Shaw Before His First Play

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Bernard Shaw wrote in the *Star* as the celebrated “Corno di Bassetto” that “My specialties are political hypocrisy and autobiographical musical criticism” (29 November 1889). Shaw’s first paid columns, at a callow twenty, when he was new in London, were unsigned, ghosted music reviews for the short-lived *Hornet*, arranged for by his mother’s musical sponsor, John Vandeleur Lee, who turned over his small fees to Shaw. Journalism in Victorian London was largely unsigned or published under transparent pseudonyms. News dispatches were often attributed to “Our Special Correspondent.” Desultory criticism of music, books, plays and pictures eventually led to Shaw’s regular columns about the art galleries, which became tedious for him, however much wit he put into them.

When T. P. O’Connor of the socialist-leaning afternoon daily the *Star* offered musical assignments that the paper’s regular music critic, Ernest Belfort Bax,1 writing as “Musigena,” could not cover, Shaw substituted anonymously, beginning in May 1888. On Bax’s resignation in February 1889 (although he would continue to review occasionally), Shaw happily reported to the offices of the *Star* in narrow Stonecutter Street, below Holborn between Shoe Lane and Farringdon Street, took over the music columns at two guineas a week, and reduced his coverage of the galleries. On 15 February 1889, “Corno di Bassetto” signed his first review.

Musical criticism, Shaw claimed in “How to Become a Musical Critic,” was an enterprise “in which lunacy is privileged. I was given a column to myself precisely as I might have been given a padded cell in an asylum.” Merry barbs made his prejudices immediately known. “Who am I that I should be just?” he declared—and he exploited his pretended license of an outsider. A corno di bassetto was, in Italian, a bass horn, but readers unversed in the language immediately assumed that the *Star* had acquired a sophisticated and clever Continental critic who made his European sympathies public in his first “Musical Mem’s” column. (The few who recognized Shaw’s style would have noted such
spelling mannerisms as the omitting of apostrophes.) Unashamedly opinionated, Bassetto announced: “I am a member of the Wagner Society, and am therefore ready to roll its log at all times.” Unwilling to offer politely tepid reviews under his pseudonym, he declared that a critic is “the policeman of the opera. Unfortunately, sheep make bad policemen.” Given his self-proclaimed “captious” nature, he added,

My colleague Musigena … declares that he goes in bodily fear of being mistaken for me. For my own part I am against anonymous criticism, and therefore sign my name and title in full without hesitation. The di Bassetto family were known to Mozart, and were of service to him in the production of several of his works. The title was created in 1770. We are a branch of the Reed family.… All complimentary tickets, invitations, and bribes meant especially for me should be addressed to the care of The Star.

Musically knowledgeable—Shaw often brought scores with him to performances. He knew that the basset horn, actually a bass clarinet, was a reed instrument with a bend toward the horn-like mouthpiece. It dated from the late 1760s in Bavaria, and that Mozart had composed for it. His operas La Clemenza di Tito and Die Entführung aus dem Serail featured the basset horn, and his concerto for clarinet was originally written for it. Mozart’s elegant Serenade No. 10, Gran Partita, employs two basset horns. But the witty reality would escape most readers.

Six days later “Bassetto” would write that he had been summoned to a conference with the editor, who took on an exotic personality in deliberate dissonance with his new critic.

“The fact is, my dear Corno,” he said, throwing himself back in his chair and arranging his moustache with the diamond that sparkles at the end of his pen-handle, “I don’t believe that music in London is confined to St James’s Hall, Covent Garden, and the Albert Hall. People must sing and play elsewhere. Whenever I go down to speak at the big Town Halls at Shoreditch, Hackney, Stratford, Holborn, Kensington, Battersea, and deuce knows where, I always see bills at the door announcing oratorios, organ recitals, concerts by local Philharmonic and Orpheus societies, and all sorts of musical games. Why not criticize these instead of saying the same things over and over again?”

Bassetto pointed out in his defense that his experience as a music critic in the West End left him “entirely unacquainted with these outlandish localities” to the east and south and their “barbarous minstrelsy.” He regarded, he explained with geographical bizarrerie, authentically musical London “was bounded on the extreme northeast by Stonecutter Street, on the extreme southwest by Kensington Gore, on the south by the Thames, and on the north by the Strand and Regent-street.” His unidentified editor assured Bassetto “that the places he named actually
existed; but that, as I was evidently hurt by the suggestion that I should actually condescend to visit them, he would hand the ticket ... for a Purcell-Handel performance at Bow, to Musigena.”

