

Arnold Dolmetsch, Violet Gordon Woodhouse, Mrs Crawley and their harpsichords

The influence on Violet Gordon Woodhouse of Arnold Dolmetsch's promotion of early music and the instruments for which it was written is well-documented.¹ She had already read about Dolmetsch's concerts and lecture-recitals before she attended her first Dolmetsch concert in 1896, but until then her focus had been on the piano. Her teacher, from the age of 16, was the Baden-born Oscar Beringer who founded an *Academy for the Higher Development of Pianoforte Playing* in London in 1873. Despite all her hard work, social convention barred her from a professional career, and her father was unyielding to her pleading.

It was through marriage, to Gordon Woodhouse, that she gained her independence, both social and financial, and began to develop her taste in art, interior design, and music. The couple divided their time between 6 Upper Brook Street, near London's Hyde Park, and Wootton Manor, near Folkington, which Gordon leased from Violet's father, and which was conveniently near her parent's home. In 1905 Wootton Manor became the home of Violet's brother, Rupert Sackville Gwynne MP whose daughter, the famous cookery writer Elizabeth David, was brought up there.

Violet's response to the 1896 Dolmetsch concert was to take lessons with AD, and later to purchase a double-manual harpsichord which AD adapted from a single-manual instrument made by Thomas Culliford, in 1785, for Longman and Broderip. The modified instrument was delivered in 1899 and would have been one of three used in a performance of a Bach Concerto for three harpsichords and strings, given in Violet's music room at Upper Brook Street on 14 December 1899. The other two harpsichordists were Arnold Dolmetsch and Arnold's second wife Elodie. AD had married Elodie, the divorced wife of his younger brother, three months earlier in Zurich. At the time AD owned a double-manual Kirkman harpsichord which he would lose when Elodie claimed it as part of their divorce settlement in 1903. It would have been one of the other two harpsichords used in that concert. The same work had been performed in an earlier Dolmetsch concert, on 22 May 1894 at Dolmetsch's home *Dowland* in West Dulwich, when the soloists were the music critic J A Fuller Maitland, Miss Ethel Davis and AD.

AD's divorce from Elodie in 1903 forced him to find a replacement for his Kirkman, and a candidate was found in Paris when AD, and his third wife Mabel, were providing music to accompany a *ballet* conceived by Isadora Duncan.

Mabel describes the instrument in her *Personal Recollections* (page 48).

'The instrument in question was a double-manual harpsichord made by Jean Couchet, in Antwerp, c. 1645, and restored, enlarged (as to compass) and redecorated by Pascal Taskin, harpsichord maker to Louis XV, in the latter part of the eighteenth century.'

Dolmetsch described the original *genouillère* which he found impractical on so fragile an instrument and replaced them with pedals which he writes were modelled on the same principle described by Thomas Mace in his *Musick's Monument* (1676) (page 235).

¹ *Violet – The Lives and Loves of Violet Gordon-Woodhouse* by Jessica Douglas-Home pub. The Harville Press (1996)

‘There is made right un|derneath the Keys, near the Ground, a kind of Cubbord, or Box, which opens with a little Pair of Doors, in which Box the Per|former sets both his Feet, resting them upon his Heels, (his Toes a little turning up) touching nothing, till such time he has a Pleasure to employ them; which is after this manner, viz. There being right underneath his Toes 4 little Pummels of Wood, under each Foot 2, any one of Those 4 he may Tread upon at his Pleasure; which by the Weight of his Foot drives a Spring, and so Causeth the whole Instrument to Sound, either Soft or Loud, according as he shall chuse to Tread any of them down; (for without the Foot so us'd Nothing Speaks.).’²

The Couchet/Taskin would feature in Dolmetsch concerts in London, and travel with them to America in 1905 when Dolmetsch was engaged to manage an early musical instrument department at the Chickering factory in Boston. Mabel writes that following their arrival in Cambridge, Mass., AD ‘remained at home working out his plans for a new model of harpsichord, based primarily on the French system exemplified by his Taskin harpsichord, but with a pedal action to provide increased resources.’ A photograph of Arnold Dolmetsch with his Testore viola d’amore and Mabel seated at the Taskin harpsichord was taken in Cambridge, Mass. in 1909 and appears in her *Personal Recollections* (facing page 65).

The Taskin may have been with the family in France when Dolmetsch was working at Gaveau, in Fontenay-sous-bois, close to the forest of Vincennes and six miles west from the centre of Paris. While at Gaveau Dolmetsch continued making harpsichords like those he had designed for Chickering, but, as Mabel comments, Étienne Gaveau ‘favoured the seventeenth-century French style of cabinet work rather than the more antique lacquered finish.’ Two of these instruments came to England, one having been acquired by Violet Gordon Woodhouse. It was on this instrument that she made her pioneering recordings in 1920.

