

PIANO-PLAYING EXTRAORDINARY.

By FRANK HOLMFIELD.

Photographs by Messrs. Foulsham and Banfield.

THERE is a pianist who can make his instrument speak, sing, and laugh like an angel. That's Paderewski. There is another player who can make a



THIS PART OF THE PERFORMANCE ORIGINATED IN THE COLLAPSE OF A PIANO-STOOL WHILE MR. ROSS WAS PLAYING CHAMINADE'S "ELEVATION."

piano behave like a being of less heavenly connections. That's Ross.

There is a difference between the methods of the two players. A big difference really. Paderewski sits comfortably on his well-padded stool while he plays. Ross does not require such pampering. Anywhere does for him to sit. On the floor; on his own head; on the door-mat—anywhere, so long as he is able to reach the keys with his fingers or any other portion of his person. Put Ross in a room where there is a piano, blindfold and handcuff him, and give him to the farthest wall. It doesn't matter. He will play the instrument. In some way or other he is sure to touch the keys. And whenever he touches, you will hear good music. Wrap him up as tightly as an Egyptian mummy. The next minute you will hear him playing a sonata with his nose, or with a stump of pencil gripped between his teeth. And he

can play as well with a couple of bricks or boxing gloves as most people can with their fingers.

Everybody knows everything of Paderewski. But who is Ross? Well, his baptismal appellation is George Ross Gilfallan, and he is one of the clever pair of professional performers known as Ross and Grayson, whose refined entertainment, "The Professor and his Pupil," has found much favour with the London and provincial public.

Mr. Ross—to use his professional name—began his musical career as a chorister at Windsor. As a pupil of Dr. Walford Davies,



PLAYING PIANO WITH HANDS AT BACK, FACING AUDIENCE.

he acquired great ability as a pianist and violinist. Later, as musical conductor, he made a name for himself in the royal borough, and afterwards in America. His

remarkable smartness at the pianoforte, however, having attracted the attention of enterprising managers, he decided to "go on the stage," and engagements duly flowed in.

And now, with the aid of his clever and charming American wife, who is the "Grayson" of the duo, he has become one of the most popular of those public entertainers who are content to be funny without being vulgar.

Mr. Ross's piano-playing extraordinary, whilst not forming the whole of the entertainment in which he and his wife appear nightly, is decidedly a very remarkable item in a clever performance.

The introduction of this trick playing occurred through an amusing incident which happened during a performance of "The Professor and his Pupil," about a year ago. Mr. Ross was sitting at the piano playing Chaminade's "Elevation"—a rather appropriate air, considering the sequel—when the stool collapsed under him, and the player found himself sitting in a rather undignified



DANCING WHILST PLAYING BACKWARDS.

position on the floor! The audience naturally laughed. A bright inspiration came to Mr. Ross. Sticking his heels upwards into the air, he continued to play from his "seat" on the floor the same air, "Elevation," and

succeeded in finishing it as perfectly as though he sat on the piano-stool. It was a great hit. The audience applauded lustily, laughing heartily as well. No doubt they thought the little bit of unexpected comedy



PLAYING THE TREBLE OF A SOLO WITH THE NOSE.

was "part of the show." And the player found consolation for his bruises in the hearty congratulation of his manager, who came up to him and declared the "new business" excellent, and hoped that next evening Mr. Ross would repeat his acrobatic performance, and "a little bit more" into the bargain. However, as the collapsing stool would have proved a rather painful affair every evening, so far as the performer was concerned, the "new business" was modified to reduce the risk of concussion of the brain. But the performance of Chaminade's "Elevation" from a seat on the floor was continued, and the art of acrobatic pianoforte-playing duly evolved into its present remarkable stage.

In the short space available for a magazine article it would be impossible to describe in detail all the extraordinary feats performed by Mr. Ross. Only the more striking items can be dealt with here.

It is hardly necessary to say that playing whilst sitting in a reversed position, with the hands behind the back, is quite a simple



ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT METHODS OF PLAYING PIANO: EVERYTHING IS ALTOGETHER REVERSED ON INSTRUMENT.



