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The True story of OLE BULL

Johnstone-music note: the following information is of great interest to us today, for the simple fact that it was written in the nineteenth century and thus much closer to the action and events than we are today. The writing shows a deep understanding and respect of the day towards the musicians that it features ...

From A BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF FIDDLERS
by A. MASON CLARKE.
(Author of "The Fiddle Historical and Biographical")

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BULL, OLE BORNEMANN, born at Bergen, Norway, Feb. 5th, 1810, died there Aug. 18th, 1880. One of the greatest performers of this century. His father, Johan Storm Bull, was a pharmacist, and intended that OLE should enter the church. How far these expectations were realized will presently be seen. On the mother's side the family were musical, and at the house of an uncle occasional quartet parties were given, at which young Ole was often present, and listened with delight to the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. This uncle, perceiving that the young boy possessed a strong poetic imagination and an ardent passion for music, presented the child with a violin, upon which he practiced so assiduously that he was soon able to take part in the family musical gatherings. Ole was next placed with a violin player named Paulsen, a native of Denmark, under whom his progress was such that he speedily became a rival of his master; causing that worthy to quit Bergen for his native land.

The lad was then left to pursue his studies entirely unaided, in face of great opposition on the part of the father, who began to entertain fears as to his son's future. In 1825 there settled in Bergen a violinist named Lundholm, a pupil of Baillot, and to him went Ole for further lessons. During his period of self-tuition, young Ole had contracted a habit of holding the violin in a manner contrary to custom, and the endeavours of Lundholm to rid him of this practice were not attended with that success they deserved, the result being that relations were constantly strained between master and pupil. At the request of his father, Ole Bull entered upon a course of study with a private tutor to fit himself for the preliminary examination of the University, but he still found time to pursue his beloved art with increased perseverance. At the age of eighteen he presented himself for admission in the University of Christiania, but failed to pass the necessary tests to the great mortification of his parent.

Allowed for a time to follow the bent of his own inclinations, Ole Bull was not long in bringing himself into prominence, with the result that he was offered a temporary position as director of the Philharmonic and Dramatic Societies of Christiania during the illness of Thrane. On the death of the latter, a month afterwards, Old Bull was nominated to fill the post, at a salary sufficient to relieve him from further dependence on his father's purse, and this resulted in further opposition to his musical career being withdrawn.

In the year 1829, Ole Bull travelled into Germany to take the opinion of Spohr regarding his playing, and found the master at Cassel, where he was directing the opera. He returned, however, with a feeling of complete disappointment ; the cold, precise nature of the Cassel master's performance failed to arouse enthusiasm in the young player, and for a time his mind wavered as to his future vocation.

After remaining two years in his native country, Ole Bull determined on hearing the best musical talent that was to be then found in France, and in the year 1831 he arrived in Paris, nearly penniless, with only his violin and his wits to depend upon. Here, however, he was destined for a time to undergo severe hardships, but ultimately he secured the patronage of the Duke of Montebello and a remarkable chain of events now conspired in his favour. He gave a concert on his own account, which resulted in a gain of 1,200 francs and his playing became the subject of comment among the cognoscenti of Paris. Encouraged by this success, Ole Bull made a tour through Switzerland and Italy. His first appearance in Italy was at Milan in 1834 at which city his playing was severely criticized in the papers.

One of the Italian musical periodicals contained the following report :

" M. Ole Bull plays the music of Spohr, Mayseder, Pugnani, and others, without knowing the true character of the music he plays ; and partly spoils it by adding a colour of his own. It is manifest that this colour of his own proceeds from an original, poetical and musical individuality, but of this originality he is himself unconscious. He has not formed himself; in fact, he has no style ; he is an uneducated musician. Whether he is a diamond or not is uncertain ; but certain it is that the diamond is not polished."

This criticism led Ole Bull to seriously review his abilities as a performer, and in the result he discovered himself to be sadly deficient in that style of playing upon which the Italians set so high a value, viz., the cantabile. Ole Bull, however, determined to remedy this at once, and six months' hard study and practice effected wonderful results.

