

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FTS 32379 STEREO

THE CRADLE OF HARMONY

William Sidney Mount's Violin & Fiddle Music

Gilbert Ross, Violinist

NOTES BY ALFRED FRANKENSTEIN



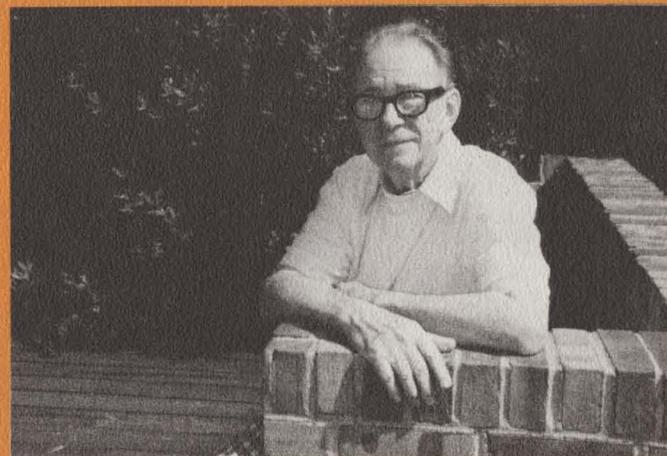
William Sidney Mount oil painting, "Left and Right", 1850

Suffolk Museum and Carriage House, Stony Brook, Long Island

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SIDE I: Willet's Hornpipe; Tis the Last Rose of Summer; Waltz; Merry Girls of New York; Yellow Hair'd Laddie; Stony Brook Moonshine; Yankee Hornpipe; Birks of Invernay; Brown Polka; In the Cars, on the Long Island Railroad; Col. Thornton's Strathspey; Rosa Waltz; Cotillion in the Key of C, No. 2; I'll Meet the Maid in the Moonlit Bower; Old Sussanna, Don't You Cry for Me; Motion of the Boat; Gentle Annie; Waltz, the Cachucha.

SIDE II: Pittsburgh Hornpipe; Braes of Tullymat; Fashionable Schottisch; Fancy Dance; Miss Eleanor Robertson's Favorite; Possum Hunt; Middletown Hornpipe; Shawn Tanish Willichan; Jordan Jig; Cotillion in the Key of C, No. 4; The Braes of Athol; Bloomingdale's Waltz; Lord St. Vincent's Hornpipe; Highland Watch, now the 42nd Regiment or Royal Highlanders; Uncle Ben's Favorite; Nancy Till; First Sett, No. 1.



Gilbert Ross is a pupil of Leopold Auer. He has performed extensively as violin soloist with orchestras and in recital throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and South America. He was founder and for more than twenty years first violinist of the University of Michigan's Stanley Quartet. He was also professor of music at the same university for many years and was chairman of its department of stringed instruments. He has long been champion of modern music in general and of American music in particular, and has given first performances and made recordings of many American works. In embarking on the present venture into the vernacular American music of the last century, he says "The classical violinist does not forget his Bach and Mozart, his classical indoctrination—only lays them aside for the moment and succumbs unabashedly to the spirit of Stony Brook's Thursday night parties. He 'hauls a tune now and then in the old-fashioned way', as Mount wrote, and tries to heed (though not too literally!) Nelson Mount's advice to his brother:—'until then you may saw away—.' NS HW 'lays into' *The Merry Girls of New York* with unashamed zeal."

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OF HARMONY
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Violin & Fiddle Music
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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

