art,
Perfect in each minutest part;
And in its hollow chamber thus
The maker from whose hand it came
Had written his unrivaled name,
'Antonius Stradivarius.'"

The great artist whose work is thus made the subject of Longfellow's verse was born at Cremona in 1644. His renown is beyond that of all others, and his praise has been sounded by poet, artist, and musician. He has received the homage of two centuries, and his name is as little likely to be dethroned from its special place as that of Shakespeare or Homer. Though many interesting particulars are known concerning his life, all attempt has failed to obtain any connected record of the principal events of his career. Perhaps there is no need, for there is ample reason to believe that Antonius Stradiuarius lived a quiet, uncheckered, monotonous existence, absorbed in his labor of making violins, and caring for nothing in the outside world which did not touch his all-beloved art. Without haste and without rest, he labored for the perfection of the violin. To him the world was a mere workshop. The fierce Italian sun beat down and made Cremona like an oven, but it was good to dry the wood for violins. On the slopes of the hills grew grand forests of maple, pine, and willow, but he cared nothing for forest or hillside except as they grew good wood for violins. The vineyards yielded rich wine, but, after all, the main use of the grape was that it furnished the spirit wherewith to compound varnish. The sheep, ox, and horse were good for food, but still more important because from

them came the hair of the bow, the violin strings, and the glue which held the pieces together. It was through this single-eyed devotion to his life-work that one great maker was enabled to gather up all the perfections of his predecessors, and stand out for all time as the flower of the Cremonese school and the master of the world. George Eliot, in her poem, "The Stradivari," probably pictures his life accurately:

"That plain white-aproned man, who stood at work,
Patient and accurate full fourscore years,
Cherished his sight and touch by temperance;
And since keen sense is love of perfectness,
Made perfect violins, the needed paths
For inspiration and high mastery."

M. Fetis, in his notice of the greatest of violin-makers, summarizes his life very briefly. He tells us the life of Antonius Stradiuarius was as tranquil as his calling was peaceful. The year 1702 alone must have caused him some disquiet, when during the war the city of Cremona was taken by Marshal Villeroy, on the Imperialist side, retaken by Prince Eugene, and finally taken a third time by the French. That must have been a parlous time for the master of that wonderful workshop whence proceeded the world's masterpieces, though we may almost fancy the absorbed master, like Archimedes when the Romans took Syracuse, so intent on his labor that he hardly heard the din and roar of battle, till some rude soldier disturbed the serene atmosphere of the room littered with shavings and strewn with the tools of a peaceful craft.

Polledro, not many years ago first violin at the Chapel Royal of Turin, who died at a very advanced age, declared

that his master had known Stradiuarius, and that he was fond of talking about him. He was, he said, tall and thin, with a bald head fringed with silvery hair, covered with a cap of white wool in the winter and of cotton in the summer. He wore over his clothes an apron of white leather when he worked, and, as he was always working, his costume never varied. He had acquired what was regarded as wealth in those days, for the people of Cremona were accustomed to say "As rich as Stradiuarius." The house he occupied is still standing in the Piazza Roma, and is probably the principal place of interest in the old city to the tourists who drift thitherward. The simple-minded Cremonese have scarcely a conception to-day of the veneration with which their ancient townsman is regarded by the musical connoisseurs of the world. It was with the greatest difficulty that they were persuaded a few years ago, by the efforts of Italian and French musicians, to name one street Stradiuarius, and another Amati. Nicholas Amati, the greatest maker of his family, was the instructor of Antonius Stradiuarius, and during the early period of the latter artist the instruments could hardly be distinguished from those of Amati. But, in after-years, he struck out boldly in an original line of his own, and made violins which, without losing the exquisite sweetness of the Amati instruments, possessed far more robustness and volume of tone, reaching, indeed, a combination of excellences which have placed his name high above all others. It may be remarked of all the Cremona violins of the best period, whether Amati, Stradiuarius, Guarnerius, or Steiner, that they are marked no less by their perfect beauty and delicacy of workmanship

than by their charm of tone. These zealous artisans were not content to imprison the soul of Ariel in other form than the lines and curves of ideal grace, exquisitely marked woods, and varnish as of liquid gold. This external beauty is uniformly characteristic of the Cremona violins, though shape varies in some degree with each maker. Of the Stradiuarius violins it may be said, before quitting the consideration of this maker, that they have fetched in latter years from one thousand to five thousand dollars. The sons and grandsons of Antonius were also violin-makers of high repute, though inferior to the chief of the family.

