

'CATGUT' – some comments.

John Downing's Comm.1937 is a welcome contribution to this obscure subject – obscure, because although so much is on record about it, it is too often lacking in essential detail, inconsistent, or of doubtful validity. What someone has written in the past is evidence, but not necessarily truth. Two (un-named) Londoners, in 1772, 'performed – the whole operation' (of gut string making) 'in the presence of the joint Committees of Chemistry and Manufactures' (of the Royal Society) 'to the entire satisfaction of the Committee; and before they left the room, the Strings made in their presence were dried, put into an instrument; and played upon; and, by proper judges, allowed to be equal in tone and goodness to what are imported from Italy: on which, each of the candidates had Six Guineas given them, as a reward for their trouble' (GSJ XIII, July 1960, p.90). Quick workers, eh?

The writer on 'Strings' in the renowned 18thC French 'Encyclopedie' (see Bonta, GSJ LII, 1999, pp.376–378) made a commendable effort to describe the fabrication of gut strings in full detail, but doubted whether he had been told everything that mattered, whether from inadvertence or concern for trade secrecy.

Is there any other account of the use of drawplates to thin and round off gut strings as they are used in wire drawing?

Will organologists in the 2,400's be pondering the nature of the 'tigerlines' which were in supply some years ago?

A quick dip into my French/Italian/German dictionaries shows no hint of a connection between cats and fiddle strings (a wider survey might be worth while. Walker's dictionary of 1836, after the definition 'A kind of cord or gut, of which fiddle strings are made..' adds parenthetically 'Either I have been misinformed, or fiddle strings are made in Italy of the guts of goats, and therefore ought properly to be called *goatgut*'). The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes gives no European parallel to 'The Cat and the Fiddle' such as is not uncommon with similar nursery rhymes. A friend reminds me that Hart ('The Violin', 1887, p.76) writes that 'Strings are made from the intestines of the sheep and the goat, chiefly of the former. The best qualities are made from the intestines of the lamb, the strength of which is very great compared with those of a sheep more than a year old'.

Downing does well to raise the question of the life style and breed of the animal. Methodical selective breeding and cross-breeding, and advances in agricultural practice, had by Victorian times made sheep very different from those of Bach's time. At least one ancient breed survives (the Hebridean Soay). But the reader is not to suppose that just a few experiments with Soay gut, mutton gut and goat gut will tell us all we wish to know, interesting though they might be. The whole issue is too complex for that.

Raw material supply, in European countries, also raises questions. No problem with sheep – but lambs? Until well into Victorian times lamb was rather a luxury; mutton was the common dish. Goats were, and are, certainly kept, but how extensively were they butchered for meat in Italy or other European countries? my impression is, very little. And cats – could domestic cats in Italy meet the string-makers needs (one would suppose that hunting feral cats would be an unattractive way of life).

All questions, alas, and I offer no opinions, let alone answers. Readers with more specialised knowledge may be more helpful.