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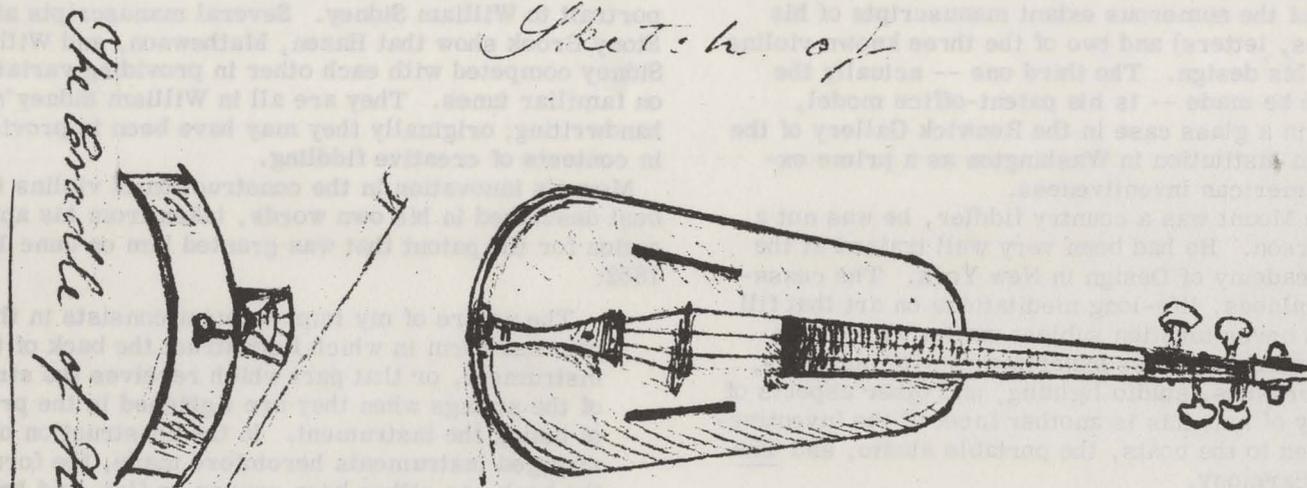
THE CRADLE OF HARMONY

William Sidney Mount's Violin & His Fiddle Music

Gilbert Ross, Violinist

*I have met you in the city -
Please drop me a few lines*

Sketch of



*The Hollow back fiddle
Invented by Wm. S. Mount.*

*Quite a number of the Editors
1 # on H. Island, New York*

By Alfred Frankenstein

Everybody knows that William Sidney Mount was one of the best American painters of the nineteenth century, but few of those who enjoy his scenes of country life on Long Island are aware of his many-sided activities in other fields than painting. He was obsessed with the design of small, sea-going boats and constructed several such, notably one called Pond Lily. Anticipating

Winslow Homer by many years, he built a horse-drawn studio on wheels so that nothing, not even memory, could come between him and the drawing and painting of the Long Island landscape. And throughout his adult life he played the violin for country dance parties and for quieter entertainment at home; he assembled an enormous collection of fiddle music, most of it in manuscript, and designed and patented a novel type of violin, which he called The Cradle of Harmony. This record is

a selection of music from Mount's library played on one of the three examples of The Cradle of Harmony now known to exist by one of the most distinguished of contemporary American violinists.

Mount was born in 1807 and died in 1868. Except for repeated and occasionally prolonged visits to New York City, he spent his entire life in and about the village of Stony Brook, Long Island, painting country types and incidents, portraits, and landscapes. He is often credited with being the first American to paint scenes of everyday life, but this is an exaggeration; it is closer to the truth to say he was the first American to make habitual use of such subject matter and build an international reputation upon it.

Although paintings by Mount are in public and private collections throughout the United States, approximately three-fourths of his known work is assembled at the Museums in Stony Brook, his home town, along with about half of the numerous extant manuscripts of his life (diaries, letters) and two of the three known violins built after his design. The third one -- actually the first one to be made -- is his patent-office model, preserved in a glass case in the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington as a prime example of American inventiveness.

Although Mount was a country fiddler, he was not a country person. He had been very well trained at the National Academy of Design in New York. The ceaseless, voluminous, life-long meditations on art that fill his diaries never mention subject matter at all. He records, rather, endless experiments with pigments, solvents, brushes, studio lighting, and other aspects of the cookery of art; this is another facet of the inventiveness that led to the boats, the portable studio, and The Cradle of Harmony.

In many of Mount's paintings one may observe a person who stands aside from the main group of the country people, observing their doings but not participating in them. This figure provides an episode of rest contrasted with activity, but I am convinced that it is more than that: it is a psychological self-portrait. William Sidney Mount was with the good folk of Stony Brook but not of them. Nothing demonstrates this quite so well as his fiddle playing. The fiddler does not participate in the dance. He leads it, standing apart.

