

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Written Music Remodeled

Josiah Warren

1860

*These are the “preliminary remarks” to Warren’s **Written Music Remodeled and Invested with the Simplicity of an Exact Science**. The elements of expression recognized and rendered definite, thereby securing the great object of musical performance everywhere, and abolishing multitudes of ambiguous words adopted in vain to secure that end. The unnecessary transposition of keys in vocal music dispensed with, and the principal use, and the bewildering study of flats and sharps thereby abolished. The confusion of cleffs abolished. A system of short hand accompaniment introduced. No unnecessary innovations made; but the easy transitions from, and to, the common notation made an object of special care. The booklet was published in Boston by Jewett in 1860, apparently using Warren’s stereotyping technique. This is an interesting little piece, relating music to politics and economics, and pointedly expressing the frustration Warren felt about the difficulty he had getting an audience for his ideas and inventions. Most of the book consists of songs in the new notation. I cannot pronounce on the system itself, not reading music, but I’m told that it is at least constructed with expertise, and could have been useful if adopted.*

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Whoever understands the philosophy of music, that is, the essential powers of musical sounds, will probably admit that the present mode of representing them on paper is neither scientific nor reasonable, and never was adapted to the wants of the public in general. It neither gives the author power to express his ideas so as to be accurately read and conceived by the performer, nor can the student obtain by the present written rudiments any thing that he can call definite or satisfactory knowledge.

The growing taste and demand for such knowledge calls loudly for a deep and patient consideration of the subject and justify a thorough and merciless criticism of the causes which lead to the general remark, "I made the attempt two or three times, but my head was too thick, I couldn't understand it and gave it up, though I would give almost anything to be able to sing or play an instrument."

The position taken by the author of this work is that the fault is not with the people, but in the mode of representing music on paper.

But we have great obstacles to overcome. Traditional bias, reverence for authority, vested interests, professional ambition and egotism, all stand in deadly array against any attack on the present system (or want of a system) and the innovator must be prepared to meet all the opposition which these adverse influences can wield; and nothing short of the glaring and positive advantages he offers the public can justify for a moment the remotest hope for success.

Nothing for the mere sake of innovation. The author yields every thing for the present system that can be yielded without running into confusion (which is the evil to be remedied) and proposes only so much innovation as is indispensable to the success of this great agent which is so rapidly becoming one of the necessities of life.

Some idea of the obstacles to this enterprise may be formed from a few illustrative facts. For twenty years the author had

been desirous of finding some music publisher who would take an interest in it but without success. Do you ask why? I will give their own answers.

A very liberal and kind friend of the author, who was a music composer and publisher was asked by another friend, what he thought of the new system proposed. His very frank answer was, "As we have got so much invested in the common music, the less we say about it the better." I do not complain of the man; he was a good, kind, obliging, but the best of men are mere slaves to the unlimited profit making system of business, and can allow no successful rivalries if they can help it. There can be no generosity or public spirit any more than friendship in the present system of trade.

In a controversy with one of the principal musical authorities and publishers in the west in 1844, after the exchange of a few ideas, he said, "well I must admit you are right, but we have a living to get, and the present system suits us." He turned away, and sitting down to the piano commenced playing.

An application was made to one of the principal publishers in Boston, who replied at once, "Yes, we will publish it if you get the sanction of Mr. _____ and Mr. _____. But these gentlemen were precisely the ones from whom the greatest opposition might be expected, as rivals most deeply interested in keeping up the present system.

It is plain then, that music, with all its grand, elevating, and beautifying powers, is made entirely subservient to the one great, all absorbing object of money making.

The necessities of the public, the necessities of music itself, the immense influence for good or evil which it exerts every where, all weigh nothing in the scale with the profits in trade and the public are as much puppets (in this respect) of musical wire workers [?] as they are of French milliners and importers of foreign furs or domestic skunk skins.

To understand this item of slavery, let it be considered that music has always been employed as a powerful agency where

the object was to subjugate the masses of mankind; it may therefore be employed with equal power for their emancipation.

An English statesman of much note once said “give me the making of the songs of a nation and I care not who make it laws.” Perhaps he did not think that however well calculated his songs might be to substitute for laws, to elevate, refine, and harmonise and humanize a people, he could not get them before the public through any of the ordinary channels, in competition with the “established authors” who have other objects in view. To have the market open to every author and their compositions to sell on their own merits would spoil the profits derived from monopoly. It is evident that any great innovation or improvement cannot expect any sympathy or aid from the trade and therefore must take its stand on the unpleasant ground of open contest, and be prepared to let the strongest prevail.

This work must stand or fall on its own intrinsic merits — not at all on its author’s name ; for, although a professor of music from the age of eighteen, some twenty years, yet he is now entirely unknown to the public and intends to remain so.

Perhaps an apology should be made in advance for the imperfections that may appear in the mechanical execution of the work. It is the production of entirely new mode of engraving, this work being the first ever executed by it. It is but reasonable to expect many imperfections which the older arts have overcome by long experience, which is the only means to conquer them.

The substance of the apology is, that an art was needed by which music, drawings, maps, phonography, and miscellaneous illustrations could be printed by a method less tedious and expensive than by those now in use; and if this work should prove to be the germ of the revolution required for music, the public will excuse the unavoidable imperfections

incident to the first attempts to use the instrumentalities by which it was effected.

The copy right has been secured as the only existing means of securing remuneration. But abhorring the principle of monopoly and all the workings and tendencies of copy rights and patents and of an endless and unprincipled scramble after indefinite and unlimited gains, the work and the art by which it is printed (which is equally adapted to printing maps, diagrams, and writing, and which is now a secret) shall be thrown open to the free use of every one, whenever any people or government shall merely remunerate the labor that has been bestowed upon them.