

Violinist Reflections - Masters, old and new

By Ovide Masix

NOT long ago, a former pupil wrote me to ask if the modern violin masters are superior to the old ones, and my answer was "No." The work of the modern teachers cannot be compared with that of the former generation, such as Viotti, Rode, Kreutzer, Baillet, Habeneck of the Paris Conservatory or Charles de Bériot, Leonard, Vieuxtemps and Wieniawski of the Conservatory of Brussels. To my knowledge not one of the younger generation has written either a study or a concerto, although Kreutzer, Rode and Fiorillo wrote their celebrated studies before they were thirty-five years old. Viotti, Kreutzer and Rode composed their concertos when about twenty years old and upwards. Vieuxtemps and Leonard wrote theirs when still very young and left to posterity works which made their names immortal.

I have also been asked if the modern violin virtuosos are more skillful than those of old times. I replied that from the technical point of view some of the old masters must have been superior, judging by the compositions they wrote and played. First take Locatelli (Pietro), born in Italy in 1693, died in Amsterdam, Holland, in 1764. He was the last pupil of Corelli and was the one to diverge the most from the manner of his master; and by his originality and audacity he succeeded in creating extraordinary effects.

It is surprising that so little is known of the life of Locatelli while his compositions have given him so brilliant a reputation that his name is placed among the greatest of the old classic masters. No traces of his career can be found in the archives of the big European cities and we know only that after Corelli's death, he made frequently long concert tours and finally established himself in Amsterdam, where he died at 71 years of age. By his works "L'Arte del Violino," his "Enigmatical Caprices and Concertos," he is considered by composers and violin virtuosos to be the pioneer of other great violinists.

It is no wonder that violinists of his time could not do justice to his compositions which they called "devilish," as they were much too difficult for them to play and understand. What placed the "Enigmatical Studies of Locatelli" still further above their comprehension was that this master had a way of writing his music with abbreviations. He would, for instance, write out one whole measure of a caprice as it should be played and the rest of the measures of the work would be abbreviated, which the player would have to solve; and as these enigma caprices, as they were called, required an experience equal to that of Locatelli himself in order to play them as he intended, we see why these works have been shelved to a large extent. But some of them are now available for violinists to study with great profit and enjoyment. In some of them I have eliminated the abbreviations and carried out every measure to the full and every note is written out as it ought to be played, with the fingering wherever necessary.

The most celebrated among them is called the "Labyrinth." This and the study in D major for extensions of the third and fourth fingers in double stoppings I consider the very best written and the most profitable to study. Locatelli has been to modern violinists from Paganini down what Hector Berlioz was in orchestral effects to Wagner, Liszt and younger composers for orchestras. Also Nicolo Paganini who is the founder of a technic absolutely unknown before him. Paganini was born in Genoa in 1784, and died in Nice, France, in 1840.

So much has been written about this great genius that I shall relate only a few incidents which are not in any encyclopedia. Camillo Sivori, the only pupil of Paganini and at that time the most celebrated Italian virtuoso, was a friend of Leonard, and I met him often at Leonard's home in

Paris, and although much younger than he, Sivori took some liking to me and we were together very often. He was living in Rue de Treviso in a hotel and I was living in Rue Cadet, just one block distant. I used to go to see him very often when he was in Paris and I always turned the conversation to Paganini. He told me how charming the great violinist was to him and also about his Guarnerius del Gesù given to him by an amateur and how he tuned his violin just half a tone higher than usual to F-B flat-E flat and A flat, instead of having his violin tuned as we do to E-A-D-G, and he used very thin strings. In his concerto in D the orchestra was playing in E flat. The effect was striking for the other violinists, also for the public. I heard a few criticisms on Paganini by Guhr, a German violinist and critic who criticized him for his tone although recognizing his wonderful technic. It is only comparatively recently - a few years - that a violinist virtuoso could draw a good house in Europe or in America. For example, Vieuxtemps, Sarasate, Wilhemj, Wieniawski, had to get the help of a pianist of reputation or a cantatrice of renown. Paganini made all Europe run to hear him no matter in what capitals or towns of any size he appeared. Sivori told me that his tone was powerful and luscious and that he played his pieces as he wrote them. Sivori's 'piece de resistance' was the finale of the 2nd concerto of Paganini called "La Clochette," which has been transcribed for the piano by Liszt under the title "La Campanella" (The Bell). Sivori being a small man with short fingers was obliged to arrange many things, in the double harmonics when the stretching was too big for his small hands. He showed me how Paganini fingered the scales, which I have adopted in my revision of the Belgian School of Violin.

Other great virtuosos of the olden times were Heinrich Ernst, born in Austria, and Ferdinand Laub a Bohemian violinist, whom I heard once in Liege, when I was a boy, and who left a tremendous impression on account of his stupendous technic. He was at that time teacher at the Conservatory of Moscow. I remember 'that' many years after, the violin teachers were still talking about Laub.