Music was ingrained in Mount's family tradition. His uncle, Micah Hawkins (1777-1825) was one of the great characters of New York City. He ran a grocery store with a piano built into its counter and often entertained his customers by playing on it; such, at least is the story. He wrote the libretto and may have composed the music for The Saw Mill, or a Yankee Trick, produced on the New York stage and published in 1824. The music may have been his own and it may, in the tradition of ballad opera, have been adapted from the popular music of the moment; there is no way of knowing. But Micah Hawkins left a good deal of music in manuscript, preserved at Stony Brook, and some of it is recorded here. One of Micah Hawkins' extant music books contains second violin parts for unnamed overtures and symphonies inscribed with the name of the Apollo Society, one of the early musical organizations of New York.

Hawkins taught music to two of the three sons of his sister, Ruth Hawkins Mount. One of these, Robert Nelson Mount, became a professional fiddle player and dancing teacher who wandered about the country establishing dancing schools here and there. He constantly exchanged fiddle tunes with William Sidney, and some of these, preserved at Stony Brook in "Brother Nelson's" letters, are on this record. Robert Nelson Mount also possessed a decided literary gift, and his letters describing pioneer conditions in the backwoods of Georgia around 1840 are among the most fascinating passages in my book, William Sidney Mount, A Documentary Biography. (Abrams, 1976).

William Sidney also derived much from two other fiddlers, Harvey L. Hazen of Norwich, Connecticut, and Nelson Mathewson, a somewhat besotted character who drifted about Long Island engaged in the same occupation as Robert Nelson Mount and who sat for his portrait to William Sidney. Several manuscripts at Stony Brook show that Hazen, Mathewson, and William Sidney competed with each other in providing variations on familiar tunes. They are all in William Sidney's handwriting; originally they may have been improvised in contests of creative fiddling.

Mount's innovation in the construction of violins is best described in his own words, taken from his application for the patent that was granted him on June 1, 1852:

The nature of my improvement consists in the peculiar form in which I construct the back of the instrument, or that part which receives the strain of the strings when they are tightened in the process of tuning the instrument. In the construction of all stringed instruments heretofore made, the form of the back has either been convex or flat, and hence in the process of tuning the instrument by tightening the strings the effect has been to strain or bend the back, and also, as an inevitable consequence, so to compress the fibers of the wood composing the sounding board in front as to alter, interfere with or impair its sonorous and vibrating qualities. To overcome this difficulty, I construct the back of the instrument, or that part which is strained by the tightening of the strings, in a concave form, so that a convex surface is presented in front toward the strings. By this form of construction when the strings are strained in the process of tuning, the effect is to lengthen instead of shorten the lower line, and thus, while the back of the instrument is relieved from the strain to which it would otherwise be subjected, the compression of the wood composing the sounding board is entirely avoided....

Constructed in this manner, the back and sides of the violin, by reason of the concavity, receive the strain of the strings when tightened, and the greater shortness of the sound post increases the vibration of the sound board, making the tone of the instrument more sonorous, rich, and powerful.

That last point, increased power, was very important to Mount. The lone fiddler, playing for country dances in an atmosphere of stamping feet and shouted merry-

making, needed all the volume he could summon. But the effect Mount attained with his structural innovations was something quite different. Ureli Corelli Hill, founder and first conductor of the New York Philharmonic, pupil of Spohr, and the best violinist in America in Mount's time, called The Cradle of Harmony "a lady's violin," which remark Mount took, or pretended to take, as an endorsement. U.C. Hill's professional descendant, Gilbert Ross, says "The Cradle of Harmony yields sounds of extraordinary richness. The viola-like darkness of the lower strings contrasts beautifully with the brightness of the instrument's upper register. Mount's unusual conception of the violin structure attests to his originality and inventiveness."

