

# SHERLOCK HOLMES AND MUSIC

*A slight monograph by*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION: THE SOURCES**

In view of the amount of attention given, in the popular view of Sherlock Holmes, to his violin-playing (and sometimes other musical activities<sup>1</sup>), the canonic references are surprisingly scanty. Leaving aside a few colourless allusions such as ‘Hand me my violin’, there are nine stories (including two of the novels) in which music is mentioned. The references may be summarised thus:

*A Study in Scarlet (STUD)* chapter 2: ‘[H]is powers upon the violin . . . were very remarkable, but as eccentric as all his other accomplishments . . . When left to himself, he would seldom produce any music or attempt any recognised air . . . [H]e would . . . scrape carelessly at the fiddle which was thrown across his knee’. He would however, play (apparently by ear or from memory) pieces such as Mendelssohn’s *Lieder*<sup>2</sup> to please Watson. — Chap. 3: Holmes ‘prattle[s] away about . . . the difference between a Stradivarius and an Amati’. — Chap. 4: “‘I want to go to Hallé’s concert to hear Norman Neruda . . . Her attack and her bowing are splendid. What’s that little thing of Chopin’s she plays so magnificently: Tra-la-la-lira-lira-lay.’”

*Red-Headed League (REDH)*: Holmes, ‘a composer of no ordinary merit’, attends a recital by Sarasate at St. James’s Hall: “[T]here is a good deal of German music on the programme, which is rather more to my taste than Italian or French. It is introspective, and I want to introspect.”

*The Solitary Cyclist (SOLI)*: “‘There is a spirituality about [Violet Smith’s] face . . . which the typewriter does not generate. This lady is a musician.’”

*The Hound of the Baskervilles (HOUN)*: “‘I have a box for *Les Huguenots*. Have you heard the De Reszkes?’”

*The Cardboard Box (CARD)*: ‘Holmes would talk about nothing but violins’. He boasts of having bought for 55 shillings a Stradivari worth ‘at least five hundred guineas’, and tells anecdotes of Paganini.

*The Red Circle (REDC)*: “‘It is not eight o’clock, and a Wagner night at Covent Garden!’”

*The Bruce-Partington Plans (BRUC)*: Holmes’s recent hobby, ‘the music of the middle ages’; his study of the motets of Lassus, culminating in a monograph ‘said by experts to be the last word on the subject’.

*The Mazarin Stone (MAZA)*: “‘I shall try over the Hoffman Barcarole [sic] upon my violin’”; reference to ‘these modern gramophones’.

*The Retired Colourman (RETI)*: “‘Carina sings tonight at the Albert Hall . . .’”

## **2. HOLMES AS PLAYER AND COMPOSER**

Nowhere is there any reference to Holmes’s playing from written or printed notation. The first reference in *STUD* implies that he preferred to improvise; admittedly it is said that ‘he could play pieces, and difficult pieces’, but the example given by Watson – popular pieces by Mendelssohn, not

originally written for the violin – would be perfectly consistent with playing by ear alone. One might conclude that Holmes had learned the violin in an unacademic way – from a gypsy or an Irish folk-fiddler – and his unusual attitude, with the instrument lying on his knee, seems consistent with this<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, Holmes must have been familiar with notation and indeed with archaic and unfamiliar forms thereof, since his study of Lassus could scarcely have gained the authority which Watson ascribes to it without some direct use of the early printed editions (those of Le Roy, Berg and Gerlach). Similarly, Watson’s reference to Holmes as a ‘composer’ implies music that was written down; whatever may be the case today, nobody in Victorian times would have spoken of the process of simply evolving a melody, without giving it its proper harmonic support and recording it in playable form, as ‘composition’. The picture seems to be of a man whose musical background was initially far from academic, but who had made his way into the world of what is loosely called classical music by sheer force of intellect. Similarly, there is no indication that Holmes ever played with any other musician. The violin part of Brahms’s violin sonata in A (op. 100) which used to be displayed in the reconstruction of 221B Baker Street at the Château de Lucens is an attractive touch, but there is no evidence for it; and who on earth would have been his accompanist?

