

THE AMERICAN GIRL AND HER VIOLIN

by
MAUD POWELL

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[The Etude considers that it has been extremely fortunate in securing the services of the distinguished violinist, Miss Maud Powell, as editor for this special issue. Mr. Robert Braine, the editor of the violin department, will resume his work next month. A biography of Miss Powell will be found in the "Gallery of Celebrated Musicians" for this month. That Miss Powell is the greatest of American violinists, irrespective of sex, is conceded by many able critics here and abroad. Her virtuosity, however, should no be characterized by national limitations, as her frequent European concert tours have been successful in the extreme. All of the following articles are by Miss Powell with the exception of those otherwise distinguished. Miss Powell has prepared this department with the same enthusiasm that has characterized all of her professional work, and we are sure that our readers will find it of great value and interest. – Editor of The Etude.]

The girl with a fiddle-box no longer excites comment. The irrepressible school boy no longer hoots and points the finger of derision as she passes. Everywhere girls are studying the violin, and everywhere other girls, a generation older or more, are teaching the violin. Girls play in quartets, in orchestras or earn their living by solo playing. Over a decade ago, Nora Clench sat at the first violin desk in the Buffalo Symphony Orchestra, under the conductorship of John Lund, and fiddled with the best of her colleagues.

For sixteen years the Women's Symphony Orchestra, of Los Angeles, with Cora Foy in the concert-master's chair has been in ambitious and honorable existence. There are the well-known "Fadettes," of Boston. The Aeolian Ladies' Orchestra, of London, England, is perhaps twenty years old, and the Aeolians, like the Fadettes, boast a woman conductor. Several women play in the Hartford Symphony Orchestra. Recently, in Detroit, Mich., the ladies of the Fine Arts Society organized a string quartet for which Elsa Ruegger was imported to fill the post of 'cellist. The Soldat String Quartet is known throughout Germany, and the Nora Clench Quartet, of London, holds its own against many masculine rivals. Year after year the field of musical effort broadens and offers greater opportunity for women, and year by year women qualify for ever higher standards.

At the present moment, we in America are working, building, achieving in the right direction. There is cultivation of music in the public schools and in the home. We have big conservatories and little conservatories. Some are private institutions of modest endeavor; others, on a larger, more comprehensive scale, equal in importance the far-famed conservatories of Europe. Music is taking a more serious place in general education, and the conservatories

affiliated with our universities grow in numbers and importance year by year. Our women's musical clubs are doing pioneer work of inestimable value, both for themselves and for the community in general.

It may be said with confidence, therefore, that the girl possessing talent, health and plenty of stick-to-itiveness will, after a thorough course of musical training, find an interesting as well as remunerative field for her labors. Not every girl can expect to have a brilliant stage career, nor is it possible for untold numbers to achieve an international reputation as concert soloists. Beautiful work, honorable work, work that is needed and wanted, lies well within these limits. Our country needs plenty of quiet workers of honest endeavor, with high ideals and adequate equipment. Indeed, the field of labor for such is almost limitless.

Take heart, young musician – you who are too conscious of your limitations. Beethoven himself hath said: “The barriers are not erected that shall say to talent, ‘Thus far and no further.’” Cultivate courage. Have a oneness of purpose. Keep at it. Go on trying. I have heard a pupil play, and play creditably, a piece full of difficulties that she had utterly balked at in the beginning. Her imagination had magnified the difficulties out of all proportion, and had diminished her own powers of achievement in inverse ratio.

Try! You do not know what you can do till you have tried. I am always disappointed in the girl who, on being introduced to me after a concert, says, “Oh, Miss Powell, I feel as if I never could touch the violin again--it seems so hopeless now.” Much more to my liking is the girl who says, in a scarcely audible voice and with upper lip aquiver, “Oh, I feel as though I could do anything now – I just feel inspired!”

Of course, enthusiasm is going to help you along. There are plenty of hard places to be conquered, but enthusiasm will make them easier. Indeed, enthusiasm is an asset that will be valuable throughout your life, and if you want your career to count for something, remember that it is she of the abiding faith and unquenchable enthusiasm whose work “tells” in the long run.

As for opportunity, apathy will prevent you from seeing it, and a lack of courage from seizing it; and before that psychological moment arrives, which may mean an important turning point in your career, your apathetic and timid attitude of mind will have interfered with your progress and kept you in a state of unpreparedness. Then your rival, perhaps someone with less talent than yourself, but with a saner, stronger character, will perceive the opportunity, make the most of it and leave you and your duller companions wondering discontentedly why some people have so much better luck than others.

Nor will the apathetic teacher, with little love in her heart either for music itself or her own work as a teacher, be able to attract irresistibly pupils to her classes nor achieve the best results with pupils chancing to come her way. As for an indifferent soloist, she is an anomaly, and can carry little conviction to her hearers. But for you, if you are ambitious and alive with interest for your work, there is a promising art-soil throughout the length and breadth of this bid land of ours, from which a rich harvest may be reaped, provided a healthy seed be planted with care and the young shoot thence watched and nurtured with intelligence, faith and enthusiasm.

The field of orchestral playing is open to women. I see no reason why women should not be regularly employed if they wish to be. They have qualities that are necessary for the work. American women, especially, have a good sense of rhythm. They are imitative, adaptable and conscientious, with endless patience for detail. They are quick to seize the trend of another's thoughts and have marvelous powers of carrying out other people's ideas. If women really want orchestral work, they will get it.

Prejudice of the American masculine mind is easily broken down. The “Union” accepts women members. The question of dress is not difficult, good taste and diplomacy suggesting simplicity, both as to style and color. It can also be urged in our favor that we are not as thirsty as the men. On the other hand, it behooves us to take the following criticism to heart. Two conductors of my acquaintance have expressed a preference for men as harp players for instance. Why? Because women forget to count the bars of rest, and rarely remember when to “come in” without a sign from the conductor. This weakness shows a lack of concentration. It suggests, too, a lack of mathematical precision in the feminine mentality, and hints at a dislike of discipline and routine. Let us ponder this well, and train ourselves accordingly.

Ten Practice Rules

I. Concentrate. Concentrate your thoughts on your work, completely and absolutely. One hour of absorbed practice is worth forty of the casual sort.

II. Play in tune. The worst of all violinistic crimes is to be untrue to pitch.

III. Practice scales religiously. Play them slowly and with perfect evenness, both as to fingering and bowing.

IV. Practice slowly all difficult or intricate passages; also, jumps, trills, spiccato, staccato, arpeggios, etc.

V. Practice long bows slowly, slowly, slowly. Draw out the tone. Pull it out, spin it, weave it, but never press it out or squeeze the string. By pressing the string with the bow you can check the natural vibration, and without changing the position of the left hand the smallest fraction, you can actually lower the pitch of the note you are producing.

VI. Memorize everything, including scales, etudes, pieces and difficult passages in chamber music.

VII. Keep in mind the structure of the composition while practicing separate phrases, difficult passages, etc. Do not let your playing or your memory become “patchy” – keep each measure mentally in its place; that is, in its correct relation, structurally, to the whole.

VIII. “Vorspielen.” This German word means “to play before.” Play your studies or pieces over in their entirety before any long-suffering friend who will listen. You will be amazed at the sore spots that will reveal themselves, and will make it your business to heal them as quickly as possible.

IX. Hear other violinists. You will listen in spite of yourself. Then apply that kind of listening to your own work. There will be more surprises in store for you.

X. Love your instrument as yourself. But love your art more than either. Keep the fires of enthusiasm burning. Nothing was ever accomplished without faith and enthusiasm.

Piano and Theory

Every violinist should play the piano. You will be at a great disadvantage if you cannot study your repertoire from the piano score. You will lose much by not being able to play accompaniments for others. What can you get out of a new composition – say a quintet, if you can look over only the violin part? If you play the piano, the complete score is yours. The piano is a useful servant. True, it is a poor mechanical contrivance of wires and ivories, but it is a

library. The whole literature of music is yours, symphonies, operas, quartets, songs, et al., if you play the piano.

A student must also study the theoretical, structural part of music – harmony, counterpoint, form and composition. Without these, you play without comprehension, memorizing by rote, phrasing parrot-like. You trust a little to taste, but more to luck. When reading a new composition, you do not know where the second theme begins, you are in a wilderness when you reach the “development,” and fail to anticipate in time that you are coming to the “recapitulation.” The thing is a muddle to you, structurally and harmonically. How can you convey anything of the composer’s meaning to others if you know nothing of it yourself? You will be at a loss in chamber music. Indeed, you will get small chance to join others in that delightful work when they discover your superficiality.

Hints on Memorizing

Read Rule VII and take well to heart. If you have no gift of musical memory and cannot leave the task to your subconscious self, then you will have to train, train, train, until your mind will commit objectively.

