

**THE WORLD OF
MUSIC: THE GREAT
VIRTUOSI**

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The World of Music: The Great Virtuosi by Anna Dunphy de Brémont

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ANNA DUNPHY DE BRÉMONT

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THE GREAT VIRTUOSI

THE
WORLD OF MUSIC

BY

ANNA, COMTESSE DE BRÉMONT

THE GREAT VIRTUOSI

*'Music has charms to soothe the savage breast,
To soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak;
I've read that things inanimate have moved,
And as with living souls have been informed
By magic numbers and persuasive sound.'*

CONGREVE

NEW YORK
BRENTANO'S

1902

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ASCHER

1831-1869

THE glamour of one of the most brilliant Courts of modern times hovers round the memory of this marvellously gifted musician; a Court whose splendours vanished like the fleeting glories of the rainbow before the war-clouds culminating in the lurid storm of Sedan.

Pianiste à Sa Majesté l'Impératrice des Français! was the proud title of this distinguished virtuoso, which, like the golden wand of a magician, conjures up a host of charming visions of one who was the pride and glory of her people when in the zenith of imperial motherhood, and whose brief span of regal power arose, flashed, and set like a meteor in the course of royal events. A pale and languid face, on whose pain-contracted lips a world once hung, starts into life beside the radiant loveliness of Eugénie, while the smiling eyes and spiritual beauty of the debonair young

Prince completes the trio. Husband and son—the dazzling glitter and prestige of the one lost, swallowed up for ever in the mighty waves of disastrous defeat; the joyous youth, the fond hopes, the proud future of the other drowned for ever in the life-blood welling up beneath the thrust of a Zulu spear!

Death spared Ascher the pain of witnessing the deplorable events which culminated in the downfall of his beloved and gracious patroness, as he fell a victim to a complication of diseases which terminated his life before the fatal year of '70.

Joseph Ascher was born in London, of German parentage, in the year 1831, and when a mere lad attracted the attention of Moscheles, who soon found the brilliant gifts of his pupil fully justified the interest he took in him; but it was not until the patronage of Eugénie established his fame that the genius discovered by Moscheles was stamped with the seal of public recognition and appreciation accorded it by that master of the pianoforte.

The year 1849 was an eventful one in the life of the young virtuoso, for it was the year of his advent in Paris. He was then in the very golden prime of youth, in the romantic age of man's life when everything in the world seems

accessible—the rich vigour and spiritual freshness of eighteen.

‘Whom have we here?’ exclaimed the critics when the young virtuoso made his first bow to a Parisian audience, and ravished their ears by the beauty and elegance of his execution. ‘Assuredly another Thalberg has arisen amongst us!’

Unknown and unheralded, the youth at once attained the coveted position for which he had studied indefatigably under the skilful teaching of Moscheles—that of the most popular pianist to the music-loving world of Paris.

Ascher felt keenly the obscurity of his birth when compared with the aristocratic parentage of his great rival, and adroitly evaded the delicate snobbery of polite society. It is related that on one occasion, a musical evening at the house of a famous dilettante, he was approached by a *grande dame*, well known for her enthusiastic support of Thalberg, who exclaimed in tones of irony and chagrin :

‘Happy am I to congratulate you, monsieur, on your wonderful execution ; it almost equals that of our dear Thalberg, son of Prince Dietrichstein.’

‘I am not the son of a Prince, Madame,’ answered Ascher, drawing up his form proudly, ‘but I am prince in my art!’

Technique, the marvellous manipulation of every resource of the pianoforte, was Ascher's crowning point. His powerful mastery of the bass, whereby he intoned melodies and themes of richness and depth, contrasting delightfully with the silvery sweetness of the variations in the treble, elicited from a celebrated musician the admiring exclamation :

'Mon Dieu! He has no left hand, but two *right* hands instead!'

Moscheles, the most undoubted critic of his day, and an indisputable authority, was unsparring in his praise of Ascher as a virtuoso, while at the same time condemning his methods as a composer. When we consider the fact that Moscheles was a worshipper at the noble shrine of Beethoven, from whence the most skilful master of modern music drew his inspiration, we cannot entertain any feelings of surprise that the brilliant and elegant style of Ascher, bestowed only on the light music of the dance, the valse and mazurka, should have found in Moscheles a severe and unsympathetic critic.

This graceful, if meaningless, school of piano variations was the vogue in Paris before the days of Ascher. To quote Mendelssohn's words when he wrote to a friend in Paris: 'Is Herz prejudiced when he says that the Parisians