Guy Warrack, in his pioneering study<sup>4</sup>, casts doubts on Watson’s view of the breadth of Holmes’s musicianship on the grounds that a true artist would not have occupied himself with the simple and hackneyed Barcarolle from Offenbach’s *Contes d’Hoffmann*. However, there is no reason to suppose that Holmes contented himself with merely playing the tune (which any first-year student of the violin can do); apart from anything else, it would not have been likely to last him long enough for Silvius and Merton to reveal all their villainy. Most probably what he played (or rather, what he had previously played into the ‘gramophone’ – see §6 below) was an elaborate fantasia on Offenbach’s theme, replete with double-stops to suggest the two voices of the original operatic version and including many cadenzas and flourishes. Such a piece could be spun out to almost any length, and the jejunity of the theme would merely add to the challenge of constructing a substantial piece from it; compare the immense structure evolved by Beethoven from Diabelli’s childish waltz.

### **3. HOLMES AS LISTENER: HIS TASTES**

What is remarkable in the musical events which Holmes attends is that they are all either operas or violin-solo recitals<sup>5</sup>; nowhere does he show any interest in either orchestral or chamber music. The only specific piece which he mentions is a transcription of something by Chopin, probably a waltz or a mazurka, played by Wilma Neruda<sup>6</sup>. More strangely still, his attitude seems on the face of it to be that of a star-hunter, a name-dropper, rather than of one who loves music for its own sake. He goes to hear Sarasate or Neruda or the de Reszkes; his interest in what they are performing seems to be secondary at best. Only once (in REDC) does he mention the composer (Wagner) to the exclusion of the artist.

This, in a man as intellectual and as replete with *Innigkeit* as Holmes, seems to call for an explanation. Is it that music represents for him not a fresh field for his logical principles and analytical practices, but a chance to lay them aside altogether? Is it, in other words, his Turkish bath rather than his cold shower? Another possibility, perhaps more convincing, is that Holmes was out of sympathy with the overt and intense emotion which was so much a feature of 19<sup>th</sup>-century musical art; just as he avoided all expressions of feeling himself and deprecated them when they crept into Watson’s writings, so he may have objected to them in music, turning rather to the formalism and restraint of the renaissance (Lassus) and baroque aesthetic<sup>7</sup>. Since he could not keep in touch with developments in the art of violin-playing without exposing himself in some measure to romantic music, he may have developed a defence-mechanism to prevent it from subverting his intellectual balance, concentrating instead on the mechanical and technical aspects of the performance. This may explain why virtuoso technicians of music such as Sarasate and Paganini, or detached, classical, non-interventionist performers such as Neruda, seem to have appealed to him more than such dignified and thoughtful artists as Joachim, who might have been expected to be more nearly in tune with his ‘introspective’ inclinations. — Let

us, however, be mindful of the error of theorising beyond the established data. After all, it may be simply that Holmes shared only the least demanding of his concert-going experiences with the fairly unsophisticated Watson, and that when alone he immersed himself in late Beethoven, or Schumann (whose love of puzzles and musical cryptograms might be expected to delight him), or the early-music studies and reconstructions of Arnold Dolmetsch, or even the theories of Schoenberg.

With one exception, the performers named by Holmes are well known to the external world<sup>8</sup>. That exception is the mysterious ‘Carina’ of RETI. As this artist had taken the enormous and (in those days) acoustically capricious Royal Albert Hall for his or her concert, it seems likely that the event in question was either an oratorio or (more probably, since no one singer would stand out so much in an oratorio) a recital of Wagnerian extracts; and this lends a little credibility to the nearest match I have been able to trace, the French soprano Rose Caron (1858-1930), who was certainly noted in Wagnerian and other large-scale dramatic roles; but it does not appear that she ever sang in England. Perhaps Carina was a Norwegian lady, a precursor of Flagstad, who arrived at her professional sobriquet by Italianising her baptismal name of Karin; Holmes may have come across her during a trip to her native land (none such is documented, but his choice of a Norwegian persona during his trip to Tibet – see *The Empty House* – seems to imply something of the kind), and it is possible that he therefore followed her career for a while and perhaps even helped her to set up engagements such as the one mentioned here, but that at last she could not fulfil her early promise and so disappeared from the records.