No two people memorize in the same way. Some artists have told me that they see the printed page before their mind’s eye, while playing from memory. This I personally cannot understand. Notes and rests with expression marks are mere symbols by means of which the composer tries to express an abstract musical idea in black and white. These symbols are wholly inadequate to express the real essence of music.

The student should, after studying the notes and signs thoroughly, and reading the composer’s printed intentions with perfect accuracy, try to make of the music an abstract essence, as the composer first conceived it – a disembodied, impalpable sequence of musical sound. The Germans call printed music “noten” or notes, which amuses us mightily when we first hear the expression. After all, they are right. The symbols are only little black notes--not abstract music at all. We unconsciously admit the inapplicability of our English work, for we speak of sheet-music, a modification which is rather sensible. However, if it helps you to remember exactly how that difficult bar in the second staff on page nine looks in print, then by all means use that method.

But before learning any new composition, get its structure well in mind. Analyze its different parts, and knit them together, bearing in mind their relative bearing to each other. Play the piece over in its entirety, either from the piano score or with an accompaniment. Get an impression of the whole and its continuity. Let the spirit of the work sink deep into your consciousness.

Remember the impression of that first bloom of enthusiasm, that first warm appeal. You will lose it all presently, when your soul flounders in a cloud of technical drudgery. The fresh enthusiasm will be deadened during the process of memorizing, while difficult passage work is practiced in sections, and countless repetition stretches patience to its limit. When the case seems hopeless leave the piece alone for a time. Some day when the composition is conquered and is yours, the warm glow of enthusiasm will return. Even after a day or two you will take it up with renewed interest and a more receptive mind. Often what seems impossible at three in the afternoon, is quite easy at 10 A.M. On the other hand, you may be able to achieve great things at 11 P.M., after having practiced yourself into a state of mental excitement, and make the

unpleasant discovery the next morning, that your over-heated brain did not hold a single impression.

Undoubtedly, the same morning hours are the best for work, for memorizing as well as for technical practice. When fishermanlike you catch a snag – that is, get entangled and have to waste time and energy in freeing yourself, it may help you to use very simple means, such as noting the direction of the melody, whether it moves up or down, whether the interval is a half or a whole tone, a fourth or a fifth, as the case may be.

Invent little ways of your own of memorizing. What matter if they may seem silly to others, so long as you gain your object?

Always use the same fingering, if your mind is not musically quick. A very good rule, that; for in an emergency, the fingers will carry you through an uncertain passage from sheer force of habit. Your mind may be a momentary blank, or a temporary mental dizziness attack you when you are playing in public, but thoroughly trained fingers will help you along.

In works written in the sonata form, practice alternately the original presentation of the theme and passage work, and their re-appearance in the “recapitulation,” until differences of key, of position, of contour, become familiar. You will usually find, when the composer writes spontaneously and understandingly, or really has something to say, that his music is easily memorized, but that if he builds artificially he is a veritable bugbear. In the latter case, you can only beat him at his own game, by using artificial means in memorizing.

Memorize Bach – and more Bach. If you play the piano, memorize Bach on the piano. He is complex, intellectual, full of musical fibre, and should be daily food. He is more than food; he is an intellectual tonic. And you will find that all others will seem easy after Bach. But guard against the stiff wrist in the right hand and against stiff wrist and fingers in the left. He demands strength in the right arm, which stiffens your bowing if you are not careful. And he keeps your left hand so much in one position that you will lose elasticity in both wrists and fingers if you do not conscientiously guard against the tendency to tighten muscles. You must constantly think of flexible firmness when you play Bach.

Care of the Violin

Put your instrument away, always, when not in use. Keep it free from dust and rosin. A soft piece of cheese-cloth that has been washed or an old silk handkerchief may be used to remove the rosin. Always clean the finger board and strings after playing. You will be amazed at the black that will come off on a cloth slightly moistened. Use alcohol if you prefer. If your hands are not excessively moist, thereby keeping the strings too wet, it is just as well or rather better to--well, you have doubtless seen a mother moisten a handkerchief at her lips and vigorously rub the dirty face of her violently resisting young hopeful! Needless to say, the rosined part of the string should be touched only with a dry cloth.