Bow, a district just below Victoria Park in Hackney, was not very far to the east of Liverpool Street Station at Broad Street, but Bassetto weighed his reviewing ambitions against his alleged fear of the suburban unknown.

“What!” I exclaimed, “Purcell! The greatest of English composers, left to Musigena! To a man whose abnormal gifts in every other direction have blinded him to his utter ignorance of music!”

“Well, the fact is,” responded the editor, “[that] Musigena told me only a half hour ago that he was at a loss to imagine how a writer so profound and accomplished as di Bassetto could be in music a mere superficial amateur.”

I waited to hear no more. Snatching the tickets from the editor’s desk, I hastily ran home to get my revolver as a precaution during my hazardous voyage to the East End. Then I dashed away to Broad-street, and asked the booking clerk whether he knew of a place called Bow. He was evidently a man of extraordinary nerve, for he handed me a ticket without any sign of surprise, as if a voyage to Bow were the most commonplace event possible. A little later the train was rushing through the strangest places: Shoreditch, of which I had read in historical novels; Old Ford, which I had supposed to be a character in one of Shakespear’s plays; Homerton, which is somehow associated in my mind with pigeons; and Haggerston, a name perfectly new to me. When I got into the concert room I was perfectly dazzled by the appearance of the orchestra. Nearly all of the desks for the second violins were occupied by ladies: beautiful young ladies. Personal beauty is not the strong point of West End orchestras, and I thought the change an immense improvement until the performance began, when the fair fiddlers rambled from bar to bar with a certain sweet indecision that had a charm of its own, but was not exactly what Purcell and Handel meant.

Shaw would later confess that he was writing musical criticism for unmusical, even deaf, stockbrokers, and indeed he acquired a reading audience beyond the usual coterie. Yet “Bassetto” would review performances seriously while fashioning his colorful persona. Despite the cane-bottomed chair he occupied and inadequate space for his long legs, Dido and Aeneas came off adequately, although a sailors’ chorus meant to be “rousing” was subdued “to the decorum of a Sunday school hymn.” He vowed to return to the wilds of Bow “without my revolver.”

Examining his invitations as critic late that February he found one “addressed to me, not in my ancestral title of di Bassetto, but in the assumed name under which I conceal my identity in the vulgar business
of life” (1 March 1889). He was invited to a prizegiving, with musical accompaniment, at a high school for girls in Clapham—“a healthy southwestern suburb.” He recalled “one ineffaceable association” with the location. On a Sunday in June 1888 he had harangued a crowd at Clapham Common on “Socialism and Selfishness” and raised nineteen shillings and sixpence for the cause: “It is not my custom to confine my critical opinions to the columns of the Press. In my public place I am ever ready to address my fellow citizens orally until the police interfere.”

In a column on unusual musical instruments he claimed that “My uncle played the ophicleide for years, and then perished by his own hand,” resulting in a postcard response, in verse (16 March 1889), asking whether it was “gospel truth” that the ophicleide had something to do with “the death of poor old Nunky.”

With this ancestral tale of woe
You’ve set us all a-sighing,
Until we deeply crave to know
The manner of his dying.
Did he fall slain by field or lake,
By poison or stiletto,
Or did his nephew’s stories take
His breath away, Bassetto?

Bassetto considered that trifling “with family feeling.”

Later in March he made “a special excursion to a concert in a place called Bermondsey,” east of Elephant and Castle, below the Thames, where at the Town Hall he was “not received, as I should have been, by the Mayor and Corporation…. Further, in spite of my card of invitation, I was only admitted to a seat worthy of my dignity on payment of sixpence extra. But I never spare money in the service of the public. Bang went that coin without a murmur from me.” Bassetto’s alleged dignity and rank were often Shaw’s opportunity in the *Star* for fun. In July he would “apologize” in print to the Shah of Persia for his failure to appear at a Covent Garden performance described by the rival *Pall Mall Gazette* as “a scene of brilliancy, tempered by ladies.” The Shah, Bassetto averred, “will cut a rather foolish figure in Persia when he confesses—if he has the moral courage to admit it—that he saw the opera without Corno di Bassetto [present],” but the producer had “recklessly” chosen a date in conflict with a political debate at St. James’s Hall.

It was one of the “inevitable evils” of his profession, Bassetto averred (28 March 1890), “that I am asked to go to all manner of places; but
hitherto”—he would be reviewing an organ recital at St. Nicholas Cole Abbey in Queen Victoria Street—“I have drawn the line at going to church. Among the pious I am a scoffer: among the musical I am religious. What has a man who knows Die Zauberflöte, the Schiller Ode to Joy as set in the Ninth Symphony, and Parsifal to do with your collects and rubrics…?” Bassetto was willing to chance damnation by forgoing “penitential hours in church.”

