GEMÜNDER GEORGE

GEORGE GEMÜNDER'S PROGRESS IN VIOLIN MAKING

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BIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE GEMÜNDER

George Gemünder was born at Ingelfingen, in the kingdom of Wurtemburg, on the 13th of April, 1816.

His father was a maker of bow instruments, and it was, therefore, from Gemünder's earliest youth that he devoted himself to the same art and the studies connected with it.

When he left school, it was suggested to his father that George should become a school-master, as he at the time wrote the finest hand and executed the best designs of any among his classmates. His father was not averse to this proposal and decided to carry it out. George was, accordingly, directed to prepare for

the seminary. The plan was not, however, in accordance with his own tastes or inclinations, and he followed it for a period of but three weeks, only to abandon it finally and forever, to take up that employment which accorded with his natural gift and gave scope for the development of his genius.

After his father's death, which occurred when George was in his nineteenth year, he went abroad, and worked variously at Pesth, Presburg, Vienna and Munich. Fortune smiled upon him, and more than once an opportunity was presented of establishing a business; but nothing that promised simply commonplace results and a commonplace life could attract his eye, since his mind, aspiring to improvement in his art, was constantly impelling him toward that celebrated manufacturer of violins, Vuillaume, at Paris. He plainly saw that in Germany he could not reach in the art that degree of accomplishment for which he strove, and, therefore, he resolved to find, if possible, at Strasburg, such a position as he had had at Munich. Through the mediation of a friend he obtained a call to go to a manufacturer of musical instruments at Strasburg; but upon his arrival he was astonished to learn that the man was a maker of brass instruments! Here was a dilemma. Disappointed in his effort to find employment, winter at the door and far away from home, what could he do? The manufacturer, whose name was Roth, perceiving his perturbation, was kind enough to ask Gemünder to remain in his house until he should have succeeded in finding such a position as he desired. Gemünder accepted the

profered kindness, and after the lapse of six weeks he formed the acquaintance of a gentleman with whom he afterward became intimate, and who promised to write for Gemünder a letter of recommendation and send it to Vuillaume at Paris. Meanwhile Gemünder remained in Strasburg. One day, while taking a walk in the park called "Die Englishen Anlagen," he seated himself on a bench and shortly fell asleep. In his sleep he heard a voice which seemed to say: "Don't give way; within three days your situation will change!" The voice proved prophetic, for on the third day after the dream his friend came to him with a letter from Vuillaume, which contained the agreeable intelligence that Gemünder should go to Paris. The invitation was promptly accepted and Gemünder immediately started on his journey. When he arrived at Vuillaume's another difficulty was encountered, for Vuillaume had mistakenly supposed that Gemünder spoke French. By mere good fortune it happened at the time of Gemünder's arrival that a German professor was giving music lessons to Vuillaume's twin daughters, who in the capacity of interpreter informed Gemünder that M. Vuillaume was sorry to have induced him to come to Paris, because it would be impossible to get along in his house without French. Vuillaume kindly offered to pay Gemünder's traveling expenses from Paris back to Strasburg, but said, however, that should the latter be satisfied with nominal wages at first, he would give him thirty sous a day until he should have learned enough of the language to be able to get along. Gemünder accepted

the proposition, which greatly astonished Vuillaume because he had not supposed that Gemünder would be contented with such small wages! Then he showed him a violin and violoncello as models of his manufacture, and asked him if he could make instruments like those. The answer being in the affirmative, Vuillaume smiled, for he was sure it could not be done. On the following day he provided Gemünder with materials for making a new violin, in order to see what he could do. He soon perceived that Gemünder possessed more theoretical than practical knowledge. When the violin was finished, he made him understand that their way of working was different, and he desired to have his own methods adopted. Gemünder did his best, and being a good designer, he soon acquired a knowledge of the different characters of the propagated Italian school in regard to the construction of violins.

After the lapse of three months Gemünder's wages were increased ten sous a day, and although he now saw his most heartfelt desire fulfilled, namely, to work in Vuillaume's manufactory, yet he did not find it possible to stay there permanently, because his fellow-workmen, who had observed the kindness with which their employer had treated his new workman, became filled with feelings of jealousy, and resolved to harrass him and compel him if possible to leave. So thoroughly did they succeed in embittering his life, that Gemünder finally resolved to leave Vuillaume and go to America, and with this firmly fixed in his mind he began his preparations secretly to

carry out his plan.

