

THE MENACE OF MECHANICAL MUSIC

BY JOHN PHILIP SOUSA

ILLUSTRATED BY F. STROTHMANN



SINGING across the country with the speed of a transient fashion in slang or Panama hats, political war cries or popular novels, comes now the mechanical device to sing for us a song or play for us a piano, in substitute for human skill, intelligence, and soul. Only by harking back to the day of the roller skate or the bicycle craze, when sports of admitted utility ran to extravagance and virtual madness, can we find a parallel to the way in which these ingenious instruments have invaded every community in the land. And if we turn from this comparison in pure mechanics to another which may fairly claim a similar proportion of music in its soul, we may observe the English sparrow, which, introduced and welcomed in all innocence, lost no time in multiplying itself to the dignity of a pest, to the destruction of numberless native song birds, and the invariable regret of those who did not stop to think in time.

On a matter upon which I feel so deeply, and which I consider so far-reaching, I am quite willing to be reck-

oned an alarmist, admittedly swayed in part by personal interest, as well as by the impending harm to American musical art. I foresee a marked deterioration in American music and musical taste, an interruption in the musical development of the country, and a host of other injuries to music in its artistic manifestations, by virtue—or rather by vice—of the multiplication of the various music-reproducing machines. When I add to this that I myself and every other popular composer are victims of a serious infringement on our clear moral rights in our own work, I but offer a second reason why the facts and conditions should be made clear to everyone, alike in the interest of musical art and of fair play.

It cannot be denied that the owners and inventors have shown wonderful aggressiveness and ingenuity in developing and exploiting these remarkable devices. Their mechanism has been steadily and marvelously improved, and they have come into very extensive use. And it must be admitted that where families lack time or inclination to acquire musical technique, and to hear public performances, the best of these machines supply a certain amount of satisfaction and pleasure.



"What might be called a fair reproduction of Jove's prerogative."



"There is a man in there playing the piano with his hands!"

But heretofore, the whole course of music, from its first day to this, has been along the line of making it the expression of soul states; in other words, of pouring into it soul. Wagner, representing the climax of this movement, declared again and again, "I will not write even one measure of music that is not thoroughly sincere."

From the days when the mathematical and mechanical were paramount in music, the struggle has been bitter and incessant for the sway of the emotional and the soulful. And now, in this the twentieth century, come these talking and playing machines, and offer again to reduce the expression of music to a mathematical system of megaphones, wheels, cogs, disks, cylinders, and all manner of revolving things, which are as like real art as the marble statue of Eve is like her beautiful, living, breathing daughters.

Away back in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries rebellion had its start against musical automatons, Palestrina proving in his compositions, that music is life, not mathematics; and Luther showing, in his sublime hymns for congregational use and in his adaptations of secular melody for the church, that music could be made the pouring out of the souls of the many in one grand, eternal song. From the days of these pioneers, all great workers in the musical vineyard have given their best powers to the development of fruit, ever finer and more delicious, and in the doing have brought their

art near and nearer to the emotional life of man.

The nightingale's song is delightful because the nightingale herself gives it forth. The boy with a penny whistle and glass of water may give an excellent imitation, but let him persist, he is sent to bed as a nuisance. Thunder inspires awe in its connection with nature, but two lusty bass drummers can drive you mad by what might be called a fair reproduction of Jove's prerogative. I doubt if a dramatist could be inspired to write a tragedy by witnessing the mournful development and dénouement of "Punch and Judy"; or an actress improve her delineation of heroic character by hearing the sobs of a Parisian doll. Was Garner led to study language and manners of the orang-outang and his kin by watching the antics of a monkey-on-a-stick?

It is the living, breathing example alone that is valuable to the student and can set into motion his creative and performing abilities. The ingenuity of a phonograph's mechanism may incite the inventive genius to its improvement, but I could not imagine that a performance by it would ever inspire embryotic Mendelssohns, Beethovens, Mozarts, and Wagners to the acquirement of technical skill, or to the grasp of human possibilities in the art.

Elson, in his "History of American Music," says: "The true beginnings of American



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From the day when mechanical music, the product of the machine, came into the world. And these mechanical instruments, again, are not mathematical, cogs, wheels, and gears, involving the mechanical, living, and

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