

THE VIOLINIST

by
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Common sense suggests, when you and I foregather for an informing chat about the way to win success as a violinist, that we begin with a clear understanding of the standard by which success is to be measured. One violinist may consider his career a failure if he falls short of the virtuoso estate. Another may be well content if he earns a comfortable livelihood with this instrument. With one, the standard may be artistic achievement; with another, the financial result. In either case, success will be measured entirely by the attainment of the end in view.

In establishing our standard, let us keep in touch with our environment. We live in America, and the American mind is essentially practical, above whatever artistic instincts it may possess. The duty of developing a talent for the good of the race does not appeal to the American mind in its present stage of artistic advancement. Neither has the American parent any inclination to educate his child for an artistic pursuit unless a good living is to be obtained thereby. As Americans, therefore, our standard must be the economic one, and the way to win success as a violinist confronts us as a practical issue: how to earn a good living with the violin.

This is making a commercial question out of an artistic pursuit, I grant you. But why not? Business methods are necessary to keep art on its feet. And our wonderful but intensely practical country will never develop the arts except on a sound businesslike basis. So businesslike it behooves us to be.

Is it possible to make a good living with the violin?

Unfortunately there is no pursuit in which so much ignorance and vagueness prevail, considering the essentials and probabilities of success, as in music. The most common mistake is that the life of a professional musician is easy and enjoyable. Enjoyable it is for those who love their art for its own sake, but easy – never. I work harder today than I did when I was a student in the Leipzig Conservatory. That is the common experience of all artists.

That we are greatly in need of enlightenment on every phase of the musical problem is evident. But my task is to cover the violin field and I will hark back to the question – Is it possible to make a good living with the violin? My answer is an affirmative, with one qualification, namely, that one's ambitions are made to square with one's talents and one's circumstances. With this reservation I maintain that the good violinist can always make a good income, and I will add that the avenues of income are widening continually in this country.

The virtuoso, the teacher and the orchestral player represent the three main branches of the violin profession. Fame and fortune are the reward of the successful virtuoso, and all young Americans who take up the violin as a profession look forward to that career.

But beware the long, hard road that lies between gifted youth and the virtuoso estate! I have traveled it. I know every obstacle. For every step forward I have paid heavy toll. Let me

reckon the cost for you in time, money, mental wear and tear and physical stress and put the matter squarely before you, pupil or parent--to decide whether the prize is worth the struggle.

And now, my ambitious young musician, before you take me up with a quick affirmative, let me ask you a few questions.

Have you real talent?

Have you strength of character, endless patience, courage, stamina?

Have you good nerves and a strong physique?

Have you a parent or some other relative willing to sacrifice everything else in life to look after you during your period of preparation?

Have you money to keep you going until you are done with teachers and then more money to launch your career?

You will have need of all these along the road to fame, and when you come to the end of the journey the reward is by no means in sight. You are in the position of a man who has toiled and slaved, stripped himself, his family, his friends – for what? A ticket in a lottery. After you have spent your youth in the sweatshop of art, you are quite likely to be snubbed by the public. Your technique may be flawless, your artistic development wonderful, but if you lack that indefinable personal quality – magnetism – the great public, which is moved most by human qualities, will give you the cold shoulder. And magnetism is something money cannot buy nor any teacher impart.

To begin with, how do you know your talent is equal to your ambition? Because you play better than any one in your town ever played at your age is no reason that you would compare remotely with very real and vital talents – talents that have brought their fortunate possessors farther along at twelve than you may get at twenty. Do you know that Kreisler could play the big concertos at twelve? Elman, Kubelik and Von Vecsey were full-fledged virtuosi on the mechanical plane at an age when the average American child begins to think of taking up the violin.

The foundation of virtuosity is technique and the technique of the instrumentalist, like that of the juggler, the acrobat or the dancer, is the result of a process of muscular coordination that must begin almost in infancy. There is little hope in the virtuoso field for the child who is not ready for advