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The Mayer Wetherill Collection: Music of the Nineteenth Century

Peter Korff

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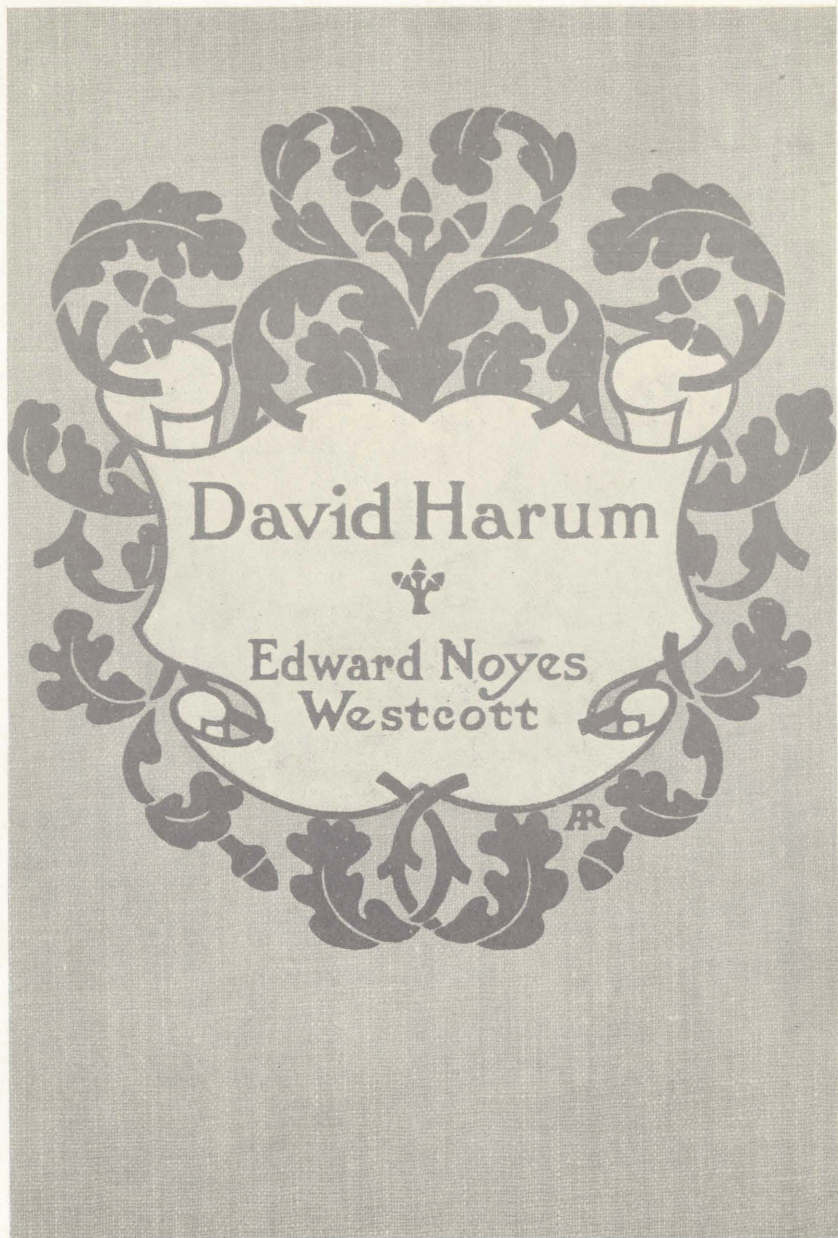


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The original cover of *David Harum* – familiar to two generations of American readers. First edition, New York, D. Appleton & Company, 1898. From the Rare Book unit of the Arents Library.

THE COURIER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
The Westcotts and David Harum Richard G. Case	3
The Romanian Village in Peter Neagoë's Short Stories Ioan A. Popa	15
Inside Bird	25
The Mayer Wetherill Collection: Music of the Nineteenth Century Peter Korff	36
Open for Research . . . Notes on Collections	44
News of the Library and Library Associates	46

The Mayer Wetherill Collection: Music of the Nineteenth Century

by Peter Korff

Miss Anna Wetherill Olmsted of Syracuse has presented the University Library with the Mayer Wetherill Collection of Nineteenth Century Music, a valuable gift documenting the musical climate of a distinguished private cultural circle.