When everything was ready, he went to Vuillaume to make known his intention and to explain to him the cause of his leaving. The latter, astonished at this intelligence, declared that Gemünder should not leave his house at all, and assured him that he would not meet with further unkindness from his fellow-workmen, even if all should be dismissed, although some of them had already been in his manufactory for many years. He further assured Gemünder that should he not desire to remain in Paris, he would establish him in a business similar to his own, either in Germany or elsewhere, but he dissuaded him from going to America, for the reason that the art of violin making was not sufficiently understood there at that time. This kindness and benevolence upon the part of his employer so touched his heart that he was constrained to remain, and he began to construct new violins, in some of which he imitated the Italian character thoroughly, and also to repair injured violins.

One day Vuillaume handed Gemünder a violin, with the remark that he wished him to do his best work in repairing it, for a gentleman from Russia had sent it. Vuillaume especially called Gemünder's attention to a certain place in the back which was to be repaired, which was almost invisible, and he gave Gemünder a magnifying glass for his assistance, but Gemünder returned it, saying that he could do better with his naked eyes, and when finished Vuillaume might examine it with the glass. When completed, the work proved to be all that Vuillaume had

wished, and satisfied the owner of the instrument so thoroughly that in his ecstasy of delight he presented Vuillaume, in addition to the payment for his work, with a costly Russian morning gown.

On the return of Ole Bull from America, in 1845, that distinguished performer brought his wonderful "Caspar da Salo" violin to Vuillaume to be repaired, and requested the latter to do the work himself, as it was something about which he was very particular; but Vuillaume answered that he had a German in his workshop who could do it better than he. Impelled by curiosity to become acquainted with this German, he asked to be shown to the place. After some conversation, Gemünder undertook the repairing of the violin and completed it in as masterly a manner as he did in the case of the Russian gentleman.

After an interval of three years, while Gemünder was still working at Vuillaume's, the latter showed him a violin and asked his opinion about it. Gemünder, having examined it, replied that it was made by some one who had no school! "I expected to hear this," returned Vuillaume, "and now let me tell you, that this violin is the very same that I engaged you to make when you came to me. I show it only that you may recognize what you are *now* and what you were *then*!" Gemünder was not only surprised, but amazed, and would hardly have believed it possible. This incident is only mentioned to show that as long as the eye has not been fully cultivated, those who fancy themselves to be artists are not such, and in reality they cannot distinguish right from wrong. Gemünder has often experienced this in America. He knows no

other violin maker who deserves to be compared with Vuillaume in this respect, for he correctly understood the character of the outline and form as well as the interior structure of the different Italian instruments.

Towards the end of 1847, when Gemünder had been four years at Vuillaume's, his two brothers, who were in America, invited him to go there, as the interest in and taste for music was improving and they intended to give concerts. Gemünder therefore determined to accept this invitation and left Paris. He arrived in November, at Springfield, Mass., and, meeting his brothers, arrangements for concerts were made with an agent, who engaged several other artists to make up the company. The instrumental quartet consisted of a clarinet, violin, flute and bass guitar. This music made quite a sensation, and the houses were always crowded, yet the Gemünder brothers did not receive anything from the proceeds. They soon comprehended that they had had too much confidence in their agent, and after the lapse of a week they gave up the speculation.

For George Gemünder, who had then very little knowledge of the English language, which fact increased the difficulty of his position, there remained no other choice but to settle as a violin maker. He borrowed from a friend twenty-five dollars, and with this money he set out for Boston, Mass., and established himself there. The violins which he made he sold at fifty dollars each, and made repairs at low prices.

In 1851, when the first exhibition of London took place,

Gemünder sent a quartet of bow instruments, in imitation of Stradivarius, and one violin according to Joseph Guarnerius, and another according to Nicholas Amati.

As his business in Boston did not prove sufficiently lucrative, Gemünder left the city after eighteen months, without waiting for news of the result of the exhibition, and established business in New York. Later he learned that his instruments had received the first premium at the exhibition.