Violet ordered what is believed to be the first five-octave clavichord made at Gaveau (Bavington: No. 2. 1911). This, like the Chickering clavichords, was based on a 1784 clavichord by Christian Gottlieb Hoffmann, which Dolmetsch sold to Belle Skinner in 1908. It was also at Gaveau, a year later, that AD designed and built the first of his small clavichords with a range of four octaves and two notes (Bavington: No. 19. 1912) which she could more easily transport in a car.³

In April 1915, Violet and Dolmetsch performed a Bach Concerto for two harpsichords with the London Symphony Orchestra directed by the Belgian conductor Henri Verbrugghen. It was then, after Violet declared that it impossible to tell which she liked more, that AD teased her to try them both, and keep the one she liked better. She decided to stick with the one she already owned. Much later, however, she acquired the second Gaveau instrument but Mabel doubted that she could ever decide which she preferred!

In 1913 Dolmetsch organised two concerts at Clifford’s Inn (6 March 1913, 17 December 1913) both featuring Violet and an amateur flautist Neville Lytton. R. T. Gould, who is best known today as the restorer of the famous Harrison timekeepers

² <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A50198.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

³ <http://www.peter-bavington.com/Bavington-Dolmetsch.pdf>

originally built to solve the 'longitude problem' in nautical navigation, attended the second of the two concerts and his reaction is reproduced in Jonathan Betts' *Time Restored*.⁴

'Concert splendid. All Dolmetsch family in costume & Neville Lytton *ébouriffé*, with large ivory flute. I liked the tone of the harpsichord immensely, but the clavichord was almost too faint to be heard.'

The period after Dolmetsch's return from France, before which he had enjoyed the financial security of contracted positions and regular remuneration, was difficult. From the outbreak of war, in July 1914, until his move away from London to Thursley and then Haslemere in 1917, he taught, restored and sold all kinds of musical instruments including some of his own, and promoted or was engaged to give concerts.

One family that appears in AD's account books, diaries and address books from this period is Mr and Mrs George Abraham Crawley.

In the summer of 1914, Denis Tollemache, a cavalry officer and one of Violet's admirers, wrote to his mother about plans for a party at Helmingham Hall, which had been in the Tollemache family since 1480. He advised her, 'I'll give you the list – V[iolet] and Gordon, Bill Barrington and Max Labouchère, and Mrs and Mrs George Crawley.'

George Abraham Crawley was the eldest son of George Baden Crawley who made a fortune as a railway contractor working in Russia, Romania, Belgium, Spain and Mexico. George Baden Crawley met an untimely death while disembarking from the steamer *City of Alexandra* in Vera Cruz, Mexico on 23 November 1879. George was sixteen at the time. His mother Eliza Inez was described in later life as 'an excellent musician with a charming voice, which her children and grandchildren have inherited, and she inspired and led the music that was always a feature of her entertaining at shooting parties, cricket matches, and family gatherings.'

George became a successful designer and architect working in both America and England. The London art-dealer Basil Dighton said that he 'never met anyone who had such a profound knowledge as George Crawley of the styles of all periods of decorative art. He could sit down at a moment's notice and design a Daniel Marot mantling of a coat of arms, a finely engraved Queen Anne silver lock, an Elizabethan fire-dog, a Henry VIII elaborately panelled room, or anything else that one's fancy desired.'⁵

George Abraham's wife, Mary, born Mary Alice Brotherhood, daughter of the engineer Peter Brotherhood, was always known as May. They married in June 1896. Although living in straightened circumstances as his projects flared and guttered, George began advising Henry Phipps, partner of Andrew Carnegie, on the acquisition of fine art and furniture. Phipps was building a white marble house on Fifth Avenue, New York and when George was engaged by Phipps with the task of decorating and

⁴ *Time Restored* by Jonathan Betts OUP and The National Maritime Museum (2006)

⁵ *George Abraham Crawley – A Short Memoir* by Cuthbert Headlam Private Publication (1929)

completing the house, the couple moved to New York, not returning to England until 1907.

On their return they took up residence in a beautiful Tudor farmhouse, Crowhurst Place, near Lingfield. May retained a small house in Cadogan Terrace, London where she could escape when the renovation work at Crowhurst became too much for her, or the damp which impacted her rheumatism. During May's absence in India (1910-1911), George decided to dispose of Crowhurst, to the American heiress, Consuelo Vanderbilt, who needed a home following the failure of her marriage to The 9th Duke of Marlborough. Wisely Consuelo engaged George to continue and complete the restoration of Crowhurst. For his part, George rented a bungalow, Shinglestreet, in Suffolk where he could entertain his friends, including Violet Gordon Woodhouse whose musical genius he worshipped.

In 1915 the Crawley's moved their London base to the more spacious 12 Cumberland Terrace, Regent's Park, better suited to hold George's substantial collection of period furniture, fine art, silver, and other collectables.

