

The True Story of GIOVANNI BATTISTA VIOTTI

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 ...

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VIOTTI, GIOVANNI BATTISTA, born at Fontanetto, a village in Piedmont, May 23rd, 1753, died in London, March 10th, 1824. Founder of the modern school of violin playing, and one of the most eminent composers for his instrument. At Turin he became a pupil of Pugnani, and at the age of twenty was appointed first violin at the Chapel Royal of that town. After remaining there three years, he entered upon a career of solo playing, and met with the greatest success in various towns in Germany, especially in Berlin and Vienna. He then directed his steps to Paris, where he made his debut at the Concerts Spirituels, in the spring of 1782. Fetis tells us that the appearance of Viotti in Paris produced a sensation difficult to describe. He on that occasion performed a concerto of his own composition, in which the Parisians observed an originality of style that appeared to fix the limits of this kind of performance, a fruitful imagination, a happy freedom, and all the fire of youth, tempered by a pure and noble taste. The audience applauded the beautiful movements in this concerto, which from the very first bars announced the genius of the composer and that development of original thought, where the progression of sentiment raises the effect to the highest degree. With respect to Viotti's execution, the enthusiasm was extraordinary; the finish of his adagio, the brilliancy of his allegro, the energy and grace of the ensemble, won the favour of every hearer.

The Queen (Marie Antoinette), now desired that Viotti should come to Versailles to perform at one of the Court concerts. The day was fixed, most of the nobility had arrived, and the music had commenced with a solo by Viotti, the first bars of which commanded the greatest attention, when suddenly a cry was heard in the adjoining apartment, "Make room for the Count d'Artois"; which interruption and the tumult occasioned by the Count's entry, so provoked Viotti, that he put his violin under his arm and left the palace, to the great scandal of all the spectators. Very shortly after this time, the great violinist determined to play no more in public; his friends, however, were still allowed the privilege of hearing him in private concerts.

In 1790, a deputy of the constituent assembly, an intimate friend of Viotti, was lodging on a fifth floor, and requested Viotti to give a concert at his apartment. He consented, and the first nobility of France were invited, when Viotti remarked, "We have long enough descended to them; they must now ascend to us." Viotti had a talent for repartee. One day the minister Calonne asked him which violin was the most true, "That," replied he, observing the minister closely, "which is the least false." A

violinist named Puppo being in the habit of boasting that he was a pupil of Tartini which was known not to be the case, Viotti being once in his company at a musical party; together with M. Lahoussaye, who was a real e/eve of that great master, asked Lahoussaye to play something in the style of Tartini, observing at the same time to Puppo, "Listen well, sir, to M. Lahoussaye, who will give you a good idea of Tartini's manner of playing."

Viotti remained in France till the year 1790, when the horrors of the French revolution chased away the muses, and Viotti in their train. He next came to this country, and made his debut at Salomon's concert, with a degree of success equal to what he had experienced in France. Soon afterwards he became concerned in the management of the King's theatre, and subsequently succeeded W. Cramer as leader of the opera orchestra. He thus proceeded, continually reaping professional honours of the highest class, till the year 1798, when he very unexpectedly received an order from Government to quit this country without delay, being suspected of partaking and encouraging those revolutionary principles which, at the above period were alarmingly spreading throughout England. No good evidence has, however, been since adduced of Viotti's having really participated in such principles ; and it has been thought in no way credible that a man of his known mild disposition should have used the heinous and sanguinary expressions against the highest personage in the realm, which were at the time publicly imputed to him.

From London, Viotti proceeded through Holland to Hamburg, in the neighbourhood of which city he lived in the strictest retirement, at a place called Schoenfeld. Nor was he idle there ; for he not only put the finishing hand to the accomplishment of the youthful violinist, Pixis, who with his father resided at Schoenfeld during a whole summer for the express purpose of receiving Viotti's valuable instruction, but he also published (at Bochann's in Hamburg) " Six duets for violins." To the work is prefixed his portrait, also a preface, in which are these words; "This book is the fruit of the leisure afforded me by misfortune. Some of the pieces were dictated by trouble, others by hope."

