

THE PIANOLIST
Gustave Kobbe – 1908

CHAPTER II :
THE CHARM OF PLAYING A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT YOURSELF

HOW I wish I could play like that! What is more common than this exclamation from people who are listening to a great virtuoso or even only to a fairly clever amateur? They realize that, no matter how much they may enjoy a performance, there -is much greater fascination in being the performer. Not a musical person but would play if he could. Why, however, that “if”? It no longer exists. It has been eliminated. The charm, the fascination of playing a musical instrument yourself can be yours, and the only “if” to it is if you have intelligence enough to appreciate what that means.

What formerly was an insuperable obstacle, the lack of technical facility the real inability to play absolutely has been done away with. There is no excuse for anybody’s not playing who wants to. The pianola furnishes the technique, the dexterity, the finger facility, or whatever you may choose to call it So far as this is concerned the instrument itself makes you a virtuoso places you on a par with a Liszt, Paderewski or Rosenthal. It does so mechanically, yet without the sharpness and insistent preciseness of a machine. Its action is pneumatic and the effect of the compressed air is to impart to its “touch” the manner in which its “fingers” strike the keys an elasticity which at least is comparable with the touch of human fingers. As a friend of mine, a lawyer, who has owned three pianolas and who actually has been made musical through them, expresses it: “When you’ve got a mechanical device as good or nearly as good as a virtuoso, you’ve got something of enormous importance to the whole world.” And so you have.

I find a great feature of the so-called mechanical piano-player lies in what it allows you to do yourself. It provides you with technique, but, to use a colloquial phrase, “you can still call your soul your own.” The technique, the substitute for that finger facility which only years of practice will give, is the pianola’s; but the interpretation is yours! The instrument provides the devices for accelerating or retarding the time and for making the tone loud or soft, but when to whip up the time or to slow down, when to use the sustaining or the soft lever or when to swell through a crescendo from pianissimo to fortissimo all that is left to your own taste, judgment and discretion. There is, indeed, among the improvements introduced in the pianola a contrivance, of which more hereafter, by which complete directions are given for the interpretation of the roll of music that is being played. These directions, however, are not compulsory. They are, in each instance, based on high authority and are of great value even to persons who are thoroughly familiar with the music, but they need not be followed if the player does not want to follow them. He is likely in the beginning to accept the directions, the so-called metrostyle marking, as he would the instruction of a high class teacher, while, later on, he may incline to regard the metrostyle as indicating the general spirit in which the piece should be interpreted, but vary it In detail as his mood or fancy dictates. The metrostyle may, in fact, be called the pianolist’s “coach,” giving him the kind of hints and directions which even the greatest players and singers

value. Something, however, of the pianist himself, something of his own thought and feeling goes into every interpretation. That this is so is proved by the fact that no two pianists interpret the same composition alike. There are differences, more or less marked, just as there are when the same piece is played by two pianists. In the broader outlines, in general spirit, the interpretations may be the same, but they will be distinguished by subtle shadings that indicate temperamental differences. The perspective of a landscape varies when viewed from different windows; so does life when observed from different points of view; so does the interpretation of a composition when played by different people on the pianola.

Were the instrument purely a mechanical device to wind up and set going, the artistic results of which it is capable never would have been obtained, and, I may add, this book never would have been written. The fact that artistic expression instead of machine-like precision has been its aim is what has caused its possibilities as a musical instrument to appeal to me. It cannot be sufficiently urged that in this country as in every other, there is an immense amount of latent musical taste awaiting only the touchstone of hearing music or, better still, the fascination of personally producing music, to assert itself. Before the invention of the piano-player hearing music was the only touchstone; through the piano-player there is added the fascination of being yourself a participator in producing the music you hear. When Theodore Thomas said "Nothing so awakens interest in music as helping to make it," he hit the nail on the head." After playing all this music I want to go to concerts next winter. I'd like to hear how the 'Fifth Symphony' sounds on the orchestra," said my little girl after the pianola had been in the house only a week. "All this music?" Yes indeed. More than she could have become familiar with in six months' concert-going and instruction. And we always had said that she wasn't musical! This fascination of personally producing music is such a great factor in the spread of musical taste that it is well worth looking into further. There always is more pleasure in doing something than in watching some one else do it. Take the average amateurs who get together for music. They enjoy what they play a thousand-fold more than if they were listening to the greatest virtuosos playing the same program. Why? Because always there is more satisfaction in doing the thing itself than merely in contemplating the result of what some one else is doing. And so, with music, "to experience the full fascination the divine art can exercise on us mortals, we must take an active part in the making of it." Through the pianola the opportunity of taking an active part in the making of it is open to everybody. Remember what my friend said. It is worth repeating. "When you've got a mechanical device as good, or nearly as good as a virtuoso, you've got something of enormous importance to the whole world." Mechanical, remember, only in a certain sense. Were it wholly mechanical it never could be "as good, or nearly as good, as a virtuoso."

