

Recollections of Paganini in Belfast

From the *Belfast News Letter*, Friday, 15 November 1844.

The opening paragraphs of this article have been omitted. They referred to a recent visit to Belfast's Music Hall by Signor Camille Savori, reputed to be Paganini's favourite pupil. The writer then recalls memories of Paganini's visit to Belfast:

... It is said that he [Savori] is, or rather was, a pupil, and the only one, of Paganini's, such may be the case, but he exhibits no features characteristic of and peculiar to those which belonged to and distinguished the superhuman excellence of his renowned master. Savori plays like a gentleman in his drawing-room, without show, flourish, or ostentation, with all the attributes of cultivation and humanity – but Paganini, with those of a being of another world, from which he seemed to have strayed.

Many ridiculous and absurd stories were told of this great and renowned man – one, that in order to be able to reach an octave or tenth, without shifting, he had split or cut up the hand between each finger; that he had murdered his wife, was put into prison, and while there, having only one string, had, by this necessity, acquired such wonderful power. Another, that in despair, while suffering incarceration for this crime, he had sold himself to the devil, by whom he had been taught.

Some, in ignorance of the almost incredible power of human perseverance and consequent perfection, stated and believed that he had “something in his fiddle.” So he had; there was “something,” but it was a “something” that this truly master magician only could bring out. Like the moon's shadow in the water, it was sought and raked after, but in vain.

He only was the great and successful alchemist who could make gold of baser metal. His fame spread far and wide, and throughout Europe his name and his instrument resounded in every court and palace of the great, and was invited by all those who really were or wished to be distinguished for their love of music and patronage of genius. He came to London, where he was hailed as the new and brightest star that had ever risen on the musical world.

In Dublin, too, he soon appeared, where musical knowledge and refined taste flung him to the highest altitude of pride and glory. He was there, as elsewhere, fixed on the loftiest pinnacle of unapproachable perfection, and none dared to dispute the deep green laurels that entwined his brow. Some, indeed, were envious, and unjust enough to insinuate that it was by “trick” that these unknown, and till then unheard, wonders were effected; so it was; it was by “trick” they were accomplished, no doubt, but it was that kind of “trick” by which the swiftest horse and fleetest racer leaves the dull, slow, dray-horse behind and out of sight – ashamed of his own want, of speed, he cries “unfair.”

He travelled towards the north, and, as he approached, the trumpet of his greatness sounded louder and louder. The papers teemed with critiques and notices, all testifying their admiration, and sending him to the third heaven with praise. Not long, and he arrived in

Belfast, where appreciation and reward soon showered upon him; the greatest excitement prevailed, and, though the prices of the theatre were raised to double the usual cost, it was full to overflowing.

'Twas like the rushing of mighty waters to a pool, which was filled before the flood-gates were completely open, and instantly the house was full, crammed to excess, presenting a mass of faces, close and compact as if chained together, all big with expectation, longing for the wizard who was so soon to appear. The time elapsed in waiting was neither long nor spent in vain, for a prelude on the piano soon drew him from his place of concealment, like an apparition summoned by the sound of the last trump. He came in and approached the footlights, with his fiddle loosely dangling in his hand – his face pale and wan – his hair long, lank, and black, and his appearance altogether was startling and unearthly.

He seemed to have come from some dark and unknown region, or that, by some rude and unholy grave-digger, he had been impiously disturbed from his repose, for his shrunk and attenuated frame insinuated a long absence from the elements of human sustenance –

“ So withered and wild in his attire,
That he look'd not like an inhabitant o' the earth,
And yet was on't.”

But, though in every other respect he seemed cold and motionless, when the time came, he took his firm-fixed and commanding stand, threw his instrument to its position, and applied his long bow to the strings, which at once uttered a marvellous concord of sweet, impassioned, and soul-stirring sounds, such as would awaken the dullest and heaviest heart to delight – from quick to slow – from strain to strain – from heavenly swelling and shaking chords to single and simple beauteous melody, he continued to peal out the enrapturing charm of never-to-be-forgotten fascination – it was now, and never heard before – all felt his matchless power, and listened with breathless interest till, for this time, his pathos and his passion had ceased.