Mayer Wetherill was Miss Olmsted's grandfather and congenial companion of her youth. It was his custom to read to the young Anna, and when she was ten years old, he began to teach her to play the violin. Her progress was so excellent that her grandfather urged Miss Olmsted to become a concert violinist, but she preferred the visual arts and has contributed to that field, in Syracuse art circles and beyond, for many years. She was director of the Everson Museum of Art from 1931 to 1958, served the community as art critic for the city papers for forty years, and continues as consultant to the art criticism columns of the Sunday *Herald American*.

The Wetherill Collection consists of light chamber music, featuring predominantly the violin. There are a Mendelssohn first edition and ten or fifteen works by reasonably well-known composers such as Spohr and Onslow; the remainder are of specific interest to scholars and violinists because they are early and middle nineteenth century repertoire long out of print. There are pieces by many of the lesser known eighteenth and nineteenth century composers, many of them the more popular artists of their own day. Most popular of all was Johann Strauss' arch-rival Joseph Lanner, who formed and conducted Vienna's first open-air orchestra and laid the foundation of the Viennese Waltz. There were other successful men like Alex Rolla, conductor of opera at La Scala; Kalliwoda (admired greatly by Schuman), conductor of Prince Fürstenberg's private orchestra; Franz Krommer, court composer to Emperor Francis II; and composer-teacher-publisher A. Andre, who was first to publish Mozart's own thematic catalog. The duets of Bruni and Jansa were highly regarded by teachers of this time, as were the personalized violin solos of Spanish-born virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate.

The Wetherill collection contains many reductions, adaptations, and arrangements of music by the major figures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are several bound collections of music for piano and violin based on "favorite opera melodies." There are also, of course, many works by

Mr. Korff is a music student at the University and works in the Music Department of the Library.



Mr. Wetherill in a corner of his home, with his violin and a portion of his music collection. The author believes the composition on the stand behind Mr. Wetherill's head to be the Mendelssohn first edition of the *Trois Grand Quatuors pour Deux Violins*. Courtesy of Miss Anna W. Olmsted.

the masters themselves. The true worth of this collection, however, is not to be found in any one *rara avis*, but rather in the quality of the whole as representative of the chamber music of its time.

Although there is little information to be had about the dates, places and occasions of Mr. Wetherill's acquisition of the collection items, the ambience from which the whole emerges is discernible in the life and interests of the man who collected it. Born in 1835 in Philadelphia, Mayer Wetherill was a life-long devotee of the violin. He excelled as a performer, an instrument maker, and a collector. What is more, he belonged to that rare species of musician, the "true amateur." This is simply to say that he was dedicated to music and not to a career, a choice made possible by his membership in a landed family of considerable wealth. He always kept a quartet of strings on hand, "for those stormy evenings when friends would want to leave their own instruments at home." The schedule and pressures of a concert violinist would merely have interfered with his enjoyment of his art. His involvement with music was nonetheless complete, as may be seen in his own brief account of his four years in Leipzig:

My whole time while there was devoted to music, in one way or another. I practiced six hours a day, went to all the concerts, and played quartets and other music for pastime. In the summer when the music in Leipzig stopped, I devoted my time to the violin makers.

The family ancestry dates back to Christopher Wetherill, an Englishman who came to America in 1682. Charles Wetherill, Mayer's father, was an art enthusiast and collected many paintings of the Hudson River School, particularly those of Thomas Doughty. A spirit of individualism has been a heritage of the family ever since the days of Christopher, whose motto was "Virtue and industry are the springs of happiness." There was Samuel Wetherill, a free-thinking Quaker, who rose up in a meeting during the Revolutionary War and declared that the colonists "ought not to turn the other cheek" – they ought to fight! He was turned out of the meeting and resolved to help Washington's cause under the guise of his occupation as a farmer. Samuel drove his wagon through the enemy lines at Valley Forge, with food and clothing for the troops concealed beneath a load of hay.

Mayer's life may have lacked comparable heroics, but not the initiative behind them. He was a strong individualist and even as a boy showed unusual self-confidence. Friends of the family tried to dissuade him from pursuing his study of the violin because it still carried with it the rustic connotation of the fiddle and therefore was not considered to be a "gentleman's instrument." He was urged to take up the flute instead, but persisted in following his own inclination and remained a violin pupil of Theodore Kammerer for eight years. He was an accomplished violinist by 1870, when he went to Leipzig with his wife and daughter for a four-year stay. There he studied repertoire with Cornelius Meisel, who at that time was concertmaster of the Capelle



Cover board of Mayer Wetherill's book on violins. Courtesy of Miss Anna W. Olmsted.

