

THE PIANOLIST

Gustave Kobbe – 1908

CHAPTER I :

THE TITLE AND PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

My book, "How to Appreciate Music," in the chapter devoted to the pianoforte, contains a paragraph relating to the Pianola and its influence in popularizing music and stimulating musical taste. I confess that before I started that paragraph I was puzzled to know what term to use in designating the instrument I had in mind." Mechanical piano-player" is a designation which not only does not appeal to me, but, furthermore, fails to do justice to the instrument, which, although mechanical in its working, is far from being mechanical in its effects.

The result? I took a cross cut and arrived straight at the word Pianola as being the name of the most widely known piano- player, and happily derived from the name of the most widely known instrument, the pianoforte or, as it is more popularly termed the piano. For this reason the term Pianola was used in the paragraph referred to and now is employed in this book; and, for the same reason, this book is called "The Pianolist." It is believed to be the title least requiring explanation, if, indeed, it requires any explanation at all. Right here, however, I must add that the company which manufactures the Pianola objects to the use of the word as a generic term.

So much for the title. Now for the purpose of this book.

Soon after the publication of "How to Appreciate Music" I discovered that the paragraph concerning this new musical instrument had made a hit. It was widely quoted as evidence of the "up-to-dateness" of the book and I began to receive letters from pianola owners who were pleased that the merits of the instrument should have been recognized in a serious book on music. Among these was a letter from a Mr. Harry Mason, of Detroit, suggesting that I should write a book for the use of those who owned piano-players. Mr. Mason and myself never have met. He knows me merely as an author of a book on music. All I know of him is that he is one of the editors of a druggists' trade paper in Detroit. Yet from him has come the suggestion which has led me to write this book, although, to judge from his letter, he had not been deeply interested in music until he began to use a "player" and., through it, was led to ask for a book which would tell him, in un-technical language, something about an art that was beginning to have eloquence and meaning for him. To me this is highly significant, for there must be thousands of others like him all over the country, to whom, in the same way, the great awakening just is coming through the pianola at first a means of amusement, then an educator with the element of amusement, but of a higher order, left in!

Shortly after I received Mr. Mason's letter an incident added greatly to the force of his suggestion. I always have been very fond of Schubert's "Rosamunde" impromptu. The first person I heard play it publicly was Annette Essipoff, a Russian pianist and one of the very few great women pianists of the world. Frequently I have heard it since then,

but never so charmingly interpreted excepting But that is the most interesting part of the story.

One night I was at my desk in my study, when, suddenly, I heard the strains of this impromptu, which is an air with variations, from the direction of the drawing room. It was sweet and tender, graceful and expressive, according to the character of the variations; and, when the last variation began with a crispness and delicacy that made me wonder what great virtuoso was at my pianoforte without my knowing it, I hurried to the drawing room and, entering it found my fourteen year old daughter seated at a pianola. The instrument had arrived only a short time before from the house of a friend who had gone South for the winter. My daughter never had had a music lesson, never had heard Schubert's "Rosamunde" impromptu. Yet she had, without any effort, been the first to take me back to Essipoffs playing of Schubert's charming work! It would have been ludicrous had it not meant so much. In fact it was ludicrous because, a few days before, when the instrument had just been delivered and set up, I had been deceived in much the same manner by her playing of a composition by Grieg.

But to return to the Schubert impromptu. Essipoff, my young daughter, the associate editor of a druggist' paper in Detroit, and myself; the first a great virtuoso, the second a schoolgirl, the third a writer on a trade paper, the fourth a music critic what a leveller of distinctions, what a universal musical provider the pianola is! Ten years ago the virtuoso and the music critic would have been the only ones concerned. The schoolgirl and the trade paper editor wouldn't have been "in it" Now, the schoolgirl was playing like a virtuoso and the writer on drugs and druggists was giving hints to the music critic. A great leveller, placing the musical elect and those who formerly would have had to remain outside the pale, on a common footing! This may not always appeal to the musical elect, but think what it means to the great mass of those who are genuinely musical but have lacked the opportunity for musical study or to those whose taste for music never has been brought out

To paraphrase a few sentences from my "How to Appreciate Music" that have been much quoted: "Are you musical?"

" ' No,' nine persons out of ten will reply; ' I neither play nor sing.'

" ' Your answer shows a complete misunderstanding of the case. Because you neither play nor sing, it by no means follows that you are unmusical. If you love music and appreciate it, you may be more musical than many pianists and singers; or latent within you and only awaiting the touchstone of music there may be a deeper love and appreciation of the art than can be attributed to many virtuosos. For most of a virtuoso's love and appreciation is apt to be centered upon himself. And when you say, 'I cannot play,' you are mistaken. You are thinking of the pianoforte. You may not be able to play that But you or any one else can play the pianola, and that instantly places at your command all the technical resources of which even the greatest virtuosos can boast."

One purpose of this book thus is to bring home to people an appreciation of what this modern instrument is, whether it is regarded as a toy with which the business man amuses himself with two-steps and ragtime after business hours, or as a serious musical instrument.

Another purpose, and a large one, is to furnish pianolists with a guide to the music

which they play, or might play if their attention were directed to it and to some of its characteristics, and to point out the importance of the instrument in developing a love of good music.

I also have in writing this book a purpose which I may describe as personal. I believe I was the first American to publish an analysis of the Wagner music dramas that seemed to be what the public wanted, and the first to contribute to a magazine of general circulation an article on Richard Strauss. It is a matter of pride with me always to be found on the firing line even if it is the privilege of those who watch the battle from a safe distance to dictate the despatches and take the credit for the result to themselves. And so, I wish to be the first to write a book on the pianola, an instrument of such importance to the progress and popular spread of music that, at the present time, we can have but a faint glimmering of the great part it is destined to play.