

Reminiscences of a Banjo Player.

TWENTY-SIXTH LETTER.

BY A. BAUR.



I have lately read an excellent little pamphlet, entitled "Practical Hints on Modern Banjo Playing." The author states that "as music for the instrument (the banjo,) was written in the beginning, with the bass string noted as 'A,' the notation has never been changed in this country, etc.," and in a foot-note he corrects this by saying, "Since writing the foregoing paragraph, a gentleman who has played the banjo for many years as an amateur has called my attention to the fact that the late Thomas Briggs (a banjoist of renown in his day) published his method for the banjo early in the '50's, and that according to Briggs, the bass string was tuned to G;" thus my statement that "music for the instrument was written in the beginning with the bass string noted as A would appear incorrect. As a matter of fact, it is practically correct, for Briggs Method is the only one I have ever been able to discover giving the tuning as G, so it must be regarded as an exception, and hardly to be considered, etc."

With reference to Tom Briggs having published a banjo book, the amateur is mistaken—Tom Briggs died before the method called "Briggs' Banjo Instructor" was published. I have an original copy of the book and it contains a narrative of Briggs' death. The man who wrote "Briggs' Banjo Instructor" is living to day and is known to all lovers of the banjo. While Briggs noted the bass string as "G," he, (or the writer of the book) gave a table showing the manner of tuning the banjo in any key and advising the performer to frequently change the "pitch," so that he might have a pleasing change. In this table the author of "Briggs' Banjo Instructor," says to play in the key of "A" Major, tune the third string to E, and so on through the various keys. The author of "Practical Hints on Modern Banjo Playing" is mistaken when he says that Briggs' was the only book ever published giving the tuning as "G." "Howes Practical Banjo Method" also noted the bass string as G, and there are several other banjo methods naming the strings just as they are in Briggs' Method. Nearly all these later methods, however, have been copied from "Briggs' Banjo Instructor;" at least, in so far as the rudimentary part is concerned. Music publishers, I imagine do not follow their trade for health and when they hear of a good thing they generally try to "keep up with the procession;" and when the banjo began to look up, publishers began to look 'round for some one to write books for the instrument. In doing so some of them probably employed persons who thought they knew all about the banjo. Before writing the book, the person so employed would procure a banjo book already published and familiarize himself with the scale, compass, etc., of the instrument: The most natural and easy way would then be for the writer to copy the rudimen-

tary part of Briggs', or any other instruction book, then add a few pieces and a song or two; then turn the work in as his own work and collect pay for it.

To my certain knowledge there are at least half a dozen Banjo Methods with the fourth string noted as G. I can think of but three now; Briggs, Howes and one by a prominent music writer whose name I shall not mention now, as it is not very many years since he wrote the book. There are at least three or four other books that I cannot recall at present.

It is a mistake to say that "the change to smaller instruments has been gradual, and while we have been slowly raising the pitch as the instruments were made smaller, no change has been made in the notation." In the early days of banjo playing—banjos were made *large* and *small*, as best suited the fancy of the player. Julius Von Bonhorst was a prominent player many years ago. I tried his last and best banjo once: It had such a long neck and the rim was so large in diameter that I could barely reach the natural position, while it was utterly impossible for me to stop any of the position chords correctly. I have a banjo that was made in the early sixties. It is an eleven inch rim with a nineteen inch fingerboard, or about the dimensions of our modern banjo. In the old days the banjo player used a violin D for third string; violin A for second; a violin E for first and fifth, and a violoncello A for fourth.

Such stringing as this made a vast difference in the pitch. It was discovered that thinner strings gave a more brilliant tone and banjoists began to use a heavy violin A string for third; a light A for second; an E for first and fifth, and guitar D for fourth. This was also modified by using violin A for third; heavy E for second; light E for first and fifth; the guitar D still holding its place as fourth, until an enterprising dealer in New York imported a very thin violin E, which was called banjo first and fifth. About the same time the banjo fourth was specially made for the instrument, the seconds and thirds coming in later.

Our modern banjo player would think it an imposition if he were compelled to pay fifty cents a piece for gut strings. Yet for several years I paid fifty cents each to a retailer for the best Italian gut strings for my banjo. I got to know a bit, and then bought my strings by the bundle which was considerable of a saving. I do not know and do not believe that any one else knows, by whom, when or how the banjo first came to be tuned to "A" or "C." I never sought for nor had anyone impart the information to me. I believe we all just "fell into that way of doing business." I always played my banjo with piano accompaniment, then I tuned to A. I played the melodies of songs as they were written, while the accompanist played the accompaniment as published. I also played the violin parts in violin and piano duets. When I began using thinner strings I found that they were so loose that the snapping of the strings against the fingerboard was not as agreeable as it might be. I then began to tune my banjo in *B flat*, and transposed the melodies as much lower as I had tuned my banjo higher, leaving the accompaniments to be played as written. It was an easy and natural transition from *B flat* to *C*, and to *D*, but the banjo strings as then made, were of such inferior quality that with their constant breaking I settled upon tuning my banjo in *C*, as being the most satisfactory.

At that time the whole system of notation and tuning might have been changed, but it might be

said the banjo was in the experimental stage with no one to assert with certainty as to what would be for the best interests of the instrument. There was no concert of action; every man seemed to be for himself, and in this condition of things the "boom" came. But very little music was published for the banjo and publishers in every direction suddenly became anxious to "stock up."

No man, unless he was "in the swim," can imagine what a demand for banjo music, all at once, sprang up. In a little less than five months I arranged and copied over six hundred pieces of music for publication. Since then, thousands upon thousands of pieces have been added. Not twenty years ago I prided myself upon the fact that I had a copy of every piece of music and book that had ever been published for the banjo. At about the same time, the late John H. Lee and I made a list of every known banjo player in the United States who played by note. The list was not very long either. We may have missed a few, but I can assure the reader that there were not many that we did not know, either personally or by reputation.

A few persons are worrying over the fact that the American and English pitch are not alike. I do not see any reason for uneasiness on that account. Our American pitch is firmly established. What little music is published on the other side can be easily learned by any player of average ability. It is merely a question of mental gymnastics at best; just a little transposition, as easy as two and two are four.

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By the time this letter reaches the reader, what promises to be the best of all the concerts given by Messrs. Stewart, Armstrong and Gorton, will have come and gone. As I intend being there with eyes and ears open, I shall endeavor in the next number of the Journal to tell its readers what I saw and heard.

The Washington and Jefferson College Glee Banjo, Mandolin and Guitar Club paid our town a visit on Christmas Night. This Club is under the direction of Mr. F. C. Meyer, of Wheeling, West Virginia. Mr. Meyer is a gentleman in every sense of the word, and deserves much credit for the efficient manner in which he has trained the W. and J. Boys (nearly all of whom use the Stewart Banjo). The events of the evening were Mr. Meyer's Mandolin and Banjo Solos in each of which he showed his ability as a skilful artist.

A GOOD MAXIM.

When you try your Stewart Banjo don't make the mistake of putting a little bit of a tom-tit bridge on the instrument, and then saying that the banjo has lost its tone, or "sounds tinny." Remember that the banjo can't tell you what it thinks of you, if you haven't got the musical instinct to cause you to understand its voice. If you possess musical instinct, go at the thing in the right way, and with careful practice you are bound to become one of the "best in the business"—for it is written—"To him that hath shall be given." If you lack musical instinct, don't blame the banjo for it.