Now let us see how this personal affiliation of pianola and pianist, of instrument and player, has been worked out, so that the player is not a mere human treadmill pumping air into a cabinet on castors, but whether he be a lawyer, merchant, financier, dressmaker, milliner, or society leader; one of the Four Hundred or one of the eighty million a musical artist with an unlimited repertory.

The pianoforte is the most universal musical Instrument of the civilized world. I once turned the old question, "What is home without a mother," into "What is home without a pianoforte?" Practically no household that makes claim to refinement is

without one. Only too often, however, even in such homes, it is merely an article of drawing room furniture, because no member of the household can play it. There it stands waiting for the chance visitor who can strike the keys and make the strings vibrate with music.

Imagine that you are a member or let us say the head of that household. You can't play a note and yet you are "fond of music." This "fondness for music" manifests itself in different degree in different people and somewhat according to their opportunities. You may be a hardworking business man and when you come home from business, you want diversion, amusement. For someone to suggest a classical concert to you would make you feel like being asked to begin the day's work all over again without a night's rest in between. As for Wagner, that would be worse than straightening out an intricate account after a day spent in poring over a ledger. No. Music without any tune to it may be all right for some people, but comic opera is "good enough" for you. You like that coon song you heard the other night. How you would enjoy playing it on the pianoforte if you only knew how! But you don't, so you have to pay a speculator three dollars for a seat if you want to hear it again.

Suppose the days of miracles weren't past and, by some miracle, you suddenly found yourself in command of the technique of the pianoforte able to play whatever you wanted to. You'd buy that coon song and some other pieces of light music, and then you'd hurry home to your pianoforte and play them off as fast as you could, while the family stood around and listened and marvelled.

That is precisely the miracle the pianola performs for you. It gives you, from the moment it enters your house, control over the keyboard of the pianoforte that so long has stood mute in your home. All you have to do is to put in the perforated music roll, work the pedals and the music begins. Supposing it is that coon song from the comic opera you liked so much. The first time you play it, you may be so interested in the instrument's accurate reproduction of the tune that you don't stop to think of the expression. The chances are, however, that your delight over what you have accomplished will lead you to play the song right over again. Now you begin to realize that there was something more than mere accuracy in the delivery of the melody when you heard it at the theatre. There was interpretation, that something which the individual artist puts into everything he does. You will recall that while the piece was taken pretty fast as a whole, some phrases were taken faster, other more slowly. You have been told that by moving a little lever to the right or left, you can produce these effects. You try it. When you come to a phrase that should be taken a little faster, you move the lever slightly to the right and the pianoforte responds. It is the same when you move the lever to the left for the slower phrases the pianoforte responds and the phrase is retarded. Two other levers control the volume of sound so that you can play any part of the piece louder or softer if you want to. It is not at all unlikely that you may vary these details to suit yourself, instead of simply being guided by your recollection of what you heard at the theatre. In a word you yourself become on the spot an interpreter of music, put something of yourself into what you play. The instrument instead of being merely a machine that grinds out music is a machine only in so far as it takes the place of technique, of finger facility. The expression, the real interpretation, that which gives one the fascination of playing, is your own.

That's your first experience with the instrument. Pretty soon you are apt to have another experience that is even more valuable. You stocked up pretty well with the music of the day, the current Broadway comic opera and musical comedy successes. Gradually, however, that pet coon song of yours will begin to pall on you a little. The very jingle to the tune that made it catch your fancy so quickly causes you to tire of it, and so it goes with the other pieces whose rhythm is so marked and continued with such great precision and whose tunefulness was so obvious that they made an instantaneous impression upon your musically untrained sense of hearing. You are beginning to find out what any one who is trained in any art is bound to discover sooner or later. The things most easily understood are not apt to give the most lasting pleasure. Some one suggests to you that you try one of the lighter classical pieces. You don't like that word "classical," it suggests heaviness, lack of tunefulness, the kind of thing that "may be all right for some people," but never, you think, would suit you. At last, however, you yield. You inquire for something of the kind and are advised to try Mendelssohn's "Spring Song." Much to your surprise you don't find it heavy at all. In fact you recall once having heard it played between the acts in a theatre and having thought it rather pretty. Its rhythm isn't as persistently emphatic as that of ragtime, nor does its melody stand out in such sharp relief, but instead of wearying you on repetition, you like it better every time you play it .