#### **4. HOLMES AS MUSICAL SCHOLAR: THE MOTETS OF LASSUS**

Warrack (op.cit.) suggests that Holmes could have had little practical knowledge of the work of Orlande or Roland de Lassus (c. 1530-1594), since in his day music earlier than Purcell was rarely performed and was generally treated as primitive and of only academic interest. This attitude did certainly exist, and not only among non-specialists; Hubert Parry, writing in the 1880s, says<sup>9</sup> ‘If we go back as much as two hundred years in music, we feel as if we were among things in a crude and incomplete condition, like barbarous examples of the sister arts of races and nations even before history began.’ (This general dismissal into a homogeneous limbo of everything previous to the high baroque may account for Watson’s implicit inclusion of Lassus, an entirely Renaissance figure, with ‘mediaeval’ music.) However, there were at least three influential vocal groups active during the canonic period which can be shown to have included choral music by Lassus in their repertoires: in the Netherlands, Daniel de Lange’s A Capella Choir<sup>10</sup>; in Paris, the Chanteurs de Saint-Gervais conducted by Charles Bordes; and in Boston (U.S.A.), the Musical Art Society under Frank Damrosch.<sup>11</sup> Of these, the Dutch group is most likely to have caught Holmes’s attention, since de Lange had brought his singers to London for the South Kensington Inventions Exhibition of 1885.

S. C. Roberts<sup>12</sup>, commenting on Warrack’s observation, suggests that Holmes’s researches might have sprung in part from his known interest in early printing, and that they consisted largely of collations of the original Paris, Munich and Nuremberg publications of his music. This seems reasonable, as it brings Holmes’s musicology into contact with other acknowledged concerns of his (book-collecting and the niceties of typography); but I think I have shown that he had both the internal motive and the opportunity to involve himself in the music *as* music.

Why Lassus rather than his two great contemporaries, Palestrina and Victoria? Perhaps Holmes was again showing his preference for Germanic rather than Latin musicality; Lassus was a Fleming, and after an early period in Italy he spent much of his working life in Munich.

#### **5. HOLMES’S VIOLIN**

The value of five hundred guineas (£525.00), which Holmes assigns in CARD to his Stradivarius, corresponds nearly enough to the market rate for such an instrument in about 1880; Cecil Stainer<sup>13</sup> quotes auction records from the 1870s of between £300 and £885. The idea that Holmes could have

found a genuine Stradivari for 55/- (£2.75) has sometimes been questioned; but we must remember that old violins, like other antiques and collectable items, did not then call forth the intense and more or less well-informed interest from the media that is their portion today; they appealed to a much more restricted circle. A further glance at the prices recorded by Stainer will underline the point. The famous ‘Messiah’ Stradivari was sold in 1888 for £2000, then the highest price achieved by any instrument. Applying a rough multiplier based on minimum annual wages, this converts to about £360,000 in modern terms; but in fact this instrument would certainly be valued in tens of millions if it were to come onto the market today. Other Stradivaris have changed hands at up to £3,500,000, or nearly ten times the inflation-adjusted equivalent of the 1888 maximum. A 16<sup>th</sup>-century instrument by Andrea Amati could then be bought for £50, or perhaps £8,000 in modern terms; today even a late 19<sup>th</sup> century instrument of any quality will fetch this kind of sum. Thus it is much more credible that an important instrument should have slipped through the net than it would be today.

It may be that Holmes’s instrument was one of the very early ones signed in the name of Nicola Amati rather than with Stradivari’s own label. It may be, too, that this violin had escaped the modifications (longer neck, reinforced bass-bar, raised bridge etc.) undergone by most old violins between about 1800 and 1830 in order to increase the available string-tension and strengthen the tone. This would not be a drawback for Holmes, since he played only in his own rooms and for his own amusement, but at that time it would have lessened the commercial value of the instrument, perhaps causing it to be overlooked as a mere curiosity by the collectors of the day.

## **6. MUSIC APPLIED: THE MAZARIN STONE**

In *The Mazarin Stone*, Holmes uses a trick to induce Count Negretto Silvius and his henchman Sam Merton to discuss a jewel-theft in his presence; they believe he is playing the violin in an adjoining room, whereas in fact he has left a recording of some kind to represent him while he creeps back into the room where they are talking. I have already commented on Holmes’s choice of music on this occasion (§2). My concern here is to establish what he referred to, at the end of the report, as ‘these modern gramophones’.

