

VARIATIONS IN THE SONG OF THE GOLDEN-CROWNED SPARROW

By FRANK N. BASSETT

WITH FOUR FIGURES

ABOUT THREE years ago my attention was called to the song of the Golden-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia coronata*) as recorded by Keeler (Bird Notes Afield, 1899, p. 117), and the remark passed at that time expressed some doubt as to the accuracy of this record. I thereupon determined to give particular attention to the song of this bird with the chance of hearing it as written in the work mentioned. I provided myself with a pitch pipe tuned to the international orchestral pitch (440A), and with the aid of this have set the songs in musical notation in the exact pitch as performed. During this time I discovered numerous variations to the song, but had about given up hopes of hearing it as written by Keeler when on April 4, 1920, to my great surprise I heard it, and moreover in exactly the same pitch as he has written it.

There seems to be one song which is typical of the species, but occasionally it is transposed into other keys, and less frequently there are variations in it. Following is the song with its variations in the order of their frequency.



Fig. 29

This is far the most frequently heard song, outnumbering all the variations together. It begins on F and with a gradual slur amounting to a *glissando* it descends one tone to E flat where there is a slight break and the E flat is struck again with a decided accent, passing a minor third lower to C without any special marks of expression. This last interval naturally pitches the song in C minor, and I have frequently heard it one half tone higher (C sharp minor), and one half tone lower (B minor). Occasionally it has been sung one tone higher (D minor), and rarely one tone lower (B flat minor), making in all five different keys in which I have heard this song.



Fig. 30

This is the most frequent variation. It is precisely the same as the first song except the first note descends only one half tone to E natural and thence

to C, making the last interval a major third and establishing the key of C major. Like the first, this has been heard in five different keys ranging from one tone lower to one tone higher.



Fig. 31

This is less frequently heard than the former. I did not determine the exact pitch of this song but it seems probable that on account of the great interval between the first and second notes it should be pitched as here written or perhaps a half tone or a tone lower, but no higher, for this would employ a higher note than I have ever heard the bird sing.

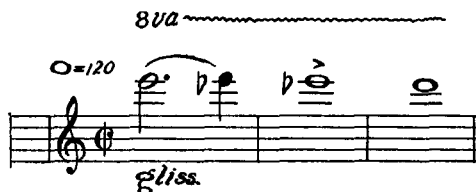


Fig. 32

This song I have heard only once. It is the one written by Keeler as mentioned previously.

The *tempo* is the same for all songs, about 120 whole notes to the minute, although this may vary somewhat. The quality of tone is that of harmonics on the violin.

There are other variations which cannot be set down in musical notation. At times the last note (C) of the typical song will be too high for C and not high enough for C sharp, producing the rather unpleasant effect of being out of tune. The same occasionally happens to the second measure of the song, and it applies to the variations as well.

The Golden-crowned Sparrow is not usually considered among our finest songsters and perhaps with some degree of justice, for it would seem like slandering the thrushes to place him among them. But on the other hand, the simplicity of this song should not go unappreciated any more than we forget Hayden or Mozart just because we have Wagner, Strauss, and Debussy. The greatest technician is not always the greatest artist, and this song, simple, yet sublime, is delivered by a true musician. The modesty and righteousness of the true interpretive artist underlie the spirit of this bird's performance, and the elaborate songs of his more showy contemporaries in nowise diminish his glory. He is at least a true artist if not a great virtuoso.

*Alameda, California, April 14, 1920.*