When, in the following year, 1852, Gemünder received his instruments back from the exhibition, he learned that Ole Bull was in New York again, and, as he had formed his acquaintance in Paris, he paid him a visit and gave information that he had established himself in New York, and also that he had obtained the first premium at the London exhibition. Ole Bull was highly astonished at this news, as he said "Vuillaume is the best violin maker, and I have on one of my violins the best specimen of his workmanship as a repairer." He thereupon showed Gemünder his "Caspar da Salo." "Here," he said, "look at it, find the place where the repair was made." But Gemünder replied: "Sir, have you entirely forgotten that when you went with your violin to Vuillaume, he made you acquainted with a German in his studio, whom he directed to repair this 'Caspar da Salo' violin, and that this German was myself?" Upon hearing this a light seemed to break upon his mind, and he exclaimed, "Yes, yes, I do remember. Now you shall become in America what Vuillaume is in Europe."

Meanwhile the advantages which might have been derived from the London exhibition were lost, in consequence of Gemünder's removal from Boston and establishing business at New York. Spohr, Thalberg, Vieuxtemps and many more of such authorities, examined his violins in the exhibition and were much surprised at the excellent qualities of the instruments. Spohr observed: "These are the first new violins that I ever saw, tried and liked!" When they were played upon by him and others, they attracted hundreds of admirers and would have been sold at high prices had Gemünder not failed to make arrangements to dispose of them.

The results obtained at Paris and Vienna were similar, his instruments attracting much attention in each exhibition. In the Vienna Exposition, held in 1873, Gemünder gained the greatest triumph that was ever obtained by any violin maker. The "Kaiser" violin sent by Gemünder in response to an offer of a prize for the best imitation, was declared by the professional judges to be a renewed original; a genuine Guarnerius not only in regard to its outer appearance and character, but also as to its wonderful quality of tone and ease with which the tones come. To find these qualities in a new violin was beyond all expectation, since it had hitherto been taken for granted that such a result could not be obtained, because that object had been the unsuccessful study of different makers for hundreds of years. This proves, therefore, to the musical world, that Gemünder has solved that problem which has generally been considered impossible. In spite of all

this, however, Gemünder had learned by painful experience that the prejudice existing among most of the violinists was not to be wiped out. These people are incapable of judging reasonably, and it is easier for them to say that Gemünder makes his new violins of wood prepared by a chemical process, or that it has not yet been proven that his violins have kept their good quality for an extended period of time, notwithstanding that Gemünder has been constructing violins in America since 1847, and that nobody can prove that any violin of his making has lost its quality of tone. On the contrary, they have invariably proved good. Gemünder, however, confesses that a few of his first made violins in America do not equal those of his present construction in regard to tone and varnish. The cause of it was that Gemünder being unacquainted with the woods of the new country, was not so successful at first in the choice of wood for his violins, and naturally would not be until his experience had improved. The prejudice above referred to would, however, be likely to exist for another century, could Gemünder live for that length of time among those people, the most of whom would persevere in their opinions.

The impracticability of the theory of using chemically prepared wood for violins is sufficiently understood at the present time to render it useless to pursue the discussion in these pages. Gemünder has informed himself as to the degree of success attained in the use of the different chemical preparations of wood, as well as those prepared with borax, by which, the

inventor asserts, the wood becomes richer in tone and lasts longer than that which is left in its natural state. Yet, without opposing the inventor, Gemünder follows the principle of the old Italian violin makers, because their productions have been in use to this day; therefore the material left in its natural state has proved good and has satisfied the musical world for these three hundred years. He has indeed succeeded in constructing new violins of material in its natural state, which produce not only an extraordinary power of tone, but also a strikingly equal quality of tone, and the quality of easy speaking, and the outward appearance of the old violins has been so faithfully imitated that he who has not been told the fact, will take them for genuine instruments made by Stradivarius, Guarnerius, Maggini, Amati, and others.

It is therefore assuming not too much to say that George Gemünder has surpassed in this art all the violin makers of the present and past times; for where the Italian masters ended with their knowledge, George Gemünder commenced and improved, which fact can be proved to the satisfaction of every critic; for George Gemünder has not only gained the same results as those achieved by Stradivarius and others, but he has sketched a better acoustic principle for producing tone. It is for this reason that August Wilhelmj, the great violinist, calls George Gemünder the greatest violin maker of all times, for Wilhelmj had learned by ample trial of the instruments made by George Gemünder that they were incontestably all that the latter claimed for them. Wilhelmj admired Gemünder's "Kaiser" violin at the

Vienna Exhibition, as it was the only violin of importance which attracted his attention, and this aroused within him the desire to become personally acquainted with its maker. By means of his renown as the great violin virtuoso, an engagement was offered him to go to America, which he accepted, and thus his wish was fulfilled. On the day after his arrival in New York, Wilhelmj went to see Gemünder at Astoria, and from that time has been Gemünder's friend and admirer.