Much in Bassetto’s “Mems” columns was serious indeed, however wry and pseudo-personal in tone. He made each foray into a musical venue an adventure, especially those requiring a tram or a train into the perilously unfamiliar suburbs. Performing idiosyncrasies also dismayed Bassetto. Among the “death watches of the concert room” he recalled a tenor “who used to mark time by shooting his ears up and down … with his ears pulsating 116 times per minute in a quick movement from one of Verdi’s operas.” It made Bassetto’s flesh creep. Yet he was “eclipsed by a rival who marked time with his eyes,” as if in a “fancy clock.” “I shall never forget the shrinking of my whole nature from his horrible oscular oscillations.”

Contemplating a singer’s fashionable trousers, “made according to the new mode in which the tailor measures you round the chest, in order to get the correct width for the knee,” he confessed to being an outsider in proper dress, for it was Bassetto’s practice to have a proper suit last six years and acquire “individuality” in the wearing. “The sleeves and legs cease to be mere tailor-made tubes; they take human shape with knees and elbows recognizably mine. When my friends catch sight of one of my suits hanging on a nail, they … rush forward, exclaiming, ‘Good Heavens! He has done it at last.’” He “could not challenge Mr [Augusus] Harris’s right to place his theatre on the footing of a West End drawing room as long as the West End people pay up the subvention which in France comes from the nation,” but he took pleasure, Bassetto wrote on 11 April 1890, that his formal evening suit for the occasion “is by far the seediest article of clothing I possess.”

Even Bassetto’s invented self-description emphasized seediness. His concert clothes were indeed weathered from overuse. Although he was tall, slender, pale and red-bearded, he claimed in fun that discovery of his allegedly misconstrued identity in the audience led to such remarks (7 February 1890) as “Do you see that short very stout man, with long black hair down his back, and spectacles, next [to] the girl in blue—putting a pencil in his mouth—there! He’s just pulled out an orange handkerchief with black stripes? That’s Corno di Bassetto.” On 14 June
1889 he confided: “My name reveals the fact that I am Italian; but as a critic I only know two nationalities among artists—the Good and the Bad.” Yet he slipped once into reality, recalling (27 December 1889): “When I was a boy, I learnt to appreciate the sight and sound of the sea in a beautiful bay on the Irish coast.” Outing himself as an Irishman was an impulsive error. Bassetto would not do it again.

At the height of the concert season (24 May 1889) he had deplored having “to drag in the subject of music rather often in this column. I know that it is my King Charles’s head; and I can assure my readers that I do what I can to avoid it.” In spite of his “diligence” in not going to many concerts on the schedule, he could not evade all of them. A music critic who is always writing about music, he realized, “is quite as odious as an ordinary man who is always talking about himself.” On one occasion (31 January 1890) he published a letter chastising him for neglecting music:

Dear Signor di Bassetto,

May I respectfully and deferentially invite your attention to the fact that it is about six weeks since you had anything about music in your column, and that the Popular Concerts have been running for the last fortnight….

“These people,” Shaw observed with Bassettian hauteur, “seem to think that I have nothing else to do than to go to concerts for them…. It is evident that if I am to maintain my independence as a critic, this spirit of insubordination … must be checked…. [However] the moment I got that letter I went straight off to a Monday Pop.” The review followed.

Bassetto also received mail, he noted (9 May 1890), “from artists whom I have criticized, explaining away their misdeeds, or thanking me for my valuable suggestions, or arguing the point with me, or threatening me with personal violence.” Some letters seemed intended “to nobble me with a little flattery; and these are the wise ones; for I need not say that I delight in flattery. Even when there is no mistaking it for sincere admiration, I am pleased to find that anybody attaches sufficient importance to my opinion to spend a postage stamp on an attempt to humbug me…. Flatter by all means; and remember that you cannot lay it on too thick.”

His style charmed readers, but embedded in it was serious missionary work. Eager to broaden audience base, Bassetto stepped aside from a review to rail about the class restrictions that made it impossible for overworked, underfed, undereducated young people to enjoy music—
“a pretty receipt for making an appreciator of Beethoven.” As a result “the middleclass musical critic is the most ridiculous of human institutions.” If he were a dictator, Bassetto claimed, he would shorten working hours, tax the income of the holders of the most expensive seats at twenty shillings in the pound (100%) and subsidize a National Opera out of the proceeds; use convict labor for the chorus and minor roles, and for the scene shifting. Bassetto would also have soldiers in the audience “turn their rifles to account by occasionally picking off the people who disturb the performance by talking loudly in their boxes.” As for operatic staples like Il Barbiere, La Sonnambula, and Lucia, “do not quail, reader, I am not going to inflict on you a single word of criticism concerning these antiquities.”