The sketch published herewith, taken from a letter Mount wrote his friend Charles Lanman on February 29, 1852, is of the earliest violin built to Mount's specifications; this is the instrument submitted as a model to the Patent Office and now displayed in the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian. The sketch shows the curved-in back extremely well. The unusual drop-shape of the instrument as a whole, and the straight sound holes, were replaced in later Mount violins by the conventional shape with waist and corners ("bouts," in the lingo of the trade) and the customary f-holes.

The patent office model was made by James H. Ward, who appears to have been a carpenter in New York City. The two other surviving Mount violins were made, respectively, by James A. Whitehorne, who was a painter by profession, like Mount himself, and by Thomas Shepard Seabury, a nephew of Mount's, who was employed in a carriage factory. The Seabury violin, dated 1857, is the one used in this recording. It was restored to playing condition, after more than a century of disuse, by John L. Rossi of Hempstead, Long Island, in 1975.

No Cradle of Harmony was ever built by a professional instrument maker. Mount had grand dreams of mass-producing his violin and of making hollow-backed violas and 'cellos as well, but he never got around to it. The three violins at Stony Brook and the Smithsonian are all that remains of this chapter in William Sidney's life.

But huge quantities of the music Mount played on his fiddles survive in the library of the Museums at Stony Brook. Most of it is written in Mount's own hand on individual sheets of staff paper, but there are also some bound notebooks of music which Mount filled with tunes and, as observed above, at least two collections of music written down by Micah Hawkins. In addition, there are several printed collections. One of these collections, from which we have drawn some of the tunes on this record, is entitled Original Dances, Waltzes, and Hornpipes for the Violin Composed by M. Higgins, published in New York in 1829. Nobody seems to know anything about Higgins, but his book contains forty-one tunes, many of them named after places, like the tunes in an old-time hymnal. Hereafter it will be designated simply as Higgins.

The other printed book on which we have drawn is Winner's Collection of Music for the Violin: Cotillions, Polkas, Quadrilles, Waltzes, Hornpipes, Reels, Jigs, Schottisches, Mazourkas, Marches, Fancy Dances, and Other Popular Airs Arranged in an Easy Manner by Sep.

Winner. That would be the fabulous Septimus Winner (1827-1902), whose song, Listen to the Mocking Bird, sold twenty million copies during his lifetime, who got himself into a heap of trouble by writing a song called Give Us Back Our Old Commander after Lincoln had sacked McClellan, who is said to have published at least two hundred tune books for twenty-three different instruments and some two thousand arrangements for violin and piano. His violin book we shall henceforth call Winner.

Unless otherwise specified, the other tunes on this disc come from Mount's manuscripts. These tunes are taken from many sources some of which will be mentioned in the notes below. Mount asserts authorship of numerous variations on other people's melodies, but he claims to have composed only one piece from start to finish: In the Cars on the Long Island Railroad, which, of course, we include.

The music on this disc was selected by Mr. Ross who, in performing it, bore in mind such precepts of the performance practice of the time as those indicated in William Sidney's letter to Nelson of February 4, 1841:

Take out your old box and go at it, pell mell. Some parts of the strains you must play softer than others, particularly the Minores, they are beautiful. Play some of the strains in octaves above or below, at leisure. In shifting, slide your fingers up and down. You know what I mean. Let your two first fingers work up in playing the whole sett. In Mathewson style...

In another letter to Nelson, of the same period, William observes, as if it were a matter of course, that he might rearrange the order of the short pieces in a cotillion in any way he pleased. Speaking of another tune, he says "You can make var. as you play it."

The following are notes on the individual pieces of our recording:

Willet's Hornpipe, Higgins, p. 4. Like all hornpipes, a lively dance in 2/4 time, each of its two repeated strains ending with three reiterated eighth notes. The dance is said to derive its name from an obsolete pipe with a bell made of horn which was used to accompany it.

Tis the Last Rose of Summer. The famous old Irish tune with twiddly little additions such as those that appear frequently in the strathspeys. Mount notes that he obtained this version "From Capt. P. Lefevre, on board of the Steam boat Kosciusko, Hartford, Conn., July 28, 1843."

Waltz. "From H. Kramer, Esq., July 23, 1843." Mount's waltzes are notably lighter in texture than those of the Viennese tradition and lack its emphatic oom-pah-pah. They are often notated in 3/8, although this one is in 3/4.