From Milan he went to Venice, where his performances aroused the warmest enthusiasm, and he was there-upon created a member of the Philharmonic Society. It was at Bologna, however, that Ole Bull scored his real first success. On arriving in that town he found De Beriot and Malibran about to fulfil an engagement to play at one of the Philharmonic Society's concerts, At the last moment through some misunderstanding between De Beriot and the Marquis di Zampieri, who was managing the Concert, De Beriot excused himself from playing on the ground that he had a sore finger. For a time the marquis was at his wits ends, but on communicating the situation to Mdme. Rossini, the wife of the great composer, was reassured by that lady that a performer of merit might be found in the immediate neighbourhood, as she had heard him play in a very creditable manner, and indicated the position of Ole Bull's lodgings hard by. The marquis hurried to Ole's apartments; an engagement was soon concluded, and the young artist, a few hours later, found himself performing before a distinguished audience. His performance on this occasion excited the liveliest enthusiasm, and a successful career was thenceforth assured. Stimulated with encouragement, Ole Bull continued his travels throughout Italy and France, finally completing his tour with a brilliant concert at the Grand Opera, Paris. In 1836 Ole Bull visited England for the first time, and during a period of sixteen months gave 274 concerts in various towns in the United Kingdom. The fame of Ole Bull was now fully established, and success attended him on every concert occasion.

About this time he went to Paris and there married a lady of good social position, and with her he returned to England. Several years were now spent on the Continent, touring and giving concerts everywhere with undiminished success, and in the course of these wanderings Ole became associated with many musicians of distinction. Our artist now turned his attention to the new world, and in the year 1840 landed at Boston and proceeded to New York. The enthusiastic reception which he received in that country is almost unprecedented in the annals of violin playing; everywhere he went he created a profound impression by his marvellous execution. During the three years of this visit he gave performances in all the principal cities in America.

On his return to Europe, in 1846, he again appeared in Paris at several concerts, and performed Paganini's "Carnival" variations on Bellini's 'L'amo ah, l'armo, e en'e piu aria," and some compositions of his own. His appearance on these occasions was greeted with tumultuous applause, and he was now recognised as one of the greatest living virtuosi of the age.

It was about this time that Ole Bull's individuality asserted itself to its fullest extent, his style was formed on that poetic and descriptive imagination conspicuous everywhere in his compositions. Quitting Paris in 1847¹⁶ Bull proceeded to Algiers, then re-crossed into Spain and directed his steps to Madrid. Here he was received with royal favour, and the Queen, in return for a composition dedicated to her Majesty, offered him the honorary rank of General which, however, he declined. Ole Bull now decided to return to Norway with the object of founding in Bergen, his native town, a national theatre. This resolve he carried out, and after a great expenditure of time and money, the establishment was opened on the 2nd January, 1850.

In 1852 Ole Bull started on a second visit to America, and spent five years there, giving up much of his time in the endeavour to form a Scandinavian colony in Pennsylvania. In this venture he was unsuccessful, and this compelled him to take up his violin again in order to recoup the heavy losses he had thereby sustained. In 1857 ill health compelled Ole Bull to return to Norway, where his native air soon restored to him his old vigour, and for some time he undertook the direction of his theatre. In the following year he made a tour through Germany, in the course of which he met with Ernst, Joachim, and Liszt. While in Paris, in 1862, he received the sad news of the death of his wife, who, for a long period, had suffered ill-health.

From 1863-1866 Ole Bull was concert giving in Germany and Russia with undiminished success. In 1867 he made a third journey to America, proceeded direct to Chicago, and was received with unbounded enthusiasm. During the visit he made the acquaintance of a Miss Thorpe, a lady residing at Madison, Wisconsin, who afterwards became his second wife. The marriage took place in Norway in 1870, after which the pair returned to the United States.

The year 1872 was spent in Norway, at the end of which he again visited America on a professional tour with his old success. After a period of some months he returned to Norway and took up his residence on the small island of Lyso; a house having been built there for him in his absence. The winter of 1873 found him once more in France, and during this tour Florence and Rome were again visited. He returned to Norway the following year.

During the remainder of his days the great Artist lived chiefly in his charming island residence, appearing occasionally at concerts to take his farewell of a public, who had supported him for so many years. At the time of his death he was in his seventy-first year.

His principal compositions are;

"Concerto in E minor,"

"The mountains of Norway,"

" Polacca Guerriera."

He was also the author of "*Violin Notes*" and "*Grammar of the Violin*."

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