To Bassetto, among the antiquities was the foisting of the annual Christmas pantomime upon the public, which received “about a farthingsworth of enjoyment.” On 17 January 1889 he compared the stale if lavish performances to “a procession of beetles”: “When I was a small boy there was in the house a book on entomology, with colored plates. The beetles depicted in them were so gorgeous and fantastic that it was delightful to turn over ten plates or so. After that they palled,… for the mind thirsted for a new idea.” He hoped that some day, dramatic critics “will grow tired of writing goodnatured lies” about decayed harlequins and columbines. At one theater he observed “a ballet of young ladies who are supposed to represent rabbits. You can pick out at a glance the girls who have ever seen a rabbit and who have the faculty of suggesting the peculiar movement of the creature’s head and paws.” Would Bassetto have enjoyed the imaginatively choreographed Cats, inspired, very likely, by such stage traditions?

In one of his columns, Bassetto introduced an interview with a star performer by opening with a playlet, and as usual eschewing conventional punctuation.

“Bassetto,” said the editor of The Star “you say that Madame Backer-Gröndahl is a great pianoforte player?”

“Commander of the Faithful” I replied, “one of the greatest in Europe.”

“Then what about an interview,” cried my chief.

“Commander of the Faithful,” I said “this lady is so truly fine and noble an artist that I am afraid and ashamed to intrude on her in the ribald character of a journalist.”

“Your modesty is well known to me; and your feelings do you credit, O Bassetto” he answered, “but if you don’t go I will send someone else.” So I could not choose but go; and on Tuesday evening my hansom jolted slowly along
the Marylebone Road, bound for Madame [Agathe] Backer-Gröndahl’s apart-
ments in Blandford Square.

There he found as intermediary “the invaluable, the ubiquitous
[Norwegian writer] H. L. Braekstad, who explains my errand to our
hostess, and at intervals corrects my propensity to neglect business and
talk eloquently about myself.”

Generously giving her some time to talk, Bassetto discovers that she
even composes as well as practices on evenings when the formal day’s
work is done. “What work?” he asks.

“Oh, all the things one has to do,” she replies, “the housekeeping, the children,
the playing, the three lessons I give every day to pupils.” I rise up in wrath to
protest … against the [domestic] ministrations that were meant for [ordinary]
mankind; but she adds, with a certain diffidence as to her power of expressing
so delicate a point in English, that it is as wife and mother that she gets her
experience which makes her an artist. I collapse. Bassetto is silenced. He can
only bow to the eternal truth, and think how different his column would be if
all artists were like this one.

As it grows dark in the sitting room in Blandford Square, I prepare to withdraw;
and we have a few parting words about her recital on Saturday afternoon at
Prince’s Hall.

It was not often that Bassetto admitted to being silenced; but he
would not be short of words in print. He would write that in keyboard
performance Mme. Backer-Gröndahl “bore out all that I have said in
her praise.”

With the close of the London season he hastened off for Bayreuth
and a surfeit of Wagner, writing about seasickness on the Channel
crossing and further motion sickness in a Dutch railway carriage bowling
toward Bavaria. For the sake of great music, Bassetto, however deli-
cate, would persevere. He would even endure inferior performances
and personal discomfort in the interest of cultural balance for his audi-
ence, perched “on hard chairs listening to obsolescent oratorios from
three to half-past ten, with a few intervals of train and tramcar” (18
November 1889) at the cavernous Crystal Palace in Sydenham, across
the Thames, and at the People’s Palace in the Mile End Road. He
would entrain to Morton’s Theatre in Greenwich to attend the 789th
performance in the “provinces” of the long-running, if mediocre, musi-
cal Dorothy, by B. C. Stephenson and Alfred Cellier. In it a “cherubi-
cally adipose” tenor who was “evidently counting the days until death
should release him from the part” (and was Bassetto’s brother-in-law)
sang “pleasantly,” and the eponymous heroine was “a beauteous young
lady” who, however unnamed, was Lucy Carr Shaw. Bassetto did not linger for the third act. William Archer, his companion, had already fallen asleep. “Even now,” he wrote, “I cannot think with composure of the fact that they are playing Dorothy tonight again—will play it tomorrow—next year—next decade—next century…. Doubtless they do not die on the stage: they first become mad and are removed to an asylum, where they incessantly sing.”

