



From

Vienna to Tin Pan Alley



was the title of a gramophone lecture-recital delivered from 2YA last Monday evening by Mr. Karl Atkinson. The recital was prefaced by the following brief descriptive account of the origin of the waltz, which—"more than any other dance, stands for pure melody, whose traditions it enshrines and keeps inviolate."

WELL over a century ago, Lord Byron said in a poem:

*"Endearing Waltz!—to thy more melting tune,
Bow Irish Jig and ancient Rigadoon."*

Later, in the same poem, he went even so far as to describe the dance as "seductive" and "voluptuous," as, indeed, it must have seemed to English dancers when, at the very end of the 18th century, it was introduced into an English ballroom for the first time. How it conquered all Europe, Great Britain, and America is now a matter of history, and its victorious march from its first home, Vienna, to the modern dance publishing centre of Tin Pan Alley, New York, is one of those fascinating romances which will *not* be found in the standard musical dictionaries, but depends for its elaboration upon students of the human interest side of music rather than the technical and theoretical experts.

Byron's poem invites us to picture a country gentleman of his day, who is supposed to come to town with his wife and daughter, and in the fashionable assemblies of the time, saw the waltz as a new dance of which he could not at first wholly approve. "Judge of my surprise," he says, "to see poor dear Mrs. Hornem with her arms half round the loins of a huge hussar-looking gentleman I never set eyes on before; and his, to say truth, rather more than half round her waist, and turning round and round to a see-saw, up-and-down sort of tune till it made me giddy wondering if they were not so." "Like two cockchafers spitted on the same bodkin" the dancers look, and in the closing words of the preface to the poem, Mr. Hornem admits:—"Now that I know what it is, I like it of all things," and so, I think, say all of us.—Why is this?

More than any other dance the waltz stands for pure melody, whose traditions it enshrines and keeps inviolate. It is therefore not difficult to rhapsodise about it. The waltz also represents more than in any other dance the real poetry of motion. All the grace, dignity and animation of the old minuet, gavotte, and saraband have, in a measure, been passed on to us in the music of the waltz, if not in its movements. Added to which it possesses its own romantic charm, and its inherent capacity for an infinite variety of moods and styles.

But the waltz is not only a dance with a most engrossing musical history; it may even be said to embody in itself one of the fundamental elements of musical expression. Of Bohemian

origin, and popularised by the Germans, it gains its name from the German word *walzen*—to revolve, spin or roll. Its first mention in England was at the very start of last century, when what ultimately became the German Empire comprised more than 300 sovereign states, to which an Englishman went to reside for five years. Appropriately enough, his name was Robinson, and in his letters home to his brother Thomas, he describes "waltzing as a form of dancing unlike anything you ever saw." Mr. Robinson's impressions in 1805 are worthy of quotation. He goes on to say: "A fair lady may repose her head on the bosom of her partner, particularly when they embrace so closely as to revive the idea of Plato's primitive man. Dancing makes them giddy, and a couple sometimes fall; in that case the gallant male gets undermost and receives his partner."

A CENTURY ago, Chopin, who wanted to play in Vienna, mourned the fact that "the Viennese have finished with the serious; everything is pushed into the background by Lanner, and Strauss (the elder) and their waltzes." The eroticism that was the basis of the recent jazz and dancing craze was the central force of the old waltz, as many a moralist testified, and as many a self-appointed censor maintained. The waltz-writers, like their jazz descendants, had to be perpetually producing something new; a dance band would have had short shrift from its followers unless its conductor-composer gave them a fresh repertory every week.

There was one great difference, however, between the older situation and the new—between the waltzes of last century and the jazzes of this. In those days the world had not yet been completely vulgarised and commercialised. It may have been that the waltz and the polka, too, had to make their way in a society the tone of which was finally given by aristocratic traditions; and insensibly the people's dances received the polish of breeding. The waltz in its heyday was written by people of breeding for people of breeding; whereas jazz was mostly written by people of little breeding for people of less. The waltz attracted some of the world's greatest composers, and what Weber and Chopin did for it in transferring it from the ballroom to the concert platform was little short of marvellous. From the Teutons we have had much music of varied and beautiful character. But the annals of music know no more alluring thing than a good waltz well played by a good orchestra. (Concluded overleaf.)



Johann Strauss, popularly known as the "Waltz King."