Wilhelmj and other artists have expressed astonishment that a man of George Gemünder's capabilities in this art was to be found in America. Although he enjoys the highest renown in his art, yet he lives in a country in which the appreciation of that art is still in its development; for the number of amateurs such as are found in Europe, who spend enormous sums in instruments, is very small here. The fact is that George Gemünder lives here at too early a period, for his productions are a continuation of those which the great Italian masters brought forth. Taking into consideration all the foregoing circumstances it is fair to suppose that George Gemünder has had to contend with extraordinary difficulties during this long time. For ignorance and arrogance can do much damage, in this respect, not only to the artist, but also to the amateur, as these often times place their confidence in those musicians who have no knowledge of violins, and who can only mislead them.

APPENDIX

GEORGE GEMUNDER'S OBSERVATIONS IN REGARD TO VIEWS WHICH THE MOST OF VIOLINISTS AND AMATEURS HAD OF THE TONE OF OLD AND NEW VIOLINS – HOW THEY IGNORED THE NEW INSTRUMENTS, AND HOW THEY WERE DECEIVED AND SURPRISED IN THEIR PREJUDICE CONCERNING THEM.

Gemünder had learned that the knowledge of arrogant violinists and amateurs in regard to tone did not rest on any correct basis, and that their prejudice rested on a tradition arising from the decline of the manufacture of violins since the death of the celebrated Italian makers. All attempts of late years to make good violins having failed, an aversion to new violins has been gradually spreading, so that the most of people at the present time do not believe it possible for violins to be both new and good. Firstly, because it has been found that new violins have not been constructed so as to possess the tone of old Italian instruments; and secondly, that those made of chemically prepared wood did not stand proof for a great length of time. Many musicians and amateurs have in consequence of this prevailing prejudice gone to an extreme and disregarded new violins, no matter what tone they might have. To this class of people belonged especially the violinist Wieniawski, who had an opportunity to play on one

of the best violins made by Gemünder, which opportunity he ignored, because the violin looked new. Instruments imitated by Gemünder were placed before him as genuine violins, and he admired them. Ole Bull was equally surprised when an imitation according to Stradivarius was handed to him in Columbus, Ohio, and he declared it to be a genuine original.

When Vieuxtemps gave concerts in America for the first time, and went to see his friend Vieweg, Professor of music in Savannah, Ga., the Professor showed him his Stradivarius violin. Vieuxtemps, catching sight of it, said: "If he had not been quite sure that his violin was at home, he would think it was his own." But when his friend told him it was a Gemünder violin, he was astonished and observed: "The d***l knows how Gemünder can bring such a tone in new violins!"

At about the same time a violinist came from Germany and visited Gemünder to hear his violins, because Spohr had praised him so much; but at the same time he doubted that new violins could sound like those of the old Italian masters. Gemünder first showed him some having the appearance of being new; the violinist played upon them and then uttered: "They are as I thought; they have not that sweet, melting tone of the Italian instruments." Hereupon he asked Gemünder if he had no Italian violins, in order to show the difference. Gemünder then opened another box, and showed him an imitation of Amati for a genuine one. No sooner did the instrument strike his sight than his face brightened up and he said: "Everybody can see at once that

there must be tone in this," and after playing upon it he was so pleased that he said to Gemünder: "Yes, there are none of the present violin makers who have brought it so far!" Hereupon Gemünder informed him that this was also a new violin of his making. Scarcely had the visitor heard this, when, ashamed of his prejudice, he took his hat and went away.