PLAYING STANDING ON HEAD.

matter to such an expert as Mr. Ross. But it is not so easy a matter as it looks to the audience. Any player who tries to accomplish the feat will be able to realise some of the difficulty of executing a piece of music under such handicapping circumstances. To be able to rattle off an operatic selection, or a difficult piece requiring elaborate fingering,

whilst sitting with the back towards the piano, is a task that most accomplished musicians would shy at. Mr. Ross succeeds, however, in playing thus, and with every appearance of ease and perfect execution.

Not only does Mr. Ross play in this way. He dances at the same time to his own accompaniment, and finishes up by shutting



LYING DOWN FROM TOP OF INSTRUMENT WITH FACE AND BODY TURNED OUTWARDS.



PLAYING SITTING ON THE FLOOR.

down the cover of the piano, executing a handspring, turning a somersault, and landing on his feet!

He is so thoroughly musical that he actually enlists his nasal organ in the service of the public's amusement, which, being interpreted, means that he plays the treble of any tune with his nose.

Another of the feats performed is that of playing whilst kneeling on the top of the piano, leaning downwards and pressing the keys from the opposite direction from that in ordinary playing. This, Mr. Ross informs me, is perhaps the most difficult of all his feats. Every movement of hands and fingers is altogether reversed, owing to the player's position. The greatest caution must be exercised, and only a player with an un-failing memory could hope to perform the feat without some ludicrous blunder.

Something must be said about the marvellous speed with which the performer manipulates the notes. It has been calculated that in some of the most difficult passages in a piece of music he strikes an average of ten notes a second, or 600 per minute.

Mr. Ross is always prepared to play any popular music selected by anyone in the audience. He does not confine himself to his own *répertoire*.

One of the quaintest of the effects produced is the playing by the right hand of one tune—say, "Dolly Gray"; and "Yankee Doodle" with the left hand; whilst the player sings another song, such as "Way down the Swanee River." The blending of the three totally different tunes is remarkable, there being no discord throughout.

"Lying down to his work," is a phrase sufficiently descriptive of other feats performed by Mr. Ross. Sitting on the top of the instrument with his back to the audience, he bends downwards until his face and upper portion of his body is visible to those in front. In this extremely uncomfortable position, the player, bringing his wrists outwards, is enabled to strike the notes with surprising effect and delicacy. He can play any air.

Another position that must prove very trying is when the performer plays whilst his heels are on the top of the piano, and his head rests on a footstool on the floor. How he escapes asphyxiation is something one can scarcely understand, as it takes a little time to complete a tune.

The most amazing feat of all those which

Mr. Ross accomplishes is undoubtedly that in which, lying upon his back on the floor, he plays the well-known intermezzo from "Cavalleria Rusticana" upon a violin, accompanying himself meanwhile on the piano with the heels of his shoes! This feat must be seen and heard to be appreciated.

A stage "hand" was once heard describing to a credulous friend the astonishing performances of Mr. Ross, and he finished up by declaring that "'E jumps inside the blooming pianner, shuts down the blessed lid, and starts playin' fer all 'e's worth!" But piano-playing extraordinary has not gone quite so far as that yet.

Mr. Ross seems as much at home with the pencil and brush as he is with a piano or violin. He does a very wonderful thing in playing with both hands on his favourite instrument whilst at the same time he draws portraits of celebrities upon the sheets of a paper block fixed up in front of him. Such industry is commendable. He apparently does not believe in wasting time.

The junior partner of Ross and Grayson (Mrs. Ross) is studying the art of piano-playing extraordinary at the present time, and the public is promised, at some future date, a lot of new striking effects by the combined forces.

The writer desires to acknowledge the kindness of Mr. Glenister, the able manager of the London Pavilion, for allowing the accompanying photographs to be taken.



PLAYING THE VIOLIN AND PIANO, WITH LITTLE PEGS IN THE HEELS OF THE BOOTS.