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Rudimental Classics

'The Downfall of Paris'

By Robert J. Damm

Once a beginning student has learned to play the basic rudiments, the next step is to play them consecutively “with fluidity and musicality” (Shiner, p. 53). Students sometimes experience a *eureka* moment when they understand that rudimental snare drum solos (a musical end) are, in fact, composed entirely of drum rudiments (a musical means); they grasp the value of the rudiments and finally realize why the teacher emphasized their systematic practice. The rudimental “classics” may be included in the repertoire provided for students to develop this skill.

“The Downfall of Paris” was included (with melody) in *The Moeller Book*, where the author described it as “one of the most ancient and perhaps the most famous of beats. It has always been the pride of schooled drummers, not only to play it so it sounded correct but also to beat it in the prescribed way” (p. 89). The traditional way of playing “The Downfall of Paris” (i.e., the rhythmic skeleton of the 7-stroke rolls, the dotted-quarter-note rolls as 15-stroke rolls, the particular sticking of the drag-taps, etc.) is not indicated in the notation and would not be obvious to the contemporary drummer. It is up to the informed teacher to pass on this information while also providing the military history that makes this composition so significant.

The tune to “Ah, Ca Ira” was first composed as a light vaudeville piece by M. Becourt, a drummer at the Paris Opera. It soon became popular as a contra-dance tune under the title “Le Carillon National” (Kidson). The words “Ah, Ca Ira” (“it will all work out”) were added later, borrowed from Benjamin Franklin’s response, as American ambassador to France, to questions about the prospects of the American Revolution (Mason, p. 43).

Songs played an important role in France’s revolutionary movements beginning in 1789. Songs such as “La Marseillaise” and “Ah, Ca Ira” were sung at the most important events of the revolution including the construction of the Champs du Mars for the Fete de la Federation, the attack on the Tuilleries, the execution of Louis XIV, and the proclamation of the Republic. “Ah, Ca Ira” conveys a tone of optimism associated with the earliest days of the Revolution. As the Revolution moved from the dream of a peaceful transition to a violent

struggle, “Ah, Ca Ira” served as the anthem and continued to be sung throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (McKinley, 2–14).

There is considerable debate about the relationship between the melody of “Ah, Ca Ira” and “The Downfall of Paris.” The two titles have been used interchangeably through the tune’s history. According to Cifaldi, “although the first measure of ‘Ah, Ca Ira’ is the same as the first measure of ‘Downfall,’ they are different tunes” (Sweet, p. 92). Similarly, Hartsough and Logozzo report that “Ah, Ca Ira” and the root melody of another tune known as “Down Fall of Paris” became popular during the French Revolution around 1789 (p. 21). Kidson established a direct connection between “Ah, Ca Ira” and “The Downfall of Paris”:

“Ah, Ca Ira,” the earliest of the French revolutionary songs, was probably first heard on October 6, 1778 when the Parisians marched to Versailles. The tune quickly became popular in England and many copies can be found in sheet music and in collections of airs. The melody was employed in an opera entitled “The Picture of Paris” produced at Covent Garden in England in 1790. For many years afterwards, it was used for a pianoforte piece with many variations under the name “The Downfall of Paris” (Grove’s).

Whether one tune or two, it was the fate of “The Downfall of Paris” to fall into enemy hands. As a result of the expansion of French power and the increasing threat of an invasion led by Napoleon, Britain went to war against France in 1793 (Muir, p. 4). When opposing the French during the Peninsular War, British bands would play French melodies in derision (Farmer, p. 11). The playing of the enemy’s music during battle was a form of psychological warfare, aimed at demoralizing the enemy and breaking his spirit (Cahn, p.1). In 1793, at the Battle of Famars in Flanders, Colonel Wellbore Ellis of the the 14th (Bedfordshire) Regiment ordered the band to play “Ah, Ca Ira” so that the French might be beaten “to their own damned tune,” which they were (Winstock, 107). The regiment boasted that they “stole” the march from their French adversaries.

From that memorable battle, “Ah, Ca

Ira” became the official quickstep (march) of the 14th regiment (Farmer, p. 12). “By the...conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, ‘Ah, Ca Ira’ was adapted by the British and given the title ‘Downfall of Paris’” (Cahn, p.1). “The Downfall of Paris” was a favorite tune of the British troops because the tune “conjured the imagination of the army, since that city was its ultimate goal” (Farmer, p. 11).

The downfall of Paris was actually achieved in 1814 as British (allied) armies marched into the French capital (Farmer, p. 15). In 1815, Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo, and when the victorious allies again entered Paris, the Royal Regiment began to play “The Downfall of Paris,” but Wellington sharply put a stop to it.

Despite Wellington’s misgivings, every band in the Austrian, Prussian, and Russian armies played the tune called “The Downfall of Paris” as they paraded before the assembled kings. Winstock wrote that the tune serenading the European monarchs was, in fact, the same one known in France as “Ah, Ca Ira,” the song of the French Revolution. The British took the tune with them wherever they went. Thus, it became part of the American fife and drum corps heritage, especially in the New England states, where it is still played today (Winstock, 105).

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