To further record public taste (21 February 1890) Bassetto also went courageously to the Alhambra, a popular music hall on Leicester Square, to witness what he would describe as “an entertainment of high artistic rank” by a dancer, Vittorio de Vincenti, who performed amazing leaps and rotated “like an animated orrery.” Bassetto’s review of Eugenio Casati’s now-forgotten ballet divertissement, Asmodeus, was also more visceral than musical:

The other evening, feeling rather in want of a headache, I bethought me that I had not been to a music-hall for a long time. One of the horrors of a critic’s life is his almost nightly suffering from lack of ventilation. Now when to the ordinary products of respiration are added the smoke of hundreds of cigarettes and of the hundreds of holes in which the discarded ends of them are burning in the rather stale carpets, the effect on a professionally sensitive person who does not smoke is indescribably noxious. The privilege of smoking and burning the carpets is supposed to make the music-hall more comfortable than the theatre….

When I arrived at my door after these dissipations I found Fitzroy Square, in which I live, deserted. It was a clear, dry cold night; and the carriage way round the circular railing presented such a magnificent hippodrome that I could not resist trying to go just one round in Vincenti’s fashion. It proved frightfully difficult. After my fourteenth fall I was picked up by a policeman. “What are you doing here?” he said, keeping fast hold of me. “I ‘bin watching you for the last five minutes.”

I explained, eloquently and enthusiastically. He hesitated a moment, then said “Would you mind holding my helmet while I have a try? It don’t look so hard.” Next moment his nose was buried in the macadam and his right knee was out through his torn garment. He got up bruised and bleeding, but resolute. “I never was beaten yet” he said “and I wont be beaten now. It was my coat that tripped me.” We both hung our coats on the railings, and went at it again. If each round of the square had been a round in a prize fight, we should have been less damaged and disfigured; but we persevered, and by four o’clock the policeman had just succeeded in getting round twice without a rest or a fall, when an inspector arrived and asked him bitterly whether that was his notion of fixed point duty. “I allow it isnt fixed point” said the constable, emboldened by his new accomplishment; “but I’ll lay a half sovereign you cant do it.”

The inspector could not resist the temptation to try (I was whirling round before his eyes in the most fascinating manner); and he made rapid progress after
half an hour or so. We were subsequently joined by an early postman and a
milkman, who unfortunately broke his leg and had to be carried to hospital by
the other three. By that time I was quite exhausted and could barely crawl into
bed. It was perhaps a foolish scene; but nobody who has witnessed Vincenti’s
performance will feel surprised at it.

Government licensing of performance venues, often used to censor
unwelcome productions, stoked Bassetto’s outrage. On one occasion,
writing in the Star on 3 March 1890, he found that he could not pay for
admission “as a casual amateur” to the Wind Instrument Society’s con-
cert at the Royal Academy of Music. (One had to be a member of the
society producing the event to evade unlawful ticket sales.) He had not
received a critic’s pass, perhaps, he guessed, because of his reputation
as “Bassetto the Incorruptible.” Since a purchase chanced breaking the
law, “I insisted on the secretary accompanying me to the residence of
a distinguished Q.C. in the neighborhood.” The lawyer confirmed that
paying five shillings at the door would be illegal; however if Bassetto of-
fered the secretary of the society five shillings “in remembrance of his
last birthday, and he gave me a free admission in celebration of my sil-
ver wedding, that would be legal.” There were other extralegal alterna-
tives, but “without breach of faith,” Bassetto declined to acknowledge
how he got in. Reviewing a Beethoven septet he found the bassoons
“rough and ready” and the horns “rough and not always ready.”

Despite his unruly reputation, he was unwilling (7 March 1890) to
claim any “destructive force” for his columns. “Though the east wind
seems to kill the consumptive patient, he dies, not of the wind, but of
phthisis. On the strong-lung man it blows in vain.” Yet on one occasion
(23 April 1890) he skirted close to libel—or concluded that the work
under review was a self-inflicted wound. There appeared to Bassetto to
be two possible reasons for Sir Frederic Cowen to set Joseph Bennett’s
libretto Thorgrim to music: “1. Because its poesy and dramatic force
inspired him. 2. Because he was afraid to offend the critic of the Daily
Telegraph by refusing.” Bassetto helped the reader “to an unprejudiced
choice of these alternatives” by quoting from its bathetic lines. The
composer conducted: “I was sorry for him; I would as soon have sat in
the pillory, in spite of the applause. I did not wait for the fourth act.”

Bassetto claimed always to be ready to make “one of those appalling
sacrifices of my own comfort” in the interest of music, attending (14
March 1890) a performance of the Bohee Minstrels at the Interna-
tional Hall above the Café Monaco at Piccadilly Circus. He found the
verses “inoffensive” and the tunes “innocuous,” the tambourines spir-
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 coveted and the choruses “deeply affecting” when pianissimo: “The musical conventions of the minstrel style are curious; but I shall reserve a full description of them for my treatise on modern music, which I hope to get through the Press shortly before 1950.” When his other self died in 1950, the threatened treatise remained unwritten.