Encouraged by this experience you next purchase the same composer's "Spinning Song." This may not appeal to you so much at first. It seems to run along very rapidly without any very clearly defined melody. Still, it is by the same composer as the "Spring Song," so it may be worth trying over again. It is more familiar now, and you begin to associate the rapid, whirring phrases with its title with the idea of "spinning." How clear it suddenly becomes. You even conjure up in your mind the picture of some young woman in quaint garb seated at a spinning wheel in an old-fashioned room and you find yourself experiencing all the pleasure that comes from association of ideas, the keenest enjoyment that art affords. You are making rapid progress now, so rapid that it is as impossible as unnecessary to follow you step by step. The main point is that you are becoming truly musical and at the same time enjoying it. What might be "all right for some people" has become all right for you too. You have been repaid a thousand-fold for the little effort it cost you to discover through the gradual development of a taste that had lain dormant, the kind of music that "lasts." The same thing is true of your whole family. It has become musical, and in an incredibly short space of time. The pianola has done it, and done the same thing in thousands of other cases. Now take the case of some one whose musical taste, to begin with, is more advanced. Supposing that, instead of having had your musical horizon bounded by coon songs and comic operas, you were an attendant at orchestral concerts, song and pianoforte recitals and grand opera. You are a genuine music lover, genuinely musical, but you can't play. You long to reproduce and express at home the music you have heard elsewhere. If only, after hearing Paderewski play your favorite Chopin nocturne, which, as with so many other music lovers, is the exquisite one in G major, Opus 37, No. 2, you could go to your own pianoforte and play it! You think it is one of the most beautiful compositions in the whole repertory, and of all pianists whom you have heard, Paderewski, in your opinion, plays it better than any other. There are pieces that sound more difficult and you have been told that it doesn't call for advanced technique as much as it does for soul. That is what your favorite virtuoso seems to you to put into it, his own soul. Interpreting himself, unconsciously expressing his own thoughts and feelings, through those of the composer. That is what

you are convinced you could do. If only you knew how to play; for you are musical, very musical, almost, In fact, to your finger tips. But these, alas, never have been trained to command the keyboard. You are getting along well in business, making money and all that; and yet you look upon your life as half a failure because, although you have the temperament artistic, you are unable to gratify fully your passion for music. You can listen, but you can't play. You can hear Paderewski interpret your favorite nocturne, but you can't go home to your own pianoforte and let your fingers conjure up memories of it on the keyboard. You have a beautiful pianoforte in your house for the use of others.

You'd be willing to mortgage half your income for life, if you could learn to play it yourself. But it's too late for that now. So you think.

But one day you drop in at a friend's house and from the drawing room come strains of your favorite Chopin nocturne. Something about it reminds you of the way Paderewski plays it. Who can it be? You know that your friend doesn't play the pianoforte. But, as you stand in the doorway, hesitating whether to go in or not, it is he who looks out at you from behind the instrument and nods to you to come in. You drop into a chair and listen and wonder. The nocturne comes to an end, your friend rises, greets your wondering look with a smile, and meets your amazed query with one word: "Pianola!"

"It sounded like Paderewski," you stammer in a dazed sort of way.

"Why shouldn't it? Practically, I have been taught how to play it by that great artist."

He takes out the roll and brings it over for you to look at on it you see, reproduced in facsimile this autographed certification :

"The line on this roll indicates the tempo according to my interpretation.

"I. J. Paderewski."

The roll, as the expression goes, has been "metrostyled" by the virtuoso himself.

"I didn't know you had one of these instruments. Why haven't you told me? How long have you had it?"

"About a week," he answers.

"And you can make it sound like that?"

"Of course I can. Nothing easier. Just stand behind me and watch." He replaces the music roll and, as he pedals and it unrolls, he shows you how easy it is with the metrostyle to follow the red line marked by Paderewski to indicate how he plays the piece.

"According to my idea," continues your friend, "he plays some parts of the second melody a little too slowly makes it too sentimental, instead of poetically expressive.

You may observe that I don't always follow the line. That's one of the great things about the instrument You can profit by the directions just as much as you want to, but you can disregard them whenever you have a mind to. It may seem presumptuous to differ, even in a small detail, from a great virtuoso like Paderewski, but every virtuoso has his idiosyncrasies and we, who, after all, have been listening to music all our lives and have heard all the great pianists from Rubinstein to 'Paddy' himself and all the women pianists from Essipoff to Bloomfield-Zeisler, are entitled to some ideas of our own. As I just said, one of the great things about the instrument is that it allows us this latitude. I call it a cinch!

"Now here's something else. We know Richard Strauss' big tone poems, the biggest things in music since Wagner. But did you know that he's written some charming

little pieces for pianoforte? Just listen to this. It's 'Traumerei' or 'Revery,' a delicious little dreamy improvisation. He 'metrostyled' it himself and, as I've never heard anyone play it, I'm only too glad to have his directions. They give you the general hang of the thing 'right off the reel,' so to speak. But later on, when I become more familiar with it, if I want to vary the interpretation according to my own mood of the moment, I can. It's a great thing, though, to find out how famous living composers, like Richard Strauss, Grieg here are a couple of rolls from his 'Peer Gynt' suite metrostyled by himself Saint-Saens, Elgar, or even composers of first rate lighter music, like Moszkowski and Chaminade, conceive that they want to have their works interpreted; or how great virtuosos, like Paderewski, Rosenthal and other pianists, play them; or gifted instructors in music, like Carl Reinecke, would have them performed. It's like taking lessons in interpretation from these people.