Similar incidents often occur. In 1859 Gemünder sent violins to the Exhibition of Baltimore, after which, on one occasion, he was invited to a soiree at which his violins were played. He also had a genuine Guarnerius among his own instruments. An amateur, Mr. Gibson, a very good player, was present and anxious to hear the Italian violin. During the performance of a quartet on the violins made by Gemünder, this amateur, who was possessed of the popular prejudice against new instruments, and who fancied he heard the Italian violin, was so exceedingly delighted with it that he observed, "To hear such violins is sufficient to keep any one from ever touching new ones." But when Gemünder told him they were new ones made by him, the amateur stared at him as much as to say, "Do you make fun of me? These violins do not look new at all!" Gemünder, however, convinced him of the truth of his assertion. This fact surprised the amateur to such a degree that he was at loss what to say, and later, upon learning the price of one of the instruments, bought it. Sometime after this he valued it at two thousand dollars in gold. Since then the violin has been sent several times to Gemünder, either for a new bridge or other slight repairs, and each time new

anecdotes have been related of it. Of especial interest is that one of Father Urso, who was looking for a genuine Guarnerius to give to his daughter Camilla, the celebrated violinist. He took Professor Simon with him to see the instrument. Both were very much surprised at it, not only on account of its undoubted genuineness, but also that it was kept so well. Gemünder then let them know that he had perpetrated a joke, and that the instrument was made by himself.

One day Mr. Poznanski, from Charleston, S. C., in company with his son, who was already an artist on the violin, visited Gemünder. Although still young, his father intended to send him to Vieuxtemps for his further artistic accomplishment, and with this purpose in view he was willing to buy an Italian violin. As Gemünder had none on hand, he showed him a new violin, but Poznanski declared that he would not buy a new one. Gemünder then showed him an imitation, as if it were a genuine original. The son played on it, and both father and son were highly satisfied with it; they expressed their wish to buy it and asked the price, which was given as five hundred dollars. When Poznanski was about to pay down the money, Gemünder told him that this instrument was also new. Whereupon Poznanski replied in an excited tone, "Have you not heard that we do not want a new violin?" and they left the Atelier!

When Vieuxtemps left America, in 1858, Poznanski's son went with him to finish his studies under his direction. After the lapse of eight years he returned an accomplished artist, and

visited Gemünder again. He then remarked that he wished to find an Italian violin of first class, and asked Gemünder if he had something of that kind in his possession? Here he took the opportunity to remind Gemünder of the time when he had deceived both him and his father, observing at the same time very naively: "But now, Gemünder, you cannot deceive me. I obtained thorough knowledge of imitations at Paris, and also a knowledge of the genuine Italian violins, for I had an opportunity to see many of those made by the masters." Gemünder told him that he had two Joseph Guarnerius violins of first class in his possession, and laid them before him. Poznanski expressed his astonishment to find such rarities. After a thorough examination Poznanski declared there was no doubt in regard to their genuineness! He tried both violins, and soon evinced his predilection for one of them, which he wished to buy, and inquired the price. Gemünder offered each of them at one thousand dollars, but at the same time told him that he had deceived him for a second time, for the instrument which he had picked out was new and made by himself, whilst the other was genuine. Poznanski, however, told Gemünder that he could not deceive him, that it was not possible to produce an instrument like that. At this moment two friends of Gemünder, who were acquainted with his instruments, entered the shop, and Gemünder asked them in the presence of the young artist, at the same time pointing to the instrument selected by Poznanski, "who made this violin?" They replied that the maker of it was Gemünder. This appeared to him impossible, but, after

deliberating on the subject, he said, "I must believe it now, and yet I don't believe it!" A few days later, becoming fully assured that the instrument to which he had taken a fancy was not an Italian violin, he bought the genuine one, which, however, was an excellent instrument, thus giving up the one to which he had first given preference. This is another striking proof of prejudice.

After a time, however, when Poznanski felt more at home at Gemünder's, he found out that the instruments made by Gemünder were the only true concert violins, and disposing of his Guarnerius, he bought a Maggini made by Gemünder; he now saw the full extent of his prejudice, and was most severe in his denunciation of all who thought that there were no other violins but the Italian to be played upon.

If Wieniawski had not been seized with such a strange fancy, and had had more confidence in other artists, he would not have been compelled to change violins every now and then, for he was constantly buying one Italian violin after another and finding none to suit him, merely because none would do but an Italian instrument. Thus he came to America and played on his Stradivarius violin, which had a splendid tone in a room, but when played upon in a concert hall proved a great deal too weak, especially on the G string, when it was overstrained. He then bought one of the finest Guarnerius violins in Brooklyn, but as it did not prove any better than the other, he returned it.

To find Italian violins fit to produce a sufficient effect in large concert halls is a great rarity, since they have been mostly spoiled

by "fiddle-patchers," or had not from the very beginning the proper construction for the giving out of tone sufficient to fill such halls. On just such powerless violins Vieuxtemps performed at his concerts on his last tour through America.

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