Keep the violin box in a place of even temperature--not too near a heater or a window. The floor is cold or draughty, a high shelf too hot and dry, especially in winter. The evaporation will be good for yourself as well as your instrument. A big jardiniere of water should be kept under a grand piano, especially in a steam-heated or furnace-heated apartment. Many a time, when traveling at night, in zero weather, I have put the violin case under the blankets in my berth, as carefully as though it were a live thing. On one occasion my train was delayed nine hours by a blizzard. The steam pipes froze – so, very nearly, did the passengers – and all that day

I kept the violin wrapped in blankets, much more worried over it than about myself. I was to give a recital that night, and only arrived in town at eight o'clock, but when I walked on the stage at ten minutes of nine, I found the violin in a splendid condition, thanks to my care. I know a lad who always kept his violin under his bed at night. He slept, even in winter, with his window wide open. Of course, when the weather was cold, the poor little fiddle got absolutely chilled. Then the lad wondered why the instrument was so unmanageable when he took it down stairs to the over-heated drawing room.

Our climate, with its sudden changes and its extremes of both dryness and sodden humidity, is unfavorable to both artist and instrument. Both live in a state of too constant tension and resistance. Take care of yourself – health is valuable above all else – but don't forget to take care of your instrument. It will reward you for your pains. Treat it like a tender human being, and invite its soul – and your own.

A Word to Teachers

One phase of art-study is often lost sight of, namely: the making of amateurs. Why is it that so many who spend money and time on musical culture think they must necessarily pursue music as a profession? Many who love music have little talent for it, or may not be qualified by temperament or gifts to become either a teacher or public performer.

Teachers should make the less-gifted pupils feel that they have a very lovely mission as amateurs--to foster art at home – and by this enthusiasm enlarge the circle of good listeners. On the other hand, many an elderly, unaccomplished man or woman would be eager to study, if given a grain of encouragement on these lines.

Music can hardly be said to exist if it lies dormant in the printed page. To become a living, vital thing with influence, it must be heard. There must be listeners. The artist, by his very nature, sensitive, emotional, longing to make propaganda for the true and beautiful, should find sympathy, encouragement and an answering enthusiasm in his fellow-beings. If he can convey but a hint of the secret that the masters have revealed to him through the printed page, he does not live in vain.

Oh, the misery of having something of infinite, though perhaps esoteric, beauty fall on ears that do not understand! And then to hear the uncultured listener affirm somewhat proudly and defiantly that he knows nothing whatever about music – but he knows what he likes! Such a soul is a sealed book. Little do people realize what joys lie in store for them if they would seek and humbly prepare their minds with a little study. – **Maud Powell**

VIOLIN INTERPRETATION

by
MISS MAUD POWELL

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[In the July issue of The Etude, which was devoted to "Woman's Work in Music," the violin department was edited by a woman for the first time during the twenty-six years existence of the paper. Miss Maud Powell, the renowned American violinist, honored our readers by a most excellent department of which the following is a continuation. – Editor's Note.]

Listen to every great artist, whether pianist, violinist or singer. Hear an orchestra, or a string quartet, whenever possible. Get something from everybody, though it may be nothing more than a revelation of some fault or trait to be avoided. Nothing more, did I say? Nay, that is a great deal, for the "don'ts" are all-important.

Don't hurry.

Don't drag.

Don't blur the passage work.

Don't scratch.

Don't play absent-mindedly or carelessly.

Don't leave the hair at either the point or nut of the bow unused, thereby curtailing possibilities in phrasing.

Don't leave out the accents and other marks of interpretation.

Don't forget that rhythm is the first and most vital element in all arts, and most obviously so in music.

Don't lose your poise.

Don't overdo the vibrato.

Don't use the same vibrato in an eighteenth century composition that you would in an intense, dramatic, modern piece.

Don't alter the composer's meaning, especially in the classics, unless on the very best authority. And let me say right here that the dictums of cultivated talent are safer to follow than the unreflecting outbursts of genius. Young Elman, for instance, is a law unto himself. I sat spellbound one afternoon listening to his Tschaikowsky Concerto. No one approaches him, it seems to me, in that school of composition. But the distortion of tempi and the liberties taken with text were bad models for an imitator, whether artist or pupil. With all my admiration for the amazing, the unaccountable genius of the boy, I cannot bring myself to accept his interpretation of the Beethoven Concerto. Beethoven is scarcely a vehicle for emotional self-expression. Rather is this concerto an art expression of perfect line, perfect poise, perfect beauty; a noble thought, nobly conceived, a thing for all time, pure, true, complete, like the best Greek statuary and to be approached only in a spirit of complete self-abnegation. Now, the fullness, the vitality of self-expression of this gifted boy, the lovely cheek of his artistic unconsciousness, are