Gewandhaus Orchestra and the Royal Opera of Leipzig. Meisel had been a pupil of Henri David and David had studied with Louis Spohr; both David and Spohr are represented in Mayer's music collection. The excellence of Mayer's playing may be surmised from the fact that Meisel begged him to perform on the concert stage. Mayer replied that he was not a physically strong man, did not need the money, and did not care about applause.

The years spent in Leipzig might well have been the busiest in Mayer's life. It is safe to say that a large portion of his music collection was purchased during this period. His ability in performance and his knowledge of music must have increased enormously, as did his skill in the art of instrument making. He had learned to make violins before going to Europe, and while there was a pupil of Friedrich Sander of Kaiserslautern. Sander, who had been making violins for fifty years, had been a pupil of Vauchel, instrument maker to the Tuscan Court at Wurtzburg, and of Francis Lupot, a pupil of Antonius Stradivarius. Mayer had one of Sander's violins in his instrument collection and described the circumstances of his acquiring it:

In the summer of 1874 (Sander died in 1876) Sander made this violin for me. We selected the best wood in the shop, and as I saw it made, know it is well made. Sander had the reputation of being the best violin maker of his time. It was a very difficult thing to get one of his violins. He had a list of orders two feet long, but I don't think he ever filled them. Musicians all wondered at my being able to get one, but the old gentleman liked me, and would have done anything for me.

VIOLINO.

The page contains ten staves of musical notation for a violin part. The music is written in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. The notation includes various dynamics such as *f* (forte), *p* (piano), *eresc.* (crescendo), *pousse.* (pulsato), *tr.* (trills), *sf* (sforzando), *dolce.* (dolce), and *ff* (fortissimo). There are also performance markings like *3* (triplets), *1*, and *6*. The piece concludes with the word **FINE.** and the page numbers **273. 274.** at the bottom.

A page from Louis Spohr's *Sonate Concertante pour Harpe ou Pianoforte et Violon ou Violoncello*, Hambourg et Leipzig, Schubert & Co. From the Wetherill Collection in the Music Department of the Library.

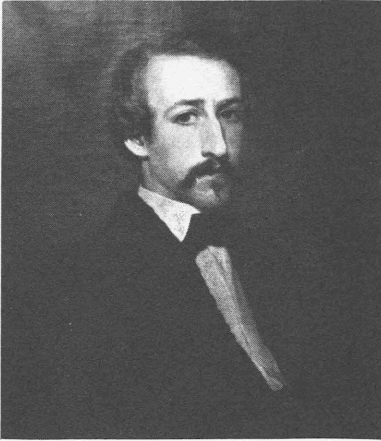
While in Europe, Mayer also purchased one violin made by Antonius Stradivarius and one by Stainer. After that he added only three more instruments to his collection: an old Amati Italian viola which he purchased in Philadelphia and two violins that he made himself. The Monarch, which he made in Philadelphia in 1885, was "made to prove that violins could be made better now than in old times," if a violin maker could find good, seasoned wood. He called it The Monarch because, he said, "it is the very best violin I know of." It was modeled after the "famous Stradivari of Emanuel Wirth." The other violin was made at 1024 South Salina Street, Syracuse, in 1891. It, too, has a Philadelphia label, however, and was made for Mayer's brother, Henry M. Wetherill.

Mayer's violin collection was not large or exceptionally valuable, but it contained many fine instruments and a few genuine relics. The most unusual was the violin made by John Gastor of Piney Woods, near Woodville, Mississippi, in 1850. This is the oldest American violin in existence today and is now a part of the collection of American instruments at the Smithsonian Institution. It was presented to the Smithsonian by Dr. Louis Krasner, Professor of Violin at Syracuse's Crouse College of Fine Arts at the time, who had received the violin as a gift from Miss Olmsted. Professor Krasner kept the violin in his studio for several years, until friends told him that they had seen the oldest American violin at the Smithsonian, an instrument made in the 1870s. He replied that he had one even older, and got in touch with the Institution, donating the instrument to the collection shortly thereafter. The only information available on the violin is that recorded by Mayer Wetherill in a private inventory of his collection, titled "Some Violins Old and New," written by him in 1892 in Syracuse. His entry follows:

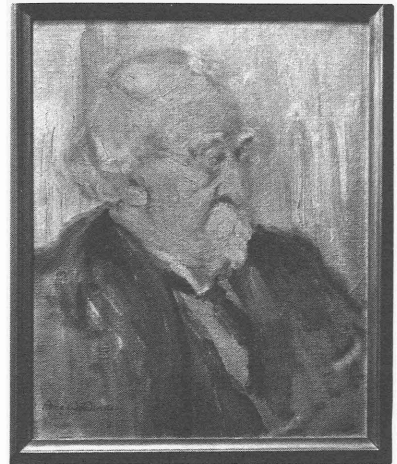
John Gastor, Piney Woods near Woodville Miss. 1850

This man was a left handed jig fiddler, and the best in the whole country. He lived in a poor section, and had probably never been fifty miles from home in his life. He made this violin evidently without tools. At first it had somewhat the form of a violin, then, he altered it to a guitar shape. Charles Wynen (solo violinist and pupil of de Beriot) came to Woodville. When Gastor heard him play, it was such a revelation to him that he gave Wynen the most precious thing he had, which was this violin. Wynen gave it to William Feltus, he to Thomas M. Wetherill (my brother) and he to me. It is a homely affair, but I doubt if any Cremona violin has ever given the same pleasure . . . as this old curiosity. Valuable as a relic. Not for sale. "There is a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough hew them how we will."

In 1874 Mayer Wetherill returned from Europe to Philadelphia, where he lived until 1886. In that year his daughter, Clara, was married to Will H.



Two portraits of Mayer Wetherill, as a young man and in his later years, the latter painted by his granddaughter, Anna W. Olmsted. Both portraits hang in Miss Olmsted's home.



Olmsted and the three moved to Syracuse where Mayer remained until his death in 1915. They lived at 1024 South Salina Street and had a summer retreat near Skaneateles Lake.

Mayer Wetherill's last thirty years were filled with the enjoyment of his family and his art. He loved children, dogs, and horses, and spent many an active day outdoors. His evenings were still often devoted to chamber music. Miss Olmsted recalls that as a child she frequently went upstairs to bed with the sounds of a string quartet serving as a lullabye from below.

After Mr. Wetherill's death, his music and instrument collections were preserved by the family. In recent years, Miss Olmsted has dispersed the instrument collection through Dr. Louis Krasner and Mrs. Antje Lemke of the Library School faculty. The availability of the music collection through the University Library will be of service to violinists, scholars, and antiquarians alike.

Following is a complete list of composers represented in the Wetherill collection:

Alard, Delphin	Louis, N.
André, Anton	Lubin, Leon Desaint
Artot, Alexandre	Martinn, Jacob
Bazzini, Antonio	Mazas, Jacques-Féréol
Beethoven, Ludwig Van	Mayseder, Joseph
Benedict, Julius	Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Felix
Beriot, Charles de	Molique, Bernhard
Bonnhorst, C. F. von	Mollenhauer, Edouard
Bruni, Antonio	Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus
Danzi, Francois	Onslow, George
David, Felicien	Osborne, George
David, Ferdinand	Paganini, Niccolò
Durst, Felicien	Pleyel, Joseph
Durst, Mathias	Proch, Heinrich
Ernst, Heinrich Wilhelm	Prume, Francois Jehin
Fodor, Joseph	Raff, Joachim
Gade, Niels W.	Reinecke, Carl
Hauser, Miska	Ries, Ferdinand
Herz, Henri	Reissiger, Carl Gottlieb
Huntern, P. E.	Rode, Ceceliode
Jansa, Leopold	Rolla, Alessandro
Kalliwoda, Johann Wenzel	Rubinstein, Anton
Kayser, Heinrich Ernst	Sainton, Prosper Philippe
Krommer, Francois	Sarasate, Pablo de
Kuffer, Joseph	Spohr, Louis
Labarre, Thomas	Svendsen, Johann S.
Labitzky, Joseph	Vieuxtemps, Henri
Lafont, Charles	Viotti, Giovanni
Lanner, Joseph	Wichtl, George
LeCarpentier, Adolphe	Wolff, Ernst
Lipinski, Karol	