Bassetto also published a prediction that anticipated a new century. He heard mechanically produced music and felt (6 September 1889) that it would impact sweepingly upon the future of performance:

I happened to dine with a man who, after dinner, asked me whether I like any music. I secretly mistrusted his intentions (the most unlikely sort of men will sometimes pull out a cornet or concertina…) But I politely said Yes, as he expected me to. “Will you have Dinorah, or national airs?” said he. I hastily declared for [Meyerbeer’s] Dinorah. Then he took what looked like a thick roll of wall paper into the next room. Presently Dinorah started, and he came back with an air of modest elation. The machine really performed very handsomely. It phrased with almost affected elegance, and made pauses and ritardandos and accelerandos in the most natural manner…. Since then I have had much more respect for music machines….

I wonder why our theatre managers do not get their music done by machinery. Usually the high class theatre orchestra is like a threadbare garment, full of holes, parts left out, harmonies incomplete, the thread of melody thin and ineffectual, the whole impression paltry and timid…. If I were an actor-manager, I would announce an “invisible orchestra” … and invest in an orchestrion6. I would start the accompanying slow music myself by a button placed under my foot on the stage…. Of course, if the suggestion were generally adopted some thousands of instrumentalists would have to go down to the docks for a living; but then that is our established way of making progress: always over somebody’s body.

Apparently Bassetto had been introduced to the potential of the cylinder phonograph. By the time his other self was established as the preeminent writer for the English stage, recorded music had indeed reduced employment across the spectrum of performance. Yet it also created new and different opportunities for the appreciation of music, as well as new audiences unable earlier to afford tickets to encounter the real thing.

Having confided his vegetarianism in a review, Bassetto received a pamphlet from a reader “proving vegetarianism to be an enfeebling and ultimately fatal practice.” (It would prove problematic for the critic’s alter ego sixty years later as a physician recommended liver extract for Shaw’s anemia.) Meanwhile, he wrote (5 April 1890), “I confute it by the simple statement that I—Corno di Bassetto—have been a vegetar-
ian these ten years.... A mind of the calibre of mine cannot derive its nutriment from cows.”

Over the weeks of critical columns with an invented personal flair, a distinct Bassetto personality had emerged. He disapproved of exploiting child performers, encores interrupting stage “illusion,” bowing to audiences during a performance (“Patti will get up and bow to you in the very agony of stage death”), “mock pregnant pauses,” “pestiferous” applause (giving a “false importance to claptrap”), pretentious conducting attire (as if the maestro were “marrying or burying somebody”), and of “ladies with Eiffel [Tower] hats” which obstructed the view of operagoers behind them. After alerting readers of his art columns in the *World* that he was leaving regular reviewing of pictures to have more time for musical criticism, Bassetto had confided in the 23 October 1889 *Star*: “I cannot guarantee my very favorable impression of the Hanover Gallery, as I only saw it by gaslight. This was the fault of Sarasate, who played the Ancient Mariner with me. He fixed me with his violin on my way to Bond Street, and though, like the wedding-guest, I tried my best, I could not choose but to hear.” Shaw’s diary for 19 October 1889 had noted: “*Private View. Hanover Gallery. Sarasate concert at St James’s Hall, 15[00].*” Multi-tasking had its limits, and Bassetto failed to review that performance, but Shaw would often review Pablo de Sarasate with wry admiration: “He never interprets anything: he plays it beautifully, and that is all.”

Another admirer of the nimble Sarasate was Sherlock Holmes. Arthur Conan Doyle’s Dr. John Watson writes about the notorious “Red-Headed League” that Holmes, mulling over the still-unsolved affair in October 1890 as a “three-pipe problem,” suddenly sprang out of his chair and put his pipe down on the mantelpiece. “Sarasate plays at the St. James’s Hall this afternoon,” Holmes remembered. “What do you think, Watson? Could your patients spare you for a few hours?” Since the concert was on a Saturday afternoon, the physician, who had few patients anyway, especially on a weekend, was, as usual, amenable.

