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THE KAPELLMEISTER

by Bill Adams (*Chairman of the George Eliot Fellowship*)

“Rosamond played admirably. Her master at Mrs. Lemon’s school (close to a county town with a memorable history that had its relics in church and castle) was one of those excellent musicians here and there to be found in our provinces, worthy to compare with many a noted Kapellmeister in a country which offers more plentiful conditions of musical celebrity. Rosamond, with the executant’s instinct, had seized his manner of playing, and gave forth his large rendering of noble music with the precision of an echo. It was almost startling, heard for the first time. A hidden soul seemed to be flowing forth from Rosamond’s fingers.”

Middlemarch Chap XVI

George Eliot was always careful to point out that while there were no direct portrayals of actual people in her fiction, her characters were drawn from acute observation of human behaviour in all its variety. Thus, we can surmise from the nature and sequence of the events in Middlemarch (whose sub-title is “A Study in Provincial Life”) that the fictional life might well be a reflection of the actual history of Coventry, which Mary Ann Evans had ample opportunity to study during her young life in the Midlands. Indeed, it is possible to get a little closer than surmise, when we find for example, the author calling a Middlemarch inn ‘The Green Dragon’, for there was an inn of that name in central Coventry, across the road from the ribbon warehouse owned by Charles Bray!

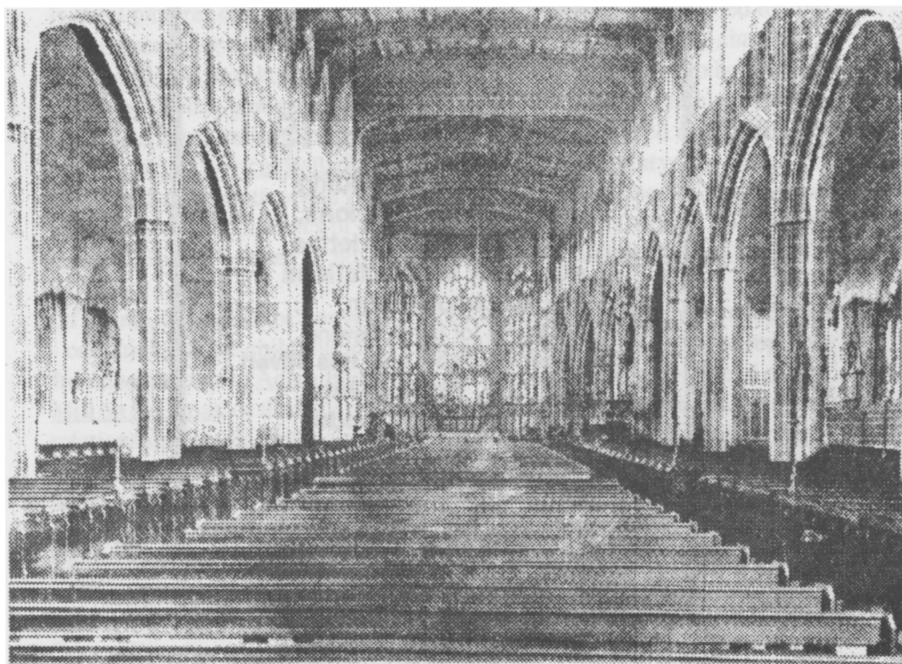
There are good grounds, therefore, for the belief that there were actual people in the mind's-eye of George Eliot when she was working - and the above brief reference to a music teacher is a case in point. We know from her journals that Mary Ann was given piano lessons at Griff by Edward Simms who came over from Coventry where he was organist in St. Michael's Church (later to become Coventry Cathedral). Simms was a remarkable man, a pillar of the musical scene in Coventry for over half the nineteenth century. He was born in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, in 1800, and died in Coventry ninety two years later. He had musical ability from an early age, and at thirteen was playing the church organ at Womborne in Staffordshire. He was sixteen when he went to London to study the organ under Thomas Adams at St. Dunstan's in the East in the City. Adams had a reputation as having noteworthy gifts of improvisation, and was known as 'The Thalberg of the organ' - a significant title, as will be seen. Simms's other teacher in London, for the piano, was the eminent German pianist, composer and teacher Friedrich Kalkbrenner (1785-1849) who was in London for nine years up to 1823. Whilst studying with this famous man, who had once taught Chopin, Simms moved in the highest musical circles. He met Thomas Attwood, who had been Mozart's pupil; Attwood took him to a private recital and introduced him to Mendelssohn.

After this star-studded period of education, Simms returned to the Midlands and advertised for pupils. He also took appointments as organist in various Coventry churches, finally settling at St. Michael's in 1828. Here he organised the choir, who loved his genial nature; he also organised a series of subscription concerts, one of which at least was attended but not enjoyed by Miss Evans in August 1838, when she was gripped by evangelical fervour. Another activity was the formation of the Coventry Choral Society, which flourished under his guidance for many years. Simms was also a prolific composer of music, little of which was ever published. Above all, it was the brilliance of his playing which startled the congregation.

"Mr. Simms's extemporisations" - says his obituary - "though somewhat florid at the evening service, were often very fine. At that time it was not fashionable to stay until the voluntary was finished. The immense congregation streamed slowly out of the church to the strains of a well balanced full organ, which for richness and grandeur could not well be surpassed. Some remained till the last note. The figure of old blind Cross, leaning slightly forward, with his hands on the back of the seat

and his face directed towards the organ, was one not to be readily forgotten. As he walked down the church from the vestry to the organ on a Sunday morning, Simms' figure will be within the recollection of many. Upright as a soldier, with frock coat and high collar, he had with him an obvious air of distinction.

As a pianist he was better known by the success of his pupils than as a performer. At one time his teaching connection included the best families - and the best schools between Birmingham and Warwick. His most celebrated pupil was George Eliot. He has often expressed his admiration for her perseverance and insight, her method of rendering Thalberg's music and especially for her aptitude in theory. Whilst the novelist, on her part, has paid a peculiarly graceful compliment to her old music master in 'Middlemarch'." The obituary goes on to quote the paragraph which begins this piece.



The nave of Coventry Cathedral (*destroyed during the Second World War*)

What is of particular interest is the reference to George Eliot's rendering of Thalberg's music. Sigismund Thalberg was born in Geneva in 1812 and died in 1871. His compositions for the piano were notable for a system whereby the melody was distributed to both hands, and the accompaniment made to enfold it in a way that gave the effect of three hands playing. Significantly, Thalberg himself studied under Kalkbrenner; thus the technique passed to Simms from the same source, and was augmented for his organ performances by Thomas Adams - 'The Thalberg of the organ'.

Finally, it seems clear that the same musical textures were imparted to Mary Ann Evans in the parlour at Griff, to be enjoyed by first the visitors to Nant Glyn when the schoolgirl performed for them, and later by her friends and loved ones at the Priory and her other homes. Was it, perhaps, one of her own performances that she recalls and gives to the beautiful Rosamond?