glorious. We of Anglo-Saxon origin know little of spontaneity of expression as exemplified in the Slavic and Latin races. When we cultivate spontaneity it is apt to be superficial. Our artistic emotions are not aroused within us creatively. Artistic self-expression is not a necessity. We are stirred from without and not within (artistically), and we are forever suffering intense and absurd self-consciousness in art, as in other matters. We have a horror of being sentimental or ludicrous. The young girl actually blushes when her teacher tries to induce her to play with "expression." There is a diffidence that stands between ourselves and our means of expression. And that brings me to another "don't."

Don't become an abject slave to "playing in" your fingers with scales. When you first take the violin from the box, occasionally plunge right into some composition that requires "mood" – the first movement of the Mendelssohn Concerto, which is "appassionato," or the last movement of the Bruch G minor Concerto, which is bold, majestic, rhythmic; or, for that matter, any piece you may be studying at the moment, whether soulful and singing in style, playful (scherzoso) or doleful (lamentoso). Learn to sink yourself at once in the emotional atmosphere of the work you are interpreting; but

Don't play to have a good time merely. Keep your critical self always alert and watchful.

Don't practice seventeen hours a day, nor even seven. It will kill all joyousness in your playing. Study, yes, any number of hours you may have strength for, but don't practice more than four or five at the most. If you have as much talent as you should have to warrant entering the ranks of professional workers, three hours should be sufficient.

Don't forget to think out your interpretation away from your instrument. Play a composition in imagination, vividly, spontaneously. Ideas will come to you, which you can work out later, with your instrument in hand. If unable to practice just before playing at lesson or in public, whip your mind into training instead. It is often even better than actual practice.

Don't get discouraged. If you cannot play an intricate passage as you think it, write it out on music paper from memory. Do this more than once, if necessary. It will help you technically and interpretatively, and it won't hurt your memory.

Don't get in a rut. You will sink in so far, if you allow yourself, that your soul will be ground down by the wheels of routine, leaving nothing but a mere mechanism with no interpretative energy. On the other hand,

Don't leave technic to the chance of the moment. Inspiration works unhampered only when technic is adequate and reliable. And technic can only be conquered through tremendous routine. The last two apparently contradictory "don'ts" you will have to work out for yourself. No one else can do so for you.

Indeed, don't expect your teacher to do your work for you. Your teacher cannot provide you with talent, nor with brains, nor with character. Your teacher can only be a guide and an inspiration. That is enough – to point the way to watch, help, prevent false steps, inspire to industry and high ideals. But on you, the you that is within you, depends your success.

A word about the importance of having good tools to work with: "A bad workman quarrels with his tools," but a good workman really prefers the best and he knows how to take care of them. So procure the best violin, bow and strings that your means will allow. It behooves you then to keep all three in as good condition as possible. Do not complain of them. An excuse is an accusation. If you cannot get something out of an indifferent instrument, you will probably get relatively little out of a good Cremona. Don't blame your instrument. Keep the lime-light of criticism focussed on yourself.

Undoubtedly, a good instrument will produce better results in the hands of talent than a poor one can. It will also teach the ear to seek beauty in tone. And it will stir the imagination. While telling you not to complain, I want you, nevertheless, to unceasingly strive for something better. It is stagnation to be satisfied. The artistic spirit never ceases to reach out for greater perfection. Strive for a more and more beautiful tone, and crave a better and more perfect instrument with which to produce it. Every time opportunity offers, play a violin that is better than your own, and seek therein new possibilities of tonal beauty. By this I do not advise experimenting in public. Play the violin you are accustomed to when you play before the public.

Tune quietly. By using a little anti-slip preparation, or by treating the pegs with soap and chalk, you can keep them in good condition. They should not stick fast and then jump suddenly beyond the mark with an annoying jerk. When you put on a new string, see that the peg stops (when the string is at pitch), at a convenient angle so that you get a purchase on it with your left hand, and turn it without taking the violin down from position. Tune with the point of the bow, producing a soft, clear tone. When the weather is unpropitious or strings are new, tuning may be troublesome, and must be done with a firm stroke of the bow, but generally speaking, especially in public, tuning should be done easily, quietly, and without fidgeting. Indeed, if it were possible, it would be well if tuning in public could be avoided altogether.

From the Archive of The Maud Powell Society for Music and Education