In British usage, the word ‘gramophone’, until the 1960s at least, denoted a machine that played disc records on which the recorded groove undulated from side to side. However, I hold it for a certainty that the machine which Holmes used was not a gramophone but what is called in Britain a phonograph: that is, a machine of the type developed by Edison in 1887-8, playing cylindrical records whose grooves varied vertically in depth, rather than horizontally in deviation from a perfect spiral line. The gramophone, then almost a monopoly of The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd. of London (precursors of ‘His Master’s Voice’), had already gained some musical credibility, notably through the recordings of Caruso, but from Holmes’s viewpoint it suffered from the following drawbacks: - (1) Disc records, then and long afterwards, showed a good deal of surface noise caused by impurities in the shellac-based material of which they were made; this noise is easily detectable through a normal interior door<sup>14</sup>, so that the watchful Sam would have been alerted before the music even began. (2) The longest-playing record then available, the newly-introduced twelve-inch size, ran for little more than four minutes at best – a scanty allowance for an important conversation. Watson was away fetching the police and Billy was downstairs, so that Holmes had nobody on hand to re-start the record if it ran out. (3) The gramophone could not be used for home recording. Making a record of Holmes’s playing would have involved cutting a wax master on a special weight-driven recording machine quite different from the domestic gramophone, shipping it to Gramophone & Typewriter’s factory in Hanover (Germany) where a reverse master was made by electrotyping and used to stamp out the finished disc, and shipping the disc itself back to England – certainly not an impossibility, for G&T would surely have been ready to put all their resources at the disposal of somebody as eminent as Holmes, but an unwieldy process which he was not likely to undertake where an alternative, both simpler and more efficient, was available.

That alternative was the cylinder-playing phonograph<sup>15</sup>. Although regarded today as a quaint forerunner, the phonograph in the 1900s was actually much more sophisticated than the rival system. The machine was so designed that the reproducing head did not rest with all its weight on the record as it does in the gramophone; instead it was supported and guided by a framework, embodying a screw-threaded shaft whose pitch matched that of the record groove. This meant both that the reproducer could be made much more sensitive than that of the disc machine, since it did not have to be so rigid and robust, and that the material of the record could be formulated for maximum smoothness rather than durability. From early 1902 onwards, cylinders were moulded by an electrotyping process in a brittle but remarkably fine-grained wax material whose background-noise level was minimal. Furthermore, the greater delicacy of the recording and reproducing heads meant that the phonograph dealt more successfully with high frequencies than the gramophone, which generally lost them altogether – a fault especially damaging in violin music. Another feature of the phonograph, which might have had an especial appeal for the congenitally independent-minded Holmes, was that the larger models at least could be used for home recording; blank cylinders and a recording head were sold with the machine.

The one great fault of the phonograph, as commercially made, was that it had no component, corresponding to the gramophone turntable, to act as a flywheel and help the motor to maintain a steady rate of running. The result was a painful uncertainty of pitch, which negated all the potential advantages of the phonograph and ruled it out as a musical instrument. The only response offered by the manufacturers was to raise the rotating speed of the cylinder higher and higher (from about 100rpm in the early 1890s to 160rpm by 1904); this eased the problem but did not remove it, and of course it shortened the playing time, which was normally about two minutes for a standard cylinder.

It would have been an easy matter to gear a flywheel to the motor, thus putting the phonograph back into parity with the gramophone in this important respect; and this, I suggest, is exactly what Holmes did. He either had a phonograph built from scratch or modified an Edison model, replacing the original motor with a hand-built precision unit (constructed like a clock from machined brass, as opposed to the stamped steel of the commercial motor) which incorporated a flywheel. With this resource he could probably have reduced the speed to 40rpm without loss of constant pitch, giving him a playing time of 8-9 minutes<sup>16</sup> (as much as two 12-inch disc sides) and at the same time, because of the reduced friction, still further lowering the level of surface and mechanical noise; and, having done so, he could record his own playing in his own rooms at Baker Street.