Merry Girls of New York. A lively tune in A major, alla breve, "composed by P. Utt."

Yellow Hair'd Laddie. In the manner of the Scottish folk tunes for which Mount had a predilection, but no source is indicated on the manuscript. An emphatically different version of the tune is preserved in one of Micah Hawkins' collections at Stony Brook.

Stony Brook Moonshine. "As played by W.S.M.," and dated "Jan. 11, 1859." At the bottom of the manuscript is the notation "Jan. 10th, 4-1/2 degrees below zero." Recording the weather became a genuine obsession with Mount in the last years of his life. He filled pages of his diaries with hourly temperature readings and could not refrain from adding them to his music as well.

Yankee Hornpipe. Higgins, Page 7.

Birks of Invermay. Another of the great, mournful Scottish tunes, also notated by Hawkins in a somewhat different version. The melody derives some of its grandeur from the fact that it is hexatonic, i. e., in a six-tone scale from which the expected seventh degree is omitted. That seventh degree (B, since the tune is notated as in C major) appears only as an acciaccatura ("grace note") at the climax in the wonderfully simple phrase which provides one of the high points of this recording.

Birk, by the way, is Scots for birch.

Brown Polka. "As played by W.S. Mount, August, 1863." Here John Brown's body is a-dancing in the streets, signaling Mount's conversion to the Union cause after the outbreak of the Civil War. He had previously belonged to a very conservative faction of the Democratic party and called the Abolitionists "Lincoln-poops." The tune was written as a camp-meeting hymn, I Am Bound to Be a Soldier in the Army of the Lord, by Thomas Brigham Bishop of Portland, Maine, who substituted the verses about John Brown after the raider of Harper's Ferry was executed in 1859.

In the Cars on the Long Island Railroad, "by William S. Mount, Stony Brook, December 4th and 5th, 1850." As is pointed out above, this fiery virtuoso study is the only known piece of music Mount claimed to have composed, although in a letter written three years earlier Mount mentions having written a piece of music called

In the Cars, on the Long Island Rail Road
by Wm. S. Mount

Stony Brook
Dec 4th & 5th 1850

Going Through the Tunnell on the Long Island rail road.

The railroad piece was a special genre of fiddler's music in those days. The influence of the railroad on American folk music of every kind was immense and has never been properly studied.

Colonel Thornton's Strathspey. The strathspey is a slow dance said to have originated in the strath (valley) of the River Spey in Scotland. Trills and turns are characteristic of it; likewise the rhythmic pattern known as the "Scotch snap" -- a short note on the beat followed by a longer one occupying most of the beat (did-it, did-it, did-it).

Rosa Waltz. In B flat major, 3/4 time.

Cotillion in the Key of C, No. 2. Today the word cotillion merely means a fancy ball, but in Mount's time it meant a long, highly formalized dance in which all the participants of the evening were involved; and the cotillion was the final event of the party. It was accompanied by a series or "sett" of short pieces in duple rhythms (2/4 or 6/8). Several such "setts," often running to five or six numbers, are to be found among Mount's musical manuscripts. This one was composed by Nelson Mathewson. The pieces in it are numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6; why there is no No. 5 is unexplained. No. 4 from this sett appears on the other side of our record.

I'll Meet Thee, Maid, in the Moonlit Bower. The manuscript is in the handwriting of Micah Hawkins, who may have composed this sentimental tune.

Old Sussannah (sic!) Don't You Cry for Me. Mount's manuscript is inscribed "From Mr. Titus in the Spring of 1848." If this is correct, Stephen Foster's own manuscript of the song could scarcely have been dry at the time, since he composed it in that year.

Motion of the Boat. That boat must have moved very evenly, since the entire piece is in 16th notes except for the final, punctuating G of each strain.

Gentle Annie. "Written and composed by S.C. Foster" in 1856.