There's another matter that will interest you. Take pieces like Rubinstein's 'Melody in F' or the best known selection from his 'Kammenoi Ostrow,' where the melody lies, in the former in between the accompaniment, in the latter below it you recall, of course, how the accompanying figure hovers above it. In pieces like these it is important that the melodic line should be clearly distinguished, otherwise it will be smothered. Fortunately an attachment to the instrument, the themodist, enables you to bring the melody and, at the same time does not prevent your retarding or accelerating the general movement of the piece or of varying the volume of sound as much as you like.

"While I've had the instrument only a little while, I've been struck with something else. I find that you can accomplish a good deal through what I may call 'foot-technique' varying the degree of strength with which you use the pedals that pump in the air. By this means you can play louder or softer at will and by a sharp pressure emphasize individual chords and phrases. This, I find, makes the interpretation seem more personal than when I use the sustaining and soft levers alone. Altogether I'm beginning to look upon myself as a virtuoso, and the best thing you can do, old man, is to take my advice and become one too."

Fortunately you are musical enough and intelligent enough to appreciate the philosophy and significance of the instrument that it supplies what you haven't got, the technique, but that you give it the expression, the soul; that although it is not a pianoforte, but an attachment to that instrument, nevertheless, in playing it, you express something of yourself, something of your inner being, something of your higher artistic nature through it.

There is a large class of people to whom the "piano-player" is or should be a great boon. I mean those who play the pianoforte, but not well enough to play publicly or professionally. To this class belong the thousands of music teachers and the amateurs. The majority of them may be more truly musical than many of the virtuoso pianists, but they are lacking in technique. For the technical standard is growing higher every year. Comparatively few music teachers have much opportunity of hearing music, the result being that they find it difficult to keep up with the times. They become old-fashioned, and in these progressive days to become old-fashioned means to be forced to "drop out" They lack the technique to run through the modern repertoire, and the time to hear others in it. It hardly is necessary to point out what the pianola, which gives them complete technical mastery of the keyboard, should be to them.

As regards the amateur I can cite my own case as an example. I had progressed on the pianoforte until I was able to play Liszt's arrangement of the Spinning Song from Wagner's "Flying Dutchman." It is a difficult piece, but there is a great deal of pianoforte music that is more difficult and that was entirely beyond me. Moreover the fact that I was able to play this composition after much assiduous practice, did not mean that I could play equally difficult or even considerably less difficult music with ease by sight. The repertoire of even the best amateur is apt to be a small one. He gains his general knowledge of music from what he hears.

With me, in time, as with so many amateurs, pianoforte playing had to yield first place to my regular work. I took up writing and that became paramount. I began to lose my pianoforte technique, and I should not like to say how many years it is since I lost the ability to play Liszt's arrangement of the Spinning Song from the "The Flying Dutchman," the "Butterfly" etude of Chopin and other works that I had had at my fingers' ends. Often, when I went to pianoforte recitals and heard these compositions played, I grieved over what I had lost through sacrificing the pianoforte to the pen.

I grieve no longer. I have acquired a perfect technique, the technique of a great virtuoso through the pianola. It is a key that has unlocked for me the whole repertoire of music. With it I can play the most difficult work ever written as easily as I can a five-finger exercise. It gives me the technique, but all that is summed up in the one word "expression," I am at liberty to put into the music myself.

In the whole world there are perhaps two, at the most three pianoforte virtuosos who really deserve to be called great. To listen to them is the acme of musical delight. But right next to this comes the performance of any musical person, whether a child or grown up, on the pianola. It is better than the playing of any virtuoso not absolutely of the very first rank, and infinitely preferable to the playing of the most gifted amateur, while the performance of the average amateur almost is juvenile compared with it. Moreover there are pieces of which the Liszt "Campanella," the Mendelssohn "Rondo Capriccioso" and the "Rosamunde" impromptu of Schubert, are examples, that, when played on the pianola by a musical person, sound just as well as if they came from under the fingers of the greatest living virtuoso possibly better.

These are not dreams, they are facts; and discoverable in due time by everyone who is made musical through the instrument of which I am writing; and, in an incredibly short time by any one, already musical, who takes it up. Moreover they are facts readily susceptible of explanation, and here it is: All technical difficulties being eliminated by the pianola, the player is free to give his whole attention to interpretation, to that subtle something which we call "expression," and which constitutes the supreme quality of a musical performance.