CREMONA FIDDLES.

FROM THE "PALL MALL GAZETTE."

FIRST LETTER.

August 19th, 1872.

UNDER this heading, for want of a better, let me sing the four-stringed instruments, that were made in Italy from about 1560 to 1760, and varnished with high-coloured yet transparent varnishes, the secret of which, known to numberless families in 1745, had vanished off the earth by 1760, and has now for fifty years baffled the laborious researches of violin makers, amateurs, and chemists. That lost art I will endeavour to restore to the world through the medium of your paper. But let me begin with other points of connoisseurship, illustrating them as far as possible by the specimens on show at the South Kensington Museum.

The modern orchestra uses four-stringed instruments, played with the bow; the smallest is the king; its construction is a marvel of art; and, as we are too apt to underrate familiar miracles, let me analyze this wooden paragon, by way of showing what great architects in wood those Italians were, who invented this instrument and its fellows at Brescia and Bologna. The violin itself, apart from its mere accessories, consists of a scroll or head, weighing an ounce or two, a slim neck, a thin back, that ought to be made of Swiss sycamore, a thin belly of Swiss deal, and sides of Swiss sycamore no thicker than a sixpence. This little wooden shell delivers an amount of sound that is simply monstrous; but, to do that, it must submit to a strain, of which the public has no conception. Let us suppose two Claimants to take opposite ends of a violin-string, and to pull against each other with all their

weight; the tension of the string so produced would not equal the tension which is created by the screw in raising that string to concert pitch. Consider, then, that not one but four strings tug night and day, like a team of demons, at the wafer-like sides of this wooden shell. Why does it not collapse; Well, it would collapse with a crash, long before the strings reached concert pitch, if the violin was not a wonder inside as well as out. The problem was to withstand that severe pressure without crippling the vast vibration by solidity. The inventors approached the difficulty thus: they inserted six blocks of lime, or some light wood; one of these blocks at the lower end of the violin, one at the upper, and one at each corner—the corner blocks very small and triangular; the top and bottom blocks much larger, and shaped like a capital D, the straight line of the block lying close to the sides, and the curved line outwards. Then they slightly connected all the blocks by two sets of linings; these linings are not above a quarter of an inch deep, I suppose, and no thicker than an old penny piece, but they connect those six blocks and help to distribute the resistance.

Even so the shell would succumb in time; but now the inventor killed two birds with one stone; he cunningly diverted a portion of the pressure by the very means that were necessary to the sound. He placed the bridge on the belly of the violin, and that raised the strings out of the direct line of tension, and relieved the lateral pressure at the expense of the belly. But as the belly is a weak arch, it must now be strengthened in its turn. Accordingly, a bass-bar was glued horizontally to the belly under one foot of the bridge. This bass-bar is a very small piece of deal, about the length and half the size of an old-fashioned lead pencil, but, the ends being tapered off, it is glued on to the belly, with a spring in it, and supports the belly magically. As a proof how nicely all these things were balanced, the bass-bar of Gasparo da Salo, the Amati, and Stradiuarius, being a little shorter and shallower than a modern bass-bar, did admirably for their day, yet will not do now. Our raised concert pitch has clapped on more tension, and straightway you must remove the bass-bar even of Stradiuarius, and substitute one a little longer and deeper, or your Cremona sounds like a strung frying-pan.

Remove now from the violin, which for two centuries has endured this strain, the finger-board, tail-piece, tail-pin and screws—since these are the instruments or vehicles of tension,

not materials of resistance—and weigh the violin itself. It weighs, I suppose, about twenty ounces: and it has fought hundredweights of pressure for centuries. A marvel of construction, it is also a marvel of sound; it is audible farther off than the gigantic pianoforte, and its tones in a master's hand go to the heart of man. It can be prostituted to the performance of difficulties, and often is; but that is not its fault. Genius can make your very heart dance with it, or your eyes to fill; and Niel Gow, who was no romancer, but only a deeper critic than his fellows, when being asked what was the true test of a player, replied, "A MON IS A PLAYER WHEN HE CAN GAR HIMSEL' GREET WI' HIS FIDDLE."

Asking forgiveness for this preamble, I proceed to enquire what country invented these four-stringed and four-cornered instruments?

I understand that France and Germany have of late raised some pretensions. Connoisseurship and etymology are both against them. Etymology suffices. The French terms are all derived from the Italian, and that disposes of France. I will go into German pretensions critically, if any one will show me as old and specific a German word as viola and violino, and the music composed for those German instruments. "Fiddle" is of vast antiquity; but pear-shaped, till Italy invented the four corners, on which sound as well as beauty depends.

THE ORDER OF INVENTION.—Etymology decides with unerring voice that the violoncello was invented after the violono or double-bass, and connoisseurship proves by two distinct methods that it was invented after the violin. 1st, the critical method: it is called after the violon, yet is made on the plan of the violin, with arched back and long inner bought. 2nd, the historical method: a violoncello made by the inventors of the violin is incomparably rare, and this instrument is disproportionately rare even up to the year 1610. Violino being a derivative of viola would seem to indicate that the violin followed the tenor; but this taken alone is dangerous; for viola is not only a specific term for the tenor, but a generic name that was in Italy a hundred years before a tenor with four strings was made. To go then to connoisseurship—I find that I have fallen in with as many tenors as violins by Gasparo da Salo, who worked from about 1555 to 1600, and not quite so many by Gio Paolo Maggini, who began a few years later. The violin being the king of all these instruments, I think there would not be so many tenors