Waltz, the Cachuca. Included in a letter from W.S. Mount to his brother, Robert Nelson, August 29, 1841. Mount adds "Mathewson was so well pleased with the style in which I played the above Waltz that he wrote it from hearing me play it. I had seen Fanny Essler Dance the Cachuca several times and I believe I caught the spirit of it. I am pleased to say that Mathewson always plays it as written above." These remarks could imply that Mount improvised the tune de novo, but they could also mean that he was remembering, or trying to remember, the music used by "Fanny Essler" (that would be the great ballerina, Fanny Elssler, who was very well known in New York).

Side 2

Pittsburgh Hornpipe. Higgins P. 13.

The Braes of Tullymet, a Strathspey. With more trills and grace-notes than any other in the collection, if not as many Scotch snaps as some. Written as in G minor but with very gingerly treatment of the E flat that should be the sixth degree of the scale. A brae is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "a steep bank bounding a river valley."

Fashionable Schottische. From Winner, Page 18. A schottische (pronounced shot-teesh) has as much to do with Scotland as the Welsh rabbit has to do with Wales. It was originally called the German polka, and nobody seems to know how it came to bear its present name, with its German spelling.

Fancy Dance. "From a new Collection published by C.G. Christman, 404 Pearl St."

Miss Eleanora Robertson's Favorite. By Nath. Gow." Nathaniel Gow (1763-1831) was one of a large and famous family of musicians in Edinburgh. The tune here, marked "Slow," is full of trills and graces. It is notated in C minor, 6/8 time.

Possum Hunt. From a letter of Robert Nelson Mount to William Sidney, January 17, 1841. "While in Hillsboro (Georgia) I heard a short Reel played which I was so well pleased with that I took the notes of it." It is notated with the signature of G major, but it is actually in D, pentatonic, with its fourth and seventh degrees omitted. This is the most widely practiced of American folk modes.

Middletown Hornpipe. Higgins, Page 5.

Shawn Tavish Willichan. Apparently a proper name. Notated as in A minor, but with a consistently flatted second degree, which gives the tune a strange, modal feeling.

Jordan Jig. Attributed by Mount to one D. H. Morgan.

Cotillion in the Key of C, No. 4. By Nelson Mathewson. See the discussion of No. 1 of this cotillion above.

The Braes of Athol. From a letter of William Sidney to Robert Nelson Mount, July 6, 1839. "I will send you an exquisite tune as played by Mathewson, The Braes of Athol. You have heard him play it often. It requires to be played with a scotch (?) bow; bow every note. The last strain, or part, is good practice."

Bloomington Waltz. Higgins, Page 10.

Lord St. Vincent's Hornpipe. The manuscript is in a very different hand from Mount's. It is inscribed "From Mr. L. Robinson's Collection," and contains, in addition, the "First Sett" of cotillions No. 1 of which concludes this record.

The Highland Watch, from the 42^d Reg^t, or Royal Highlanders, Strathspey. One of the longest and most mournful of the strathspeys in Mount's collection, full of the usual trills and slides. It is notated in E minor, with very little attention to its sixth degree, C. The manuscript is dated September 9, 1843 and bears the notation "From Niel Gow & Sons Collection of Music." For Gow, see the notes above on Miss Eleanora Robertson's Favorite.

Uncle Ben's Favorite. As played by W.S.M. Jan. 11th, 1859." Uncle Ben was obviously delighted with the Scotch snaps in this tune, which are more obvious here than elsewhere. The melody is notated in D major, with its obligatory sharps on F and C, but nary a C sharp is heard. That seventh degree of the scale is totally omitted.

Nancy Gill. Mount's manuscript for this contains three different versions of the tune on one page. Mr. Ross plays the second of them. Underneath this Mount wrote "Nancy Gill has hard work to get up hill." The third version is dated May 10th, 1838.

First Sett, No. 1. See above, Lord St. Vincent's Hornpipe.

We may add here that some of the tunes on this record appear in facsimile of the manuscript in my William Sidney Mount, A Documentary Biography. They are as follows: The Braes of Athol, p. 57. Possum Hunt, p. 61. A Sett of Cotillions in the Key of C, p. 63. Waltz, The Cachuca, p. 64. In the Cars on the Long Island Railroad, p. 85.

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