After the lapse of a few years Viotti found himself at liberty to return to England, and in 1801, revisited London, but this time in a commercial capacity, for he became interested in a wine business, and for the nonce the musician entirely laid aside his art. The undertaking, however, in the end, proved a failure, and Viotti was thereby compelled to resume his

legitimate profession. The French singer, Garat, relates how he discovered Viotti, who, during his connection with the wine business, had become completely lost to his old friends. Garat had some vague notion that the violinist was located somewhere in the metropolis, but all attempts to trace him seemed to be fruitless. At last one morning he went to a large export house for wine. It had a spacious courtyard filled with numbers of large barrels, among which it was not easy to move toward the counting-house. Entering, at length, the first person who met his gaze was Viotti himself, surrounded by a legion of employees, and so absorbed in business that he did not at first notice Garat. At last he raised his head, and, recognizing his old friend, seized him by the hand, and led him into an adjoining room, where he gave him a hearty welcome. Garat could not believe his senses, and stood motionless with surprise. "I see you are astonished at the metamorphosis," said Viotti; "it is certainly droll unexpected; but what could you expect? At Paris I was looked upon as a ruined man, lost to all my friends; it was necessary to do something to get a living, and here I am making my fortune."

"But," interrupted Garat, "have you taken into consideration all the drawbacks and annoyances of a profession to which you were not brought up, and which must be opposed to your tastes?"

"I perceive," continued Viotti, "that you share the error which so many indulge in. Commercial enterprise is generally considered a most prosaic undertaking, but it has, nevertheless, its seductions, its prestige, its poetical side. I assure you no musician, no poet, ever had an existence more full of interesting and exciting incidents than those which cause the heart of the merchant to throb. His imagination, stimulated by success, carries him forward to new conquests; his clients increase, his fortune augments, the finest dreams of ambition are ever before him."

"But art," again interrupted his friend; "the art of which you are one of the finest representatives you cannot have entirely abandoned it!"

"Art will lose nothing," rejoined Viotti; "and you will find that I can conciliate two things without interfering with either, though you doubtless consider them irreconcilable. We will continue this subject another time; at present I must leave you; I have some pressing business to transact this afternoon. But come and dine with me at six o'clock, and be sure you do not disappoint me." Garat then proceeds to relate that at the appointed time he returned to the house, and was conducted with many distinguished guests to a magnificently furnished drawing-room, where they were cordially received by Viotti. After dinner, music was indulged in, and Viotti played one of his compositions in such a superb manner as to prove he was still the great artist who had formerly captivated his listeners in Paris.

Viotti conducted the wine business for several years, but, as before stated, it all ended in failure. He was now compelled to resume his legitimate profession, and through the influence of some of his friends in Paris, he was appointed Director of the Grand Opéra. Here he found the duties of his office too arduous for his age and state of health, and shortly afterwards he retired on a small pension. In the year 1822 he returned once more to this country, and passed the remainder of his days in quietude. M. Eymar, a celebrated patron of the arts, has thus described some of the moral qualities of Viotti. "There never existed a man who attached such great value to the simplest gifts of nature; there never was a child who more ardently enjoyed them. A violet found under the grass would transport him with joy; or the gathering of fresh fruit render him the happiest of mortals; he found in the one, a perfume ever new, in the other a flavour always more and more delicious. His organs, thus delicate and sensible, seemed to have preserved the impressibility of early youth; whilst stretched on the grass, he would pass whole hours in admiring the colour or inhaling the odour of a rose. Everything that belonged to the "Decade philosophique et litteraire.

The country was, for this extraordinary man, a new object of amusement, interest, and enjoyment. All his senses were excited by the slightest impressions; everything around him affected his imagination; all nature spoke to his heart, which overflowed with sentiment." We are also indebted to M. Eymar for the knowledge of the "Ranz des Vaches," which Viotti was wont to play with emotion on the days he consecrated to music.