He retired – seemingly unmoved, slowly and awkwardly to his hiding-place, perchance to rest, if he could, or hurry about the precincts of the charnel-house, from which he had been driven – for his person, manner, and performance appeared so truly wonderful, that his identity might almost have been doubted. Again he came, resolved to try another effort, perhaps to convince us of his mission, and make known to us what is going on, and afford a sample of the music he has heard and learnt in the world from which he has been permitted to come.

His features were still cold, ashy, and frozen, and neither the strong burning lights, nor the plaudits of the audience, could relax their rigidity. He again astounds with the amazing and magical command in drawing, or forcing out, the heavenly sounds entombed in his instrument. From the nut – not to say the extremity of the finger-board, but to the bridge itself – he runs over and ransacks all, with an ease and rapidity that compels every portion to yield and give out its matchless share of single and combined harmony. His bow was of unusual length, but not too long to “discuss the sweet sounds” that were ever ready at his call to flutter and emerge from their prison-house.

It never can be forgotten the almost endless flood of notes produced by one length of his bow. The beholder would imagine that the effort was exhausted, that the stream had or was about to cease; but two inches yet remained at the hilt, in which short space a countless number were yet summoned to follow in the lucid train of those by which they were preceded. This was done, till the bow and hand had both passed clean over the strings, instrument, and all. There he stood, erect and firm, like a statue, bow in hand, seeming either to thank the gods for past success, or to invoke them to sanction and sustain him in fresh efforts.

He is now seen to move slowly to his retreat, where after remaining a short time to collect new energies, he returns with only one string (the fourth) to his violin, which may be said to combine and contain his very soul, and on which he is to play, to make his last appeal and parting claim to immortality. The whole house was spell-bound, and death-like silence pervaded throughout; every ear was open, and every eye stretched, to hear and see the coming wonder; it was even so, and the tale of wonder was more than realized, for not a simple air, but a grand composition was sent forth, redolent with all the beauty and elegance that the most finished execution could give it.

He commenced with an *adagio* passage, which was slow and grave, every tone of which went thrilling to the heart, and ended too soon, for it was listened to as music from heaven. Now he arose in altitude, and ran over, with electric effect, a cadence of celestial beauty and sweetness –

“ ’Twas the charm of a seraph-touch that awoke
New music, holy and inspiring,
As are those dulcet sounds, at break of day,
That creep into the dreaming bridegroom’s ear,
And summon him to marriage.”

But here he staid not – he had merely told the sublime tale of affection and love; the amorous fire of his passion was yet to come – difficulties, to others impossibilities, flew terrified before his magic bow. Began he then, in alternate movements, a hurried torrent of burning notes, rapid, full, swelling, and distinct, telling us the glowing tones of an organ, revealing with bewitching grandeur a beautiful account of intricate and compound harmony, dashing over all the dangerous rocks of almost impracticable obstruction like an irresistible and overwhelming flood. But it was not a pell-mell of hasty confusion and inarticulate jumble.

Every tone came round and full from his excited and almost bursting instrument, mingling, as he went along in furious career, the purest harmonies, that danced, and thrilled, and flickered in the dizzy atmosphere of their own heaven, sparkling like diamonds, and shedding their illuminating light on the more humble and earthly class below. He succeeded – he was pleased – and, for the first time, his features yielded to the force of pleasurable emotion. A pale, faint smile was seen to play on his lips and spread a gentle influence on his face. A slight but stiff inclination of the body, indicative of his sensibility of the deafening applause he received – and he disappeared.

All that is stated here, and more, dwells upon the writer’s sense and delights him, even now. But it was over, the enchantment ended, and all were left to dwell over and revel in the wonders they had heard.

Adieu, then, thou paragon of unrivalled excellence and perfection! Thy like will never be look'd upon again, but thy name shall be inscribed and emblazoned on the imperishable shield of fame, and, so long as divine music holds a seat in this world, it shall never be forgotten.