The name of Joseph Guarnerius del Jesû is only less in estimation than that of Antonius Stradiuarius, of whom it is believed by many he was a pupil or apprentice, though of this there is no proof. Both his uncle Andreas and his cousin Joseph were distinguished violin-makers, but the Guarnerius patronymic has now its chiefest glory from that member known as "del Jesû." This great artist in fiddle-making was born at Cremona in the year 1683, and died in 1745. He worked in his native place till the day of his death, but in his latter years Joseph del Jesû became dissipated, and his instruments fell off somewhat in excellence of quality and workmanship. But his *chef d'oeuvres* yield only to those of the great Stradiuarius in the estimation of connoisseurs. Many of the Guarnerius violins, it is said, were made in prison, where the artist was confined for debt, with inferior tools and material surreptitiously obtained for him by the jailer's daughter, who was in love with the handsome captive. These fruits of his skill were less beautiful in workmanship, though marked by wonderful sweetness and

power of tone. Mr. Charles Reade, a great violin amateur as well as a novelist, says of these "prison" fiddles, referring to the comical grotesqueness of their form: "Such is the force of genius, that I believe in our secret hearts we love these impudent fiddles best, they are so full of *chic*." Paganini's favorite was a Guarnerius del Jesû, though he had no less than seven instruments of the greatest Cremona masters. Spohr, the celebrated violinist and composer, offered to exchange his Strad, one of the finest in the world, for a Guarnerius, in the possession of Mr. Mawkes, an English musician.

Carlo Bergonzi, the pupil of Antonius Stradiuarius, was another of the great Cremona makers, and his best violins have commanded extraordinary prices. He followed the model of his master closely, and some of his instruments can hardly be distinguished in workmanship and tone from genuine Strads. Something might be said, too, of Jacob Steiner, who, though a German (born about 1620), got the inspiration for his instruments of the best period so directly from Cremona that he ought perhaps to be classified with the violin-makers of this school. His famous violins, known as the Elector Steiners, were made under peculiar circumstances. Almost heartbroken by the death of his wife, he retired to a Benedictine monastery with the purpose of taking holy orders. But the art-passion of his life was too strong, and he made in his cloister-prison twelve instruments, on which he lavished the most jealous care and attention. These were presented to the twelve Electors of Germany, and their extraordinary merit has caused them to rank high among the great violins of the world. A volume

might be easily compiled of anecdotes concerning violins and violin-makers. The vicissitudes and changes of ownership through which many celebrated instruments have passed are full of romantic interest. Each instrument of the greatest makers has a pedigree, as well authenticated as those of the great masterpieces of painting, though there have been instances where a Strad or a Guarnerius has been picked up by some strange accident for a mere trifle at an auction. There have been many imitations of the genuine Cremonas palmed off, too, on the unwary at a high price, but the connoisseur rarely fails to identify the great violins almost instantly. For, aside from their magical beauty of tone, they are made with the greatest beauty of form, color, and general detail. So much has been said concerning the greatest violin-makers, in view of the fact that coincident with the growth of a great school of art-manufacture in violins there also sprang up a grand school of violin-playing; for, indeed, the one could hardly have existed without the other.

III.

The first great performer on the violin whose career had any special significance, in its connection with the modern world of musical art, was Archangelo Corelli, who was born at Fusignano, in the territory of Bologna, in the year 1653. Corelli's compositions are recognized to-day as types of musical purity and freshness, and the great number of distinguished pupils who graduated from his teaching relate him closely with all the distinguished violinists even down to the present day. In Corelli's younger days the church had a stronger claim on musicians than the theatre or concert-room. So we find him getting his earliest instruction from

the Capuchin Simonelli, who devoted himself to the ecclesiastical style. The pupil, however, yielded to an irresistible instinct, and soon put himself under the care of a clever and skillful teacher, the well-known Bassani. Under this tuition the young musician made rapid advancement, for he labored incessantly in the practice of his instrument. At the age of twenty Corelli followed that natural bent which carried him to Paris, then, as now, a great art capital; and we are told, on the authority of Fetis, that the composer Lulli became so jealous of his extraordinary skill that he obtained a royal mandate ordering Corelli to quit Paris, on pain of the Bastille.

In 1680 he paid a visit to Germany, and was specially well received, and was so universally admired, that he with difficulty escaped the importunate invitations to settle at various courts as chief musician. After a three years' absence from his native land he returned and published his first sonatas. The result of his assiduous labor was that his fame as a violinist had spread all over Europe, and pupils came from distant lands to profit by his instruction. We are told of his style as a solo player that it was learned and elegant, the tone firm and even, that his playing was frequently impressed with feeling, but that during performance "his countenance was distorted, his eyes red as fire, and his eyeballs rolled as if he were in agony." For about eighteen years Corelli was domiciled at Rome, under the patronage of Cardinal Ottoboni. As leader of the orchestra at the opera, he introduced many reforms, among them that of perfect uniformity of bowing. By the violin sonatas composed during this period, it is claimed that

Corelli laid the foundation for the art of violin-playing, though it is probable that he profited largely by those that went before him. It was at the house of Cardinal Ottoboni that Corelli met Handel, when the violent temper of the latter did not hesitate to show itself. Corelli was playing a sonata, when the imperious young German snatched the violin from his hand, to show the greatest virtuoso of the age how to play the music. Corelli, though very amiable in temper, knew how to make himself respected. At one of the private concerts at Cardinal Ottoboni's, he observed his host and others talking during his playing. He laid his violin down and joined the audience, saying he feared his music might interrupt the conversation.

