

# SINGERS ARE DUMBER THAN FIDDLERS

BY BERNARD PRESTON

IN A recent number of *THE AMERICAN MERCURY* appeared an erudite article entitled "Fiddlers Are Dumber Than Pianists."<sup>1</sup> Encouraged by the convincing clarity of the case as set forth by its remarkably logical author, I purpose to settle a kindred question, engendered by his theme, namely, "Are Singers Dumber Than Fiddlers?"

Following the admirable process of elimination employed by my predecessor in this field of enquiry, let us first have it clearly understood that we reject from this discussion all pseudo-types, who have really no claim to any regard whatever. For instance, ballad singers. If some misguided person wants to tell the story of "The Black-bordered Letter"—let us say, for a horrible example, inconceivable as it is that any one should be willing to hear it—in heaven's name let him relate the maudlin tale in speech rather than doubly afflict his hearers by attempting it in song. Yodellers are others who might find a useful sphere in the Tyrol or other mountainous regions, where there are plenty of distances to span; there, no doubt, a properly arranged system of signals in their peculiar medium would prove of inestimable value. But these ear-splitting falsetto lilts should never be heard within doors; let them rather be reserved for calling the cattle home and similar pur-

poses. And crooners, of course, do not sing at all; they merely whisper, more or less in tune and more or less out of time. While the torch-singer plainly caterwauls. *Vide* Mr. Deems Taylor's recent definition, somewhat as follows: "A torch-singer is a woman who has lost her voice and insists on bewailing the fact in public." Ergo, no singer, if she have no voice!

We should also exclude the oratorio singer, for oratorio is not music, but some churchly or Biblical message imperfectly disguised as such. And if it is not music, it certainly cannot be sung; and if it were music, the stilted, woolly-toned, traditional manner of rendering it is certainly not singing. And, finally, choristers should be debarred as subjects of the debate, since they combine only for the blending of tone and pitch, and can patently be consigned to outer darkness as simply vocal orchestras, and, at that, immeasurably inferior to the instrumental in range, color and quality.

(Students, it goes without saying, as my colleague did in the case of the fiddlers, we must sternly banish. The sweet young thing who at her Conservatory's Commencement smilingly murders "Casta Diva," or the flushed adolescent who strains his voice, his blood-vessels and his audience to the bursting-point in an agonizing tenor or a growling bass, cannot yet claim our attention as singers, however justly they may at a later stage of development demand our recognition on such grounds.)

<sup>1</sup> "Fiddlers Are Dumber Than Pianists," by Edward Robinson. *THE AMERICAN MERCURY*, September, 1934.

The way being thus cleared, we shall begin with an examination of the apparatus, to the acquiring of whose mastery the singer must bend his intellect. One of the most striking points made, in the comparison of pianists and fiddlers, lay in bringing out the fact that the mind of the former was confronted with the task of manipulating a vast number of strings, while the latter are required to achieve mental ascendancy over no more than four. Now if we slash this number into halves, we have the extremely simple equipment of the singer: a mere pair of strings, the two vocal cords. In addition to this, the aggregate length of the four violin strings is some two yards, that is to say, six feet, which is to say, 72 inches; that of the singer's cords is about two inches. An absurdly small obstacle to overcome, since the vocalist, as opposed to the violinist, needs to focus his consideration only in the ratio of 1 to 36.

And the process of operating these instruments is still more emphatic in the disparity between their physical demands. It was shown that the fiddler expends energy, and therewith brain-cells, to an amount represented by  $\frac{1}{8}$  lb. while playing; but observations made by Dr. Lámke of the University of Klyno, Japan, prove that the singer spends as little as 125 ergs per second, or about  $\frac{1}{50}$  of a millionth h.p., which is of course utterly negligible, particularly in view of the fact that he has to be breathing anyway; for all he needs to do, practically speaking, is to open his mouth and let the sound emerge. We can easily imagine instances when much more force, self-applied *bien-entendu*, would be called upon if he were to remain silent; we might go further, and aver that there are instances when this force *should* be applied by an external agency, if the subject himself does not see fit to bring it into play.

Apart from this there is the fact that the fiddler, though not employing so many parts of his body as the pianist, as was amply demonstrated, still has to keep his two hands fairly well occupied. The singer, on the contrary, finds so much leisure for these members that he is frequently seen to wave them about in distracting and meaningless gestures—unless, indeed, he aims to overcome this tendency by clenching them tightly together, somewhat in advance of his chest, in an attitude suggestive of partially paralyzed and completely wretched prayerfulness, often heightening the piteous picture by going through grimaces and other distortions of face and figure.

He, or she (for the female singer is even a worse offender as a rule in this regard), has not even the dignity of static posture, which however stiff and soldier-like in the violinist, has at any rate the virtue of consistency. The singer rambles all over the place, particularly, of course, in opera, that most mongrel of all the arts, frequently turning his back to the audience, walking, running, climbing, sitting, kneeling, or even lying down! So abject is he in his enslavement to his mood, or to that of the combined subjective wills of the composer and the *répétiteur*! In comparison with the pianist's "crouching" position, and the fiddler's "militaristic" one, the deportment of the singer would seem to reflect total abandon of self-respect. On top of which, the vocalist frequently toys with objects absolutely foreign to music, as a fan, a hat, a bouquet, a sword, a train that requires careful manœuvring, and a thousand other adventitious "props," especially, again, in that horrendous world which is Grand Opera. No, there can be no convincing claim advanced that the musician who stoops to playing with such trifles has a mind seriously intent upon any

worthier aim than pandering to the most superficial of the emotions.