made as violins, when once the violin had been invented. Moreover, between the above dates came Corelli, a composer and violinist. He would naturally create a crop of violins. Finding the tenors and violins of Gasparo da Salo about equal in number, I am driven to the conclusion that the tenor had an unfair start—in other words, was invented first. I add to this that true four-stringed tenors by Gasparo da Salo exist, though very rare, made with only two corners, which is a more primitive form than any violin by the same maker appears in. For this and some other reasons, I have little doubt the viola preceded the violin by a very few years. What puzzles me more is to time the violon, or, as we childishly call it (after its known descendant), the double-bass. If I was so presumptuous as to trust to my eye alone, I should say it was the first of them all. It is an instrument which does not seem to mix with these four-stringed upstarts, but to belong to a much older family—viz. the viole d'amore, da gamba, &c. In the first place it has not four strings; secondly, it has not an arched back, but a flat back, with a peculiar shoulder, copied from the viola da gamba; thirdly, the space between the upper and lower corners in the early specimens is ludicrously short. And it is hard to believe that an eye, which had observed the graceful proportions of the tenor and violin, could be guilty of such a wretched little inner-bought as you find in a double-bass of Brescia. *Per contra*, it must be admitted, first, that the sound-hole of a Brescian double-bass seems copied from the four-stringed tribe, and not at all from the elder family; secondly, that the violin and tenor are instruments of melody or harmony, but the violon of harmony only. This is dead against its being invented until after the instruments to which it is subsidiary. Man invents only to supply a want. Thus, then, it is. First, the large tenor, played between the knees; then the violin, played under the chin; then (if not the first of them all) the small double-bass: then, years after the violin, the violoncello; then the full-sized double-bass; then, *longo intervallo*, the small tenor, played under the chin.

However, I do not advance these conclusions as infallible. The highest evidence on some of these points must surely lie in manuscript music of the sixteenth century, much of which is preserved in the libraries of Italy; and, if Mr. Hatton or any musician learned in the history of his art will tell me for what stringed instruments the immediate predecessors of

Corelli, and Corelli at his commencement, marked their compositions, I shall receive the communication with gratitude and respect. I need hardly say that nothing but the MS. or the *editio princeps* is evidence in so nice a matter.

The first known maker of the true tenor, and probably of the violin, was Gasparo da Salo. The student who has read the valuable work put forth by Monsieur Fétis and Monsieur Vuillaume might imagine that I am contradicting them here; for they quote as "luthiers"—antecedent to Gasparo da Salo—Kerlino, Duiffoprugcar, Linarolli, Dardelli, and others. These men, I grant you, worked long before Gasparo da Salo; I even offer an independent proof, and a very simple one. I find that their genuine tickets are in Gothic letters, whereas those of Gasparo da Salo are in Roman type; but I know the works of those makers, and they did not make tenors nor violins. They made instruments of the older family, viole d'amore, da gamba, &c. Their *true* tickets are all black-letter tickets, and not one such ticket exists in any old violin, nor in a single genuine tenor. The fact is that the tenor is an instrument of unfixed dimensions, and can easily be reconstructed out of different viole made in an earlier age. There are innumerable examples of this, and happily the Exhibition furnishes two. There are two curious instruments strung as tenors, Nos. 114 and 134 in the catalogue: one is given to Joan Carlino, and the year 1452; the other to Linaro, and 1563. These two instruments were both made by one man, Ventura Linarolli, of Venice (misspelt by M. Fétis, Venturi), about the year 1520. Look at the enormous breadth between the sound holes; that shows they were made to carry six or seven strings. Now look at the scrolls; both of them new, because the old scrolls were primitive things with six or seven screws; it is only by such reconstruction that a tenor or violin can be set up as anterior to Gasparo da Salo. No. 114 is, however, a real gem of antiquity; the wood and varnish exquisite, and far fresher than nine Amatis out of ten. It is well worthy the special attention of collectors. It was played *upon* the knee.

There are in the collection two instruments by Gasparo da Salo worth especial notice; a tenor, No. 142, and a violono, or primitive double-bass, 199. The tenor is one of his later make, yet has a grand primitive character. Observe, in particular, the scroll all round, and the amazing inequality between the bass sound-hole and the purfling of the belly;

this instrument and the grand tenor assigned to Maggini, and lent by Madame Risler, offer a point of connoisseurship worthy the student's attention. The back of each instrument looks full a century younger than the belly. But this is illusory. The simple fact is that the tenors of that day, when not in use, were not nursed in cases, but hung up on a nail, belly outwards. Thus the belly caught the sun of Italy, the dust, &c., and its varnish was often withered to a mere resin, while the back and sides escaped. This is the key to that little mystery. Observe the scroll of the violono 199! How primitive it is all round: at the back a flat cut, in front a single flute, copied from *its true parent*, the viola da gamba. This scroll, taken in conjunction with the size and other points, marks an instrument considerably anterior to No. 200. As to the other double-basses in the same case, they are assigned by their owners to Gasparo da Salo, because they are double purfled and look older than Cremonese violins; but these indicia are valueless; all Cremona and Milan double-purfled the violon as often as not; and the constant exposure to air and dust gives the violono a colour of antiquity that is delusive. In no one part of the business is knowledge of work so necessary. The violoni 201-2-3, are all fine Italian instruments. The small violon, 202, that stands by the side of the Gasparo da Salo, 199, has the purfling of Andreas Amatus, the early sound-hole of Andreas Amatus; the exquisite corners and finish of Andreas Amatus; the finely cut scroll of Andreas Amatus; at the back of scroll the neat shell and square shoulder of Andreas Amatus; and the back, instead of being made of any rubbish that came to hand, after the manner of Brescia, is of true fiddle wood, cut the bastard way of the grain, which was the taste of the Amati; and, finally, it is varnished with the best varnish of the Amati. Under these circumstances, I hope I shall not offend the owner by refusing it the inferior name of Gasparo da Salo. It is one of the brightest gems of the collection, and not easily to be matched in Europe.