In 1708, according to Dubourg, Corelli accepted a royal invitation from Naples, and took with him his second violin, Matteo, and a violoncellist, in case he should not be well accompanied by the Neapolitan orchestra. He had no sooner arrived than he was asked to play some of his concertos before the king. This he refused, as the whole of his orchestra was not with him, and there was no time for a rehearsal. However, he soon found that the Neapolitan musicians played the orchestral parts of his concertos as well as his own accompanists did after some practice; for, having at length consented to play the first of his concertos before the court, the accompaniment was so good that Corelli is said to have exclaimed to Matteo: "*Si suona a Napoli!*"—"They *do* play at Naples!" This performance being quite successful, he was presented to the king, who afterward requested him to perform one of his sonatas; but his Majesty found the adagio "so long and so dry that he got

up and *left the room* (!), to the great mortification of the eminent virtuoso." As the king had commanded the piece, the least he could have done would have been to have waited till it was finished. "If they play at Naples, they are not very polite there," poor Corelli must have thought! Another unfortunate mishap also occurred to him there, if we are to believe the dictum of Geminiani, one of Corelli's pupils, who had preceded him at Naples. It would appear that he was appointed to lead a composition of Scarlatti's, and on arriving at an air in C minor he led off in C major, which mistake he twice repeated, till Scarlatti came on the stage and showed him the difference. This anecdote, however, is so intrinsically improbable that it must be taken with several "grains of salt." In 1712 Corelli's concertos were beautifully engraved at Amsterdam, but the composer only survived the publication a few weeks. A beautiful statue, bearing the inscription "*Corelli princeps musicorum*," was erected to his memory, adjacent that honoring the memory of Raffaelle in the Pantheon. He accumulated a considerable fortune, and left a valuable collection of pictures. The solos of Corelli have been adopted as valuable studies by the most eminent modern players and teachers.

Francesco Geminiani was the most remarkable of Corelli's pupils. Born at Lucca in 1680, he finished his studies under Corelli at Rome, and spent several years with great musical *éclat* at Naples. In 1714 he went to England, in which country he spent many years. His execution was of great excellence, but his compositions only achieved temporary favor. His life is said to have been full of romance and incident. Geminiani's connection with Handel has a special

musical interest. The king, who arrived in England in September, 1714, and was crowned at Westminster a month later, was irritated with Handel for having left Germany, where he held the position of chapel-master to George, when Elector of Brunswick, and still more so by his having composed a *Te Deum* on the Peace of Utrecht, which was not favorably regarded by the Protestant princes of Germany. Baron Kilmanseck, a Hanoverian, and a great admirer of Handel, undertook to bring them together again. Being informed that the king intended to picnic on the Thames, he requested the composer to write something for the occasion. Thereupon Handel wrote the twenty-five little concerted pieces known under the title of "Water Music." They were executed in a barge which followed the royal boat. The orchestra consisted of four violins, one tenor, one violoncello, one double-bass, two hautboys, two bassoons, two French horns, two flageolets, one flute, and one trumpet. The king soon recognized the author of the music, and his resentment against Handel began to soften. Shortly after this Geminiani was requested to play some sonatas of his own composition in the king's private cabinet; but, fearing that they would lose much of their effect if they were accompanied in an inferior manner, he expressed the desire that Handel should play the accompaniments. Baron Kilmanseck carried the request to the king, and supported it strongly. The result was that peace was made, and an extra pension of two hundred pounds per annum settled upon Handel. Geminiani, after thirty-five years spent in England, went to Paris for five years, where he was most heartily welcomed by the musical world, but returned across the

Channel again to spend his latter years in Dublin. It was here that Matthew Dubourg, whose book on "The Violin and Violinists" is a perfect treasure-trove of anecdote, became his pupil.

Another remarkable violinist was an intimate friend of Geminiani, a name distinguished alike in the annals of chess-playing and music, André Danican Philidor. This musician was born near Paris in 1726, and was the grandson of the hautboy-player to the court of Louis XIII. His father and several of his relations were also eminent players in the royal orchestras of Louis XIV and Louis XV. Young Philidor was received into the Chapel Royal at Versailles in 1732, being then six years old, and when eleven he composed a motette which extorted much admiration. In the Chapel Royal there were about eighty musicians daily in attendance, violins, hautboys, violas, double-basses, choristers, etc.; and, cards not being allowed, they had a long table inlaid with a number of chess-boards, with which they amused their leisure time. When fourteen years old Philidor was the best chess-player in the band. Four years later he played at Paris two games of chess at the same time, without seeing the boards, and afterward extended this feat to playing five games simultaneously, which, though far inferior to the wonderful feats of Morphy, Paulsen, and others in more recent years, very much astonished his own generation. Philidor was an admirable violinist, and the composer of numerous operas which delighted the French public for many years. He died in London in 1759.