At M. Eymar's request, Viotti copied for him this air accompanying the gift with the following lines: "This 'Ranz des Vaches' is neither the one which our friend M. Rousseau has favoured us with in his works, nor is it that of which M. de la Borde speaks in his book on music. I am not aware that it is known to many persons; all I can say is, that I have heard it in Switzerland, and that I learnt it in a way ever to be impressed in my memory.

"I was walking alone, towards evening, in one of those gloomy spots where one never wishes to speak; the weather was beautiful; the wind, which I dislike, was still, everything was calm and analogous to my sensations, and I felt within me that melancholy which has ever been present to my mind at the hour of evening and will remain as long as I exist. My thoughts were wandering and my steps followed them! my heart gave the preference to no particular object, but it was prepared for that tenderness and love which have since caused me so much pain and taught me such real happiness. My imagination idle, if I may use the expression, from the absence of the passions, was without motion. I climbed and descended the most imposing steeps, till at length chance led me to a valley, to which at first I paid no attention, and it was not till some time afterwards that I

perceived it was beautiful, and such as I had often read of in the works of Gessner. Flowers, grass, a stream, all were there, and all formed the most harmonious picture. At length, though not fatigued, I mechanically sat down upon a piece of rock, and gave myself up to that profound reverie which I not infrequently indulge in, and in which my ideas wander so as to make me forget that I am an inhabitant of the earth. I know not what it is that produces in me this species of ecstasy, whether it be the sleep of the soul, or an absence of the thinking faculty; I can only say, that I delight in the feeling and willingly abandon myself to it. On this stone then was I sitting, when on a sudden my ear, or rather my existence, was struck by sounds, now sudden and short, and now again prolonged and slower, which proceeded from one mountain and flew to the other without being repeated by the echoes. It was a long strain, and a female voice mingled in perfect unison with the sad, though sweet and affecting sounds. Struck as if by enchantment, I shook off my lethargic sensations, and whilst I intently listened, learned, or rather engraved on my memory the ' Ranz des Vaches ' which I now send you. I have thought it most characteristic to note it down without bars : it is of a nature to be perfectly without restraint ; regularity of time would destroy its effect ; for its wild sounds prolonging themselves in the air, the time they took to reach from one mountain to another could not be determined. It is then depth of thought and feeling which ought to guide us in the execution of this air, rather than rhythm and measured cadence. This ' Ranz des Vaches ' played in strict time, would be unnatural, and lose its simplicity. To produce its true effect, imagination must transport the performer to the mountains where the melody is indigenous. Whilst executing it in Paris, it must be felt as in Switzerland. It is thus that in some moments of inspiration, I have myself played it on my violin, accompanied by Mile. Montgerault."

As a creative artist, Viotti will ever appear as a landmark in the history of violin literature; his compositions are numerous, and present many scenes of beauty, that in their particular style have never been surpassed, if equalled. This latter remark is especially directed to his duos for two violins. The name of Viotti should also be associated with the improvement of the bow and its use, for he was one of the first to adopt those by Tourte, of Paris, and, like Tartini, closely studied its manipulation, and the varied effects capable of being produced ; so that in his time he was unrivalled in this branch of violin playing. It is said that the long and effective sweep of his bow was his great characteristic, and was alike the admiration and despair of his rivals.

Viotti had but few pupils, but they all turned out highly gifted artists ; the most noted among them being Rode, Robrechts, Cartier, Middle. Gerbini, Alday, Laburre, Pixis, Mori, Mdme. Paravacini, and Vacher.

The compositions of Viotti are, shortly, as follows:

29 concertos for violin ;

2 concertantes for 2 violins ;

21 quartets for strings;

21 trios for ditto;

51 duets for violins;

18 sonatas for violin and bass ;

3 divertissements for piano and violin ;

Sonata for pianoforte.

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