It only remains to consider how Holmes may have obtained this machine. From among his known connections ‘Von Herder, the blind German mechanic’<sup>17</sup>, comes to mind, but the reference to him rather suggests that he was dead or at least inactive by that time (1894). There was however a considerable body of amateur or freelance researchers and constructors associated with the phonograph (the gramophone would not attract the like until the 1920s), including J. E. Greenhill, Henry Seymour and Augustus Stroh. Of these the most likely contact for Holmes is Stroh, an immigrant from Germany who had built Britain’s first phonograph (on Edison’s original ‘tinfoil’ pattern) in 1878 and who designed a portable recorder for detective use in the 1890s; he was also interested in the violin, his modified violins and violas (which replaced the normal body with a diaphragm-and-horn arrangement for directional sound) being widely used in the early recording studios from their introduction in 1902 onwards.

By way of conclusion:- The following drawing, while very much in the style of the period, has nothing to be said for it in point of authenticity; nonetheless, I believe it offers at least a credible idea of the kind of machine Holmes may have used, as well as a glimpse of a part of the Baker Street apartment not often seen.

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<sup>1</sup> Such as singing music-hall songs or even playing the Highland bagpipes (for both of which see the Rathbone/Bruce and Conway/Bruce radio series of the 1940s).

<sup>2</sup> I.e. transcriptions of some of the *Lieder ohne Worte*, originally written for piano.

<sup>3</sup> Compare the fiddler of southern India, who squats on the ground with the violin lying flat between his legs. Taking this in conjunction with the decidedly Oriental attitude sometimes adopted by Holmes when smoking (*The Man with the Twisted Lip*), can we not conclude that he had travelled in the East at some time and absorbed some musical influences there?

<sup>4</sup> *Sherlock Holmes and Music* (1947).

<sup>5</sup> It was not then usual for a soloist to sustain an entire recital alone; the concert would include vocal, instrumental and perhaps orchestral items by other artists. We cannot necessarily assume that, for example, Sarasate himself was involved in the 'German music' included in his St. James's Hall concert.

<sup>6</sup> Transcriptions were then much more freely accepted than they are today. Even thirty years later, the distinguished critic Ernest Newman could praise a violin version of Chopin's E flat nocturne (op.9 no. 2), adding 'Many of Chopin's melodies are so much more violinistic than pianistic that one wonders why Chopin himself did not perceive that fact' ('Putting the Classics in their Place – III' in *A Musical Motley* [1919]).

<sup>7</sup> Compare his older contemporary and fellow-rationalist Samuel Butler, who combined a passion for Handel with a contempt for all other forms of musical utterance.

<sup>8</sup> Biographical and critical notes at <http://camdenhouse.ignisart.com/midi/index.html> ; it would be both idle and ungracious to repeat the catalogue here. It may be added that the curious practice of referring to Wilma or Wilhelmine Neruda as 'Norman Neruda', from the name of her first husband Ludvik Norman, is also regularly followed by G.B. Shaw in his music criticisms of the 1890s.

<sup>9</sup> *Studies of Great Composers* (quoted from 6<sup>th</sup> edition, 1900).

<sup>10</sup> G. B. Shaw, *London Music in 1888-1889* (1937), p.81.

<sup>11</sup> For Bordes and Damrosch, see Haskell, *The Baroque Revival* (1988), pp. 46 and 97 respectively.

<sup>12</sup> *Holmes and Watson: a Miscellany* (1953).

<sup>13</sup> *A Dictionary of Violin Makers* (1896; rev. ed., n.d. [after 1904]).

<sup>14</sup> Tests carried out by the author of this article, using a gramophone of 1913 which is mechanically and acoustically identical to the finest machines of ten years earlier. It is irrelevant that Sam would almost certainly never have heard a gramophone before; if intellectually dull, he was physically alert, and *any* unidentifiable noise would have roused his suspicions at once.

<sup>15</sup> Watson, with his usual imprecision, uses the word 'gramophone' because it had become the standard term in English usage for any sound-reproducing machine by the time he wrote. This process was already developing at the time when the story took place; thus P.G. Wodehouse, in his early school story *The Pot-Hunters* (1902), has the boy O'Hara smuggling a *phonograph* into his study, whereas in *A Prefect's Uncle* (1903) the machine has become a *gramophone*. 'Gramophone' was technically a trade-name owned by Gramophone and Typewriter, not a generic term; but the public took no notice of this.

<sup>16</sup> If necessary the record could have been made to repeat itself automatically; devices for this purpose were available commercially from Edison as early as 1894.

<sup>17</sup> *The Empty House*.

