A SHORT TREATISE ON THE STAVE

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JOHN HULLAH

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SHORT TREATISE

OF

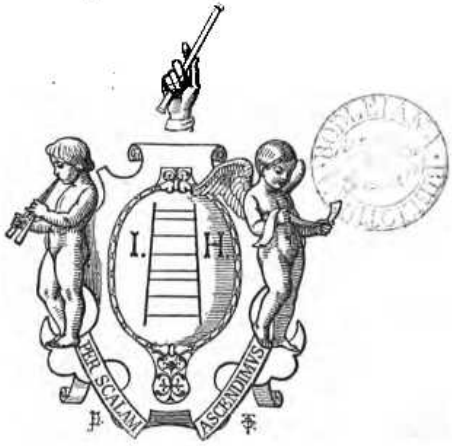
THE STAVE:

TO SERVE AS AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PRACTICE OF

Reading or Playing from Score.

BY JOHN HULLAH,

PROFESSOR OF VOCAL MUSIC IN KING'S COLLEGE, AND IN QUEEN'S COLLEGE, LONDON.



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1855.

PREFACE.

MUSICAL notation has of late years been the object of much attention. The recent increase in the number of musical students has naturally turned many ingenious minds to the consideration of every means by which it would seem likely that the progress of those students might be facilitated, and their number still further augmented.

Of these means, a change, more or less entire, in the musical alphabet is the favourite panacea for the various ills which the beginner is heir to; and every year or two brings forth its new system of *phonography*—to be treated, like its predecessors, with absolute neglect or universal condemnation.

Every one of these systems is proposed on the assumption that the principal business of the musical student is the cultivation of the powers, not of his ear, but of his eye; and that the relative appreciation or absolute recognition of musical sounds would be rendered a comparatively easy matter by the adoption of a more simple and philosophical mode of expressing them than that now in use among us.

Allowing, for a moment, that an improved system of musical notation could be devised, it is a very grave question whether music itself would be more easily felt and understood by its means; whether the symbol by which a sound is presented to the eye has much, or anything, to do with its estimation by the ear; whether, in short, the difficulties of the musical student are not inherent to the thing studied, and altogether unconnected with the contrivances by which it is represented. Nor, on the other hand, admitting that a musical alphabet may seriously increase or diminish the difficulty of learning music, is it at all certain that the system of *musicography* at present in use could be replaced by a better one. Symbols which are able to express the most varied successions and the most intricate combinations

of sounds, which can be read and rendered by the skilful performer with unerring certainty and lightning rapidity, which admit of such arrangement as to inform the practised eye at a glance of the simultaneous action of twenty or thirty instruments of various qualities and powers—symbols which, in a word, answer every purpose of those who know how to use and interpret them, can hardly admit of that boundless and facile improvement of which the author of each new scheme of musicography speaks so confidently. Artists, like statesmen, cannot afford to be altogether unmindful of "pressure from without;" but it is a curious fact that most, perhaps *all*, schemes for the reform of musical notation have been the invention of philosophers, mathematicians, divines, lawyers, physicians, poets, painters—of anybody, in short, but musicians.

One argument in favour of our existing musical notation must, however, supersede all others—which is the simple one that *it exists;* that for some centuries past it has been accepted by and intelligible to the whole civilized world. The adoption of a new system would in a few years render all existing music-books as unintelligible to the ordinary practitioner as the inscriptions on an Assyrian monument; and, as a necessary consequence, would throw into oblivion all music not of popular and temporary interest enough to justify its reprint.* Modern musical writers are *in possession* of the nearest approximation to a universal alphabet which has yet appeared; and there is little likelihood of their coming to an agreement to give up a means of addressing an audience as large as that of all the writers in the world on other subjects put together.

In the belief that the present system of musical notation is in no immediate danger of being superseded, could even a better one be devised, the following *Short Treatise* has been drawn up. The theory developed in it has no claim, as the musical historian will know, to the merit or demerit of novelty; but the mode of treatment may possibly open out to the practical musician some new views of the nature and powers of the Stave, and do something to check future attempts to corrupt or supersede it. A candid study of the subject will probably show that, so far from being the clumsy and complex instrument described or imagined by *phonographers,* the Stave is one of the most perfect and simple of human

* As late as the end of the seventeenth century, the *Lute* was the most popular of musical instruments. There are probably not a dozen persons now living who can interpret the lute "tablature"—none who can read it with facility.

inventions, and that any difficulties which may be found in the application of its powers belong, not to the thing itself, but to the misunderstanding and the misuse of it.

These difficulties are, however, fully considered in the following work, which, it is to be hoped, may promote the object proposed in the title-page, by "serving as an Introduction to the Practice of Reading or Playing *from Score;*" an object which will repay with large interest whatever time or pains may be spent in attaining it. The vocal or instrumental performer whose attention has been chiefly concentrated on his own part, and the pianoforte player who has had to content himself with "arrangements" for his instrument, in entering on the study of the intact creation of a musician—his *Score*—will experience pleasure and surprise like that of a scholar who, after his curiosity has been stimulated by a fragment or a translation of a great literary work, is put in possession of a perfect copy of the original.

The *Exercises* (following Chapter V.) are, with one exception, in the "contrapuntal" style of the sixteenth century. This style has been chosen, and is recommended for practice in reading from score, because its *unfamiliar* forms compel closer attention to each individual part than those of modern music, in reading which it is more difficult to avoid *guessing*, or taking for granted from one passage what is contained in another. If the student be not too soon discouraged by these "unfamiliar" forms, he will assuredly find that they embody "something rich" as well as "strange;" and learn from them a truth which the fascinations of contemporary art are too apt to keep out of mind—that music is not a *dialect*, but a *language*—the parent of many dialects, of which contemporary art is but one.

J. H.

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