

The Musical Examiner

The Musical Examiner: an Impartial Weekly Record of Music and Musical Events was published in London from 5 November 1842 to 21 December 1844 by Messrs. Wessel and Stapleton. The journal comprises one-hundred and twelve issues numbered consecutively, without division into volumes. Numbers one through three contain four pages each; numbers four through sixty-seven, eight pages; and, numbers sixty-eight through one-hundred and twelve, twelve pages. The pagination is consistent through number twenty-one, but in number twenty-two the page that should be numbered 157 is incorrectly assigned number 149. Successive pagination continues thereafter, without correction of the error.

James William Davison, the well-known English music critic, edited the *Musical Examiner*. Davison (1813-85) began his musical studies with his mother, Maud Rebecca Duncan, a successful actress. After pursuing a career in the legal profession, Davison resumed his musical studies—pianoforte with W.H. Holmes and composition with G.A. Macfarren—and composed a number of songs and pianoforte works. With the founding of the *Musical Examiner* in 1842, Davison began a career in music criticism which he continued for the remainder of his life. In 1843 he succeeded G.A. Macfarren as editor of the *Musical World* and continued in that capacity until his death. In addition to these activities, Davison was music editor and critic for the daily *Times* and contributor to many other leading British publications, include the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Graphic* and the *Saturday Review*. Davison's assumption of the editorship of the *Musical World* may account for the short-lived run of the *Musical Examiner*.

The establishment of the *Musical Examiner* appears to have been brought about as a reaction to the mediocre level of music criticism practiced in England during the 1830s and 1840s. The London daily press did not often employ the services of musically educated critics, preferring rather to rely on the musical opinions of writers who wrote on many subjects. For the educated musician however such music criticism was suspect and open to charges of favoritism. Moreover, the *Musical World*, which began publication in 1836, had not by 1842 when the *Musical Examiner* appeared, developed a clearly-defined editorial policy with respect to the in-depth evaluation of musical events and works.

From the motto "fair play to all parties," which appears as an epigram on the mast-head of all issues of the *Musical Examiner*, it is clear that Davison sought to rectify the abuses of the contemporary press. These sentiments are, in fact, expressed in a subscription announcement published in issue number fifteen.

By the adoption of their motto, the Editors of *The Musical Examiner* intend the expression of a desire to award *praise* where it is due, and *censure* where it is due... Of *charlatanism*, however, in all its phases,

they declare themselves the avowed and uncompromising enemies, and nothing can ever induce them to court popularity by appealing to the comprehensions, and flattering the prejudices of the vulgar. Where *humbug* holds its head erect, it has been, and shall be the office of *The Musical Examiner* to fling a stone at it, in the hope of dislodging it from its unmerited position. Where the public and the musical profession are bamboozled and blindfolded, it has been and shall be the office of *The Musical Examiner* to unwrap the folding which has shut out the daylight from their eyes.¹

To expose the ignorance of the generalists writing music criticism, Davison began reprinting portions of reviews with commentaries on their shortcomings. The publication of such articles began in 1842 with a series of five entitled "Newspaper Criticism" in which Davison reprinted sections of reviews from the *Spectator*, the *Times*, the *Athenaeum*, and the *Morning Chronicle*. Subjecting them to thorough examination he revealed their authors' lack of musical knowledge and perception, grammatical errors, clumsy writing style, and, the ultimate counterfeit, notices by writers who were not in attendance at the concerts they reviewed. Of particular interest is a series of attacks against Charles Gruneison, music critic of the *Morning Post*, the *Maestro*, and *Great Gun*, who appears to have been, in Davison's mind, the greatest offender. Gruneison was identified with the name "Jenkins," a pseudonym invented by the editors of *Punch* and associated with the exposure of perpetrators of shams in other fields. Articles entitled "The Beauties of Jenkins" were published in the *Musical Examiner* with "the object apparently being to oust a writer who was opposed to the interests of English music and musicians, from his position as music critic to an influential journal."² Other critics were also attacked, including those writing in the *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, which was satirized by changing the words *Revue musicale* to *Bevue musicale* which in French means "musical mistake."