Penetrating further into this analysis, we find that the singer's music is structurally as much inferior to the violinist's, as is his to the pianist's. The disciple of Paganini may not play chords as complex as does the virtuoso of the keyboard; but he can and frequently does indulge in double-stopping, with the result that we then hear more than one note produced at the same time. But no singer has ever yet been born with a conformation sufficiently intricate to enable him to sing a chord. One note only at a time can be given forth by the resounding throat. Parenthetically, as we know that the resonance of a violin is attributable to its hollowness, is it not a logical presumption that a parallel scientific phenomenon is manifested in the audibility of the voice issuing from the cavities of a human head?

## II

On the heels of realizing the bare melodic limitations of the singer's scope, inevitably follows recognition of the limitations of his score. For every note he sings, his accompanist will strike an average of five or six—to say nothing of those passages when the instrumentalist is busier than ever, while his soloist takes an unearned rest and fatuously gazes about, or nods irrelevantly to friends in the audience. This, however, is measuring him against the pianist; but the case is not much better when he is sized up against the violinist, who may kindly be assisting with an *obbligato*. At least as much work devolves upon the strings as upon the voice, and for about one-fiftieth of the glory; sometimes the onus is considerably greater, as in that strangely popular hybrid, the Bach-Gounod "Ave Maria," when

the poor fiddler does the whole thing twice over to the soprano's once.

I have not troubled to count the notes of any particular composition, as my profound *confrère* apparently had the enormous patience to do in his argument, since, in the case of voice versus instrument, it is so much more sweepingly patent that the notes flowing from the keyboard are as a Niagara to the puny trickle of those that drip from the singer's lips. And if the work is orchestrated, simply multiply this Niagara a thousandfold, while the trickle is not increased by one drop.

A still subtler differentiation must be made. While it is certainly undeniable that the range of the violin is far below that of the pianoforte, still it has a compass of some four or five octaves whereas the average singer boasts about two, perhaps two and a half, in some exceptional cases three. How can any partisan, therefore, possibly maintain that he has the space to express as much? And, expressing less, how can he be deemed an interpreter to anything like the same degree? More than that. Admission of his inferiority is incontrovertibly, however unconsciously, implied in that he does not sing abstract or pure music: the wordless singing of a Debussy "Arabesque" is an extreme rarity. Almost without exception his song must be bolstered up with words, automatically dividing the interest and reducing the work from sheer ideal concept to mere concrete ideas. It may be contended that coloratura *cadenze* and similar *fioriture* do not come within the reach of this criticism, but an easy rejoinder is that these are only weak imitations of what the thrush, the skylark, the nightingale, or even the canary can do so much better. And who would pretend to make much of a case for the intellect of a canary bird?

The majority of the great composers

have written even less for the voice than for the violin; there is no such thing as a vocal concerto. And vocal scores matching in greatness their composers' instrumental works are very few; one may admit the nobility of "Tristan" (though even in this opera the orchestra counts more than the voices), but Wagner only wrote that in a mighty effort at private and specific self-justification. And where, O where, is the singer who has ever become a great composer?

Surely enough has been said. The weight

of our evidence, it will be granted, is enough to crush all opposition. It is a recognized axiom, even amongst other singers, that tenors are apt to be a little weak in the region of the cerebellum; through this breach in the defense what other damaging conclusions may not be established!

I say nothing of the theory of the asininity of *all* musicians. But here I only assert that, whether they be musicians or not, as compared to fiddlers, singers are obviously dumber.

## FOUR SONNETS

BY WILLIAM ELLERY LEONARD

**T**HOUGH crippled, prisoned, white-haired, fifty-eight,  
My world a heap of ashes, splinters, shards,  
Until I die, by God, I'll stand up straight—  
And when I die I want no flowers and cards.  
What have I seen? I've seen the Caesars come,  
The work of Athens and Rome's Senate free  
And parliaments of centuries stricken dumb,  
And upstarts spitting on democracy.  
I've seen man's speech, which Time had won for art  
Since Homer clear and clean and serving man,  
Distorted, maimed, and in the insane mart  
The laurel-crown on every charlatan.  
I'll stand up straight, not to rebuke these years—  
But for my faith in my abandoned peers.

### II

Plain words be mine, afoot, ahorse, afloat,  
That say big things: like that high wooden sign  
On Yukon's north bank, near the Porcupine,  
Where one reads "ARCTIC CIRCLE" from the boat;  
Or Schwitzer's Alpine letters pointing south,  
"ITALIA," chiselled on the boundary-stone;  
Or at the fork, for Trailers facing drouth,  
Plains, thunder, Rockies: "ROAD TO OREGON."  
Be *my* words smokeless where they flash or hit,  
Aimed not at stalked deer nor at carrion-bird,  
But at the Lords—to force, even where they sit,  
Surrender from the bleeding Gods . . . each word  
Edged and compact as steel, steady and bright  
As glint of sunshine on a rifle-sight.

### III

I'd shake your hand, mad Alcibiades . . .  
Not for your youth, wit, beauty sent by Zeus,