The name Mrs Crawley first appears in AD's diaries in 1917: 23 January 'Mrs Crawley Lunch 1.30'; then again on 31 January, 21 February, 5 March (when a bill for 2 guineas is noted), 23 April (1 guinea for tuning). His account book for 1917-1920 shows entries, generally invoices for 1 guinea to the account of Mrs G Crawley, marked variously 'tuning', 'lesson(s)', and running from July 1917 through to January 1920.

It would appear that Mrs Crawley had acquired a harpsichord, and an entry in *Early Keyboard Instruments* by Philip James (1930) confirms that this instrument was Dolmetsch's Taskin. The instrument became known as Mrs Crawley's Couchet and is now, minus its anachronistic pedals, part of the Russell Collection in Edinburgh where it is described as a Jean Goerman/Pascal Taskin [Russell Collection of Early Keyboard Instruments, University of Edinburgh. Cat. No. HD5-JG1764.29].^{6 7}

The Couchet was not the only musical instruments purchased by the Crawleys. In July 1917, AD records the purchase, by George, of a viola d'amore, a pochette, a Venetian lute, and a bow. A Richard Meares viol was listed too but a later note records that that instrument was eventually sold to a Miss Warren.

In the Sotheby's sale of 13 May 1927, following George's death in 1926, a number of his musical instruments were offered for sale. The viola d'amore that AD sold him in 1917 is listed, with a note that it had been restored under the direction of Arnold Dolmetsch by Chickering of Boston U.S.A. in January 1907. Other lots include a clavichord by Henry Tull, a late eighteenth-century wing-shaped spinet, and a Ruckers harpsichord, Lot 170. The description reads:

'Rucker's Harpsichord made by Johannes Ruckers of Antwerp (Hans the Younger) fl. 1617-1642, a magnificent instrument, 7ft 10in. by 3ft 9in., exquisitely decorated in Vernis Martin; on the exterior with classical scenes, playing Amoretti, floral borders, etc., in the manner of Boucher; on the interior of the lid with a beautifully executed

⁶ <https://academic.oup.com/em/article-abstract/7/4/473/475555?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

⁷ <https://collections.ed.ac.uk/record/684>

landscape. With delicately worked mounts and hinges; and one of the celebrated Rucker's roses in the sounding-board : supported on a stand of carved and gilded wood.'

The formal description is followed by an additional note which ends: 'It is in perfect condition, having very recently been set in order by a celebrated Parisian firm'. This could have been Gaveau, who continued to make and restore early keyboard instruments long after Dolmetsch had returned to England in 1914.

The plate illustrating this fine harpsichord strongly suggests this is the same instrument recently restored by Dr Grant O'Brien, which he describes as a Franco-Flemish double-manual harpsichord, originally a transposing harpsichord made in Antwerp in 1617, and then ravalé in Paris, possibly by François Étienne Blanchet in 1750, and then in stages by Jacques Barberini, Paris, c.1775 and by Nicolas Hoffman, 1786. ⁸ O'Brien states that it was purchased later by William Randolph Hearst before finding its way to South America.

The 13 May sale included a second harpsichord, a Spanish single-manual instrument, the property of Mr H. E. Crawley. H. E. Crawley was a younger brother of George. The instrument's description includes the comment: 'This instrument is in perfect order having been restored by Arnold Dolmetsch in 1919.' The catalogue includes an illustration of this instrument but its current whereabouts is unknown.

A final diary entry 25 January 1922, marks the final appearance of Mrs Crawley in AD's diaries and the only appearance of Mrs Headlam of 4 Montague Place W.1. Mrs Cuthbert Headlam was Georgina Beatrice, sister of George A. Crawley. Her husband was a Clerk in the House of Lords who entered politics, and was elected MP for the seat of Barnard Castle, County Durham. Mrs, later Lady, Headlam acquired Violet Gordon Woodhouse's Thomas Culliford. In 1965 it was purchased by Mackenzie of Ord who restored it back to its original condition as a single-manual instrument, and this restored harpsichord was auctioned by Gardiner Houlgate on 13 March 2017.

The Crawley-Gordon Woodhouse relationship was based on mutual admiration, and clearly she encouraged a love of the harpsichord and the clavichord in the extended Crawley family.

Headlam's memoir records that on the first Sunday in July, 1926, and by now mortally ill, 'George sent for those of his dearest friends who could come to him. "Thinking that some music might soothe and help him," writes May, "Violet Gordon Woodhouse asked if she should bring her little clavichord. ⁹ He was overjoyed. It was set at the end of his bed and his friends all clustered round. ... No one who was there can forget the peace of that morning. As the soft notes of the clavichord came to him he looked absolutely happy. Bach was always to him the music of his heart, for his sense of line was ever persistent.' ¹⁰

⁸ http://www.claviantica.com/Franco-Flemish_harpsichord_files/WR_harps.htm

⁹ Bavington: No. 19. 1912

¹⁰ *George Abraham Crawley – A Short Memoir* by Cuthbert Headlam Private Publication (1929)