“Then put on your hat and come. I am going through the City first, and we can have some lunch on the way. I observe that there 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.” Concert programs were indeed lengthy in the later nineteenth century, and the Baker Street detective had carefully researched the matinée. In addition to Beethoven’s *King Stephen Overture* and Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst’s *Fantasia on Airs from Rossini’s Otello* (opera fantasias were
a Sarasate specialty), there were violin concertos by Max Bruch and Émile Bernard, a Frenchman of twenty-two who had shrewdly dedicated his forgettable work to Sarasate. A violin aficionado who would write a privately printed monograph on the Belgian Roland de Lassus, Sherlock Holmes often relaxed by playing Bach on a Stradivarius he had purchased as a youth, for a bargain fifty-five shillings, years before, at a pawnshop in the Tottenham Court Road.

The pair traveled by Underground on the Metropolitan and District Line to Aldersgate, “and a short walk took us to Saxe-Coburg Square, the scene of the singular story” [which became “The Red-Headed League”]. Once Holmes’s scrutiny of the shops and other business premises nearby was concluded, he said: “And now, Doctor, we’ve done our work, so it’s time we had some play. A sandwich and a cup of coffee, and then off to violin-land, where all is sweetness and delicacy and harmony, and there are no red-headed clients to vex us with their conundrums.” And so they went on to St. James’s Hall in Piccadilly, where Holmes “sat in the stalls, wrapped in the most perfect happiness, gently waving his long, thin fingers in time to the music.”

Later that evening the crime would be solved, and one of the seized thieves would be found to have red hair. For the moment the mystery lay in abeyance. As Holmes listened to Señor Sarasate, entranced, the most famous consulting detective in fiction had probably never noticed, on a nearby aisle, another red-headed figure, complete to ruddy beard, paying close attention to the performance. It was Corno di Bassetto, who would write (The World, 29 October 1890): “Sarasate … left all criticism behind him at his first concert on Saturday [last] week. He also left Mr. Cusins [the conductor] behind by half a bar or so all through the two concertos, the unpremeditated effects of syncopation resulting therefrom being more curious than delectable.” Thanks to Pablo de Sarasate, nearly a legend himself, the paths of two of the iconic figures in the Victorian literary imagination had coincided.

In the Star on 2 May 1890 had been a hint of Bassetto’s abruptly abbreviated future. Although he intended to leave at the interval to review another program, “My Herculean frame suddenly yielded,” he wrote, “to the strain which the present stress of pictures, politics, and music put on a critic who is engaged in all three departments simultaneously. I settled down lazily in my stall [in the Prince of Wales’s Theatre] and never budged until the curtain fell.” The next week’s issue found Bassetto commenting not only on performances, but on his mail, and in
the issue of May 16 appeared a paragraph preceding Bassetto’s usual column, signed “T.P.”

We are losing, we are sorry to say, Corno di Bassetto. The larger salary of a weekly organ of the classes have proved too much for the virtue even of a Fabian, and he has abandoned us. We wish him well, and twice even the big salary that is coming to him from the bloated coffers of the organ of the aristocracy. Let us give his adieu to The Star readers, with whom he has been on terms of such pleasant intercourse, in his own words.

“After the malediction, the valediction,” Bassetto began:

“I have now to make a desolating, an incredible announcement. This is the last column from the hand of Corno di Bassetto which will appear in The Star. Friday will no longer be looked forward to in a hundred thousand households as the day of the Feast of Light.”

On one memorable Friday, he recalled, when the printing presses failed to keep up with demand, the editor attributed the shortfall to the report of the commission investigating the Charles Parnell–Kitty O’Shea adultery scandal rather than Bassetto’s column. “He even said that nobody ever read my articles.” Bassetto declared that “nobody ever read anything else in the paper.” But the actual reason for his departure, he conceded, was that “A man who, like myself, has to rise regularly at eleven o’clock every morning cannot sit up night after night writing opera notices piping hot from the performance. My habits, my health, and my other activities forbid it. Therefore I felt that my wisest course would be to transfer myself to a weekly paper… I ask some indulgence for my successor, handicapped as he will be for a time by the inevitable comparison with one whom he can hardly hope to equal, much less to surpass.”

What had happened, Shaw wrote later, was that Louis Engel, “the best hated musical critic in Europe, and Archer’s colleague on The World, [had] got into a[n extra-marital] scrape, and had to leave the country. Archer instantly assured Edmund Yates, the editor, that Corno di Bassetto was Engel’s only possible successor.” Yates followed up the suggestion as a “purely journalistic” decision. He had “no more special interest in music than he had in chemistry.” T. P. O’Connor likewise took it as an economic matter, declining to meet the competing offer. Shaw was unrepentant. When he moved to the World at £5/week, doubling his salary, Bassetto, but for occasional reappearances in his former paper, vanished, in the World, into “G.B.S.” “Bassetto’s stuff,” he wrote later, prefacing a truncated collection of his columns, “was great fun when it was fresh…. I knew all that was necessary about music, but
in criticism I was only a beginner.” He had yet to write, he claimed, “keenly analytical observations, and only distinguished what is pleasant or unpleasant, accurate or inaccurate in a performance,” and had yet “to get his valuations right.” A song was not worth singing well, he declared (14 April 1890), if it “is not worth singing at all.” He would not deny that “Bassetto was occasionally vulgar,” yet that was “a necessary trait of a complete author’s equipment; and the clown is sometimes the best part of the circus.” But he wrote (1 April 1890) to a complainer who “signed with an Italian name,” saying Bassetto’s business in his column was “not to be funny, but to be accurate.”

