# PERCUSSION AND PETTICOATS

By Henry G. Farmer

" . . . I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." The apostle speaks contemptuously, revealing an opinion of the percussive instrument curiously like that of the Mephistophelean Berlioz. He is evidently of the opinion that the cymbal's tintinabulation is but a meaningless noise; and the translators of our Authorized Version have enhanced his disdain by their rendering of the Greek adjective *alalazon* as " tinkling ", being influenced no doubt by the *cymbalum tinniens* of the Vulgate. Stainer long ago protested against this " tinkling ", which has been replaced in our Revised Version by " clanging ". St. Paul's point, of course, is that without charity one's utterance is mere noise, even though one speak with an angel's tongue. It is his choice of the cymbals as an illustration that brings Berlioz to mind—Berlioz who in his book on instrumentation speaks of the " noise " rather than the " sound " of cymbals and triangles in his reference to their " deplorable abuse " by the composers of his day.

A century ago, when he was writing, audiences were not so inured as we to the junior members of the Turkish Music family. These had, indeed, been accepted by certain composers long before the vogue for Janissary music spread. The use of " Turkish " effects in the military bands of the second half of the eighteenth century suggested to Gluck, Haydn and Mozart the introduction of something of the sort into their scores. All this is well enough known; but one aspect of the vogue has received but little attention —I mean the enthusiasm with which the ladies of the time took up the tambourine and triangle.

By the 1790s there was a flourishing fashion among them for " tinkling " instruments, a fashion which instrument-makers and music-publishers exploited profitably. What is the explanation? What induced Jane Austen's girlish contemporaries to emulate Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, who " took a timbrel in her hand "? Was this a means of escape for impulses pent up by the conventional code of genteel manners? Or was it merely that the tambourine could be adequately played upon with far less preparatory drudgery than harpsichord, pianoforte or violin? Not that we must allow ourselves to imagine this rather primitive form of music-making as indulged in with any orgiastic, bacchanalian

spirit. The iconographical evidence is decisive. The decorative title-pages of the publications that ministered to this percussive fashion represent delightful maidens poised and playing with the utmost placidity and demureness. It was a pretty whim. Little or nothing may have been contributed by it to the main stream of music; but it is only bad luck that it should not have inspired Edith Sitwell to a few stanzas in the vein of her 'Elegy on Dead Fashion'.

It was not a vogue merely of one short season. Joseph Dale's publications are enough to show that more than one summer turned to autumn, and more than one winter gave place to spring, what time the tambourinists were developing and refining their art. Dale brought out his 'Favorite Grand Sonata for the Piano Forte and Tambourine' in about 1800. This was some four years after the appearance of his 'Instructions for the Tambourine'. In this work he indicated an adequate method of producing from the membrane the most perfect trill or tremolo, by means of a moistened thumb, along with a dozen other refinements of technique. Not only a composer, Dale was also a craftsman who devoted himself to the improvement of the instrument. After working long and late he was, in 1799, able to take out a patent in the specification of which he tells of devices which "remove certain objections and impediments felt by the performer in the use of this well-known instrument when accompanying a piece of music, and performing with that variety of attitudes necessary to give the sound and power thereof its full effect". "Variety of posture"—the words are important. The pictorial representations of the maidenly tambourinists of the time make it clear how much the effect of their performance depended upon attitude; and Dale insists that "posture is everything".

A book of instructions was not enough for those whose desire it was to acquire a more than rudimentary technique. There were teachers of the tambourine. Parke in his 'Musical Memoirs' (1830) tells us that the Negro tambourinists of the Guards' bands did a roaring trade in teaching the "belles of distinction who were anxious to display Turkish attitudes." At Edinburgh in about 1804 it was the mode to seek out one Robert Crichton, the acknowledged master of the "tambarine".

Much of what has been said about the tambourine applies also to the triangle, though my search has not brought to light a corresponding tutor for that instrument. No doubt it was considered as ancillary to the more imposing tambourine, and yet there is every reason to suppose that the executant was far from feeling herself bound to restrict herself rigidly to the written notes, any more than

the singer of the times did. An example of the style of writing for these instruments is to be found in Clementi's ' Twelve Waltzes for the Piano Forte with an Accompaniment for a Tambourine and Triangle ' (London, about 1798). Unlike Gluck, who in his triangle parts was satisfied with a succession of mere quavers, Cramer opened wider horizons for the triangulist by writing both crotchets and semiquavers, together with their corresponding rests, as he also did for the tambourine.

The percussive fashion was by no means confined to London. We find tambourine and triangle associated with the pianoforte in Hamilton's ' Apollo's Monthly Journal ' (Edinburgh, about 1800); and France yields Steibelt's ' La Grande Marche de Buonaparte . . . pour le Forte-piano avec accompagnement de Tambourin ' (Paris, about 1800). The next development was the incorporation of mechanical tambourine and triangle in the pianoforte. George Godfrey had already, in 1789, included a tambourine in his barrel-organs, and nine years later Joseph Smith used a similar device in the pianoforte. His " drum tabor or tambourine with sticks or beaters thereunto belonging " (I quote from his specification) enabled a pianist to dispense with the collaboration of her merely percussive sisters. Such is progress. From the merely utilitarian point of view it was, no doubt, a labour-saving device. Yet how much was lost! Tambourine-playing lingered on for a time in the British drawing-room, but its days were numbered, and soon the postures of the maidens we admire on the covers of that old music were but a regretful memory.