The first forty-odd issues contain four to six sections. The leading article (often untitled), concerns a major musical issue of the day. This is followed by the review section "Concerts," and occasionally two additional review rubrics, "Provincial concerts" and "Review" (of published music). These sections are followed sporadically by "Original correspondence" (beginning with number 7) and the often-lengthy "Miscellaneous" section which continues through to the final number; and, "Foreign intelligence" and "Miscellaneous foreign news," both appearing fairly regularly until

¹ *The Musical Examiner*, no. 15 (11 February 1843): 108.

² Henry Davison, *From Mendelssohn to Wagner. Being the Memoirs of J.W. Davison, Forty Years Music Critic of "The Times"* (London, 1912): 50.

number thirty-three. Beginning in August 1843, the following three-part format was introduced: a leading article, the extensive "Original correspondence," and the "Miscellaneous" section. In the issue dated 3 February 1844 (number sixty-six) a further section appears, "Concerts &c." This offers reviews of instrumental and vocal performances and operatic productions. Prior to the inclusion of the "Concerts &c." column, reviews of musical events are dealt with both in the "Miscellaneous" section and in feature review articles. When the "Concerts &c." section appeared for the last time in issue number eighty-eight, reviews were again included under the heading "Miscellaneous." Advertisements are found on the final pages of each issue; of particular interest are those from the journal's publisher, Wessel & Stapleton, which occasionally contain reprints of reviews from other periodicals.

The subjects of leading articles are treated in-depth and address the major concerns of the period: superficial music, excessive virtuosity, the British preference for foreign rather than native composers and performers, inadequate translations of foreign-language texts into English, the evaluation of candidates for the Edinburgh musical professorship, and the much-needed reform of musical societies. Important continental musicians who visited England also receive attention including Mendelssohn, Chopin, Leopold de Meyer, Ernst, and Hallé.

In keeping with the concerns for British societies and institutions, the editor devotes much space to reviews of performances by the Sacred Harmonic Society, the Philharmonic Society, the Society of British Musicians (which Davison helped found), the Concerts of Ancient Music, Royal Academy of Music student exhibitions, and the various literary and scientific institutions found in London and in the provinces. Another reflection of the same concern is the attention given to concerts, lectures, and entertainments devised by British musicians such as John Braham and his sons Augustus and Charles, the pianist W. H. Holmes, the Scottish entertainer Wilson, G.A. Macfarren, and Sterndale Bennett. During the London summer and winter seasons the public's great interest in the activities of the capital's three major operatic theatres—Her Majesty's Theatre, Covent Garden Theatre, and the Drury Lane Theatre—is clearly reflected in the journal.

Controversial topics are the feature of the correspondence section; subjects treated include the heated dispute between violinists Sivioli and Ernst concerning the authorship of the variations on the *Carnival de Venise*, and the vitriolic exchange between Charles Stephens and George French Flowers over the latter's insistence that members proposed to the Contrapuntists' Society be required to write a five-voice a capella fugue. Flowers, in fact, is embroiled in many controversies. The "Foreign intelligence" section consists of signed letters from correspondents in numerous cities including Paris, Berlin, Leipzig, and Vienna. Musical news from abroad is also found in the important "Miscellaneous" section which contains a variety of materials

including general news, notices of death, bits of gossip, announcements including those for concerts, and, it is important to note, many in-depth reviews. Musical supplements are announced in issue number sixteen, however, none are found in the UMI microfilm from which the present catalogue was prepared.

Articles and reviews are for the most part unsigned. The initials "Q.," "D.," and "J.W.D." are those of Davison. Letters published under the heading "Original Correspondence" are consistently signed. The regular correspondents to "Foreign intelligence"—"J.S." (Paris), "F.C.M." (Berlin) and "F.B.J." (Leipzig)—have not been identified.