As a ha’penny newspaper, the Star did not address itself to members of the Royal Society of Literature or to the Musical Association but “to the bicycle clubs and [the products of] the polytechnics,” the kind of readership later represented by ’Enry Straker, the earnest mechanic and chauffeur employed by John Tanner in the decade-later Man and Superman: “I purposely vulgarized musical criticism, which was then refined and academic to the point of being unreadable and often nonsensical.” His competition then, he thought, often produced “pretentious twaddle and sometimes spiteful cliquishness … and you will wonder at my politeness.” His replacement on the Star, Robert Hichens, who would become better known for the Wildean satire The Green Carnation, recognized his relative insignificance to the incomparable Corno di Bassetto. He signed his musical columns as Piccolo.

Since the Star had no exclusive rights to the Bassetto pseudonym and Shaw had continued his musical columns as G.B.S., only occasionally did he revive his other self. When for the World or the Star or other papers he injected no personal color, he merely signed his effusions as “C. di B.” Reviewing a small volume of verse by the young Richard Le Gallienne (27 October 1892), he wondered in his pseudo-autobiographical mode “why I, of all Star reviewers, should have been asked to deal with this book—I, di Bassetto, most prosaic of critics.” He did not, he confided,

enthused readily over the smaller fancy wares of art: the builder, not the jeweller, is the man for my money; and your miniatures and fan paintings, your ballads and morceaux de salon make but a finicking appeal to the Bassettian spirit, nursed upon cathedrals, frescoes, and giant Wagnerian music-epics. Besides, it is against my vow to let any man off cheaply in the arts. I am no smirking verger to let all comers who look good for a tip into the choir and among the tombs of the mighty dead, there to pose and scratch their names until Time, Death, and Judgment come down out of Mr. [George Frederick] Watts’s pictures and inexorably eject them. Rather let me stand at the gate I guard….
In a *Morning Leader* review (27 November 1893), although signed only “C. di B.,” he went back to his imagined childhood, for the occasion far less aristocratic than in earlier boasts, when “every respectable house guarded its privacy from the pryings of the people over the way by fitting its parlor window with a perforated wire blind,” resulting in a “minute roseate ring pattern” on one’s nose from the prying onlooker indoors “all over the tip.”

You can see it on my nose, for instance; and it will go with me to my grave. It is the mark of the perforated window blind through which I used to peer at the barrel-organs when they ground out their tunes at the area railings. When I look back it seems to me that my whole childhood was passed with my nose riveted either upon an organ grinder or upon a ton of coals being emptied out of grimy bags through the cellar-plate…. The barrel-organ began its career as an adjunct to divine worship in churches. After about a century of this it took to the streets, and had to be excommunicated. Twenty years ago it was driven out … by the street piano…. When the hat comes round I simply refuse to give….

Bassetto continued to cover the Wagner festivals in Bayreuth, and, catholic in tastes, on 24 July 1895, even wrote about his adventures on a bicycle. Seemingly without purpose other than to sum up his career as Bassetto (and to fill a valedictory column) was his “What it Feels Like to Be Successful,” in the *Star* for 16 January 1897, when as G.B.S. he was the best-known theater critic in London, and an emerging playwright.

“Who says I am successful?” Bassetto asked, exaggerating the number of his weekly columns. “Everybody knows I am brilliant, paradoxical, eccentric, witty, and all the rest of it. But how do they know it? Simply because I have told London so every week at two or three thousand words’ length during the whole of the nine years of *The Star*’s existence…. Would you call the Ancient Mariner a successful man merely because people could not help listening to him, even when they heard the loud bassoon?”

Anticipating further accomplishment, Bassetto wrapped up his feuilleton with “If you think I have yet succeeded, I hope you underrate my destiny.” Yet his destiny in print as Bassetto would close with a minor and perhaps unexpected assignment of a Wagner review in the *Morning Leader* on 27 May 1899. Handicapped by surgery on an infected foot, and then a broken arm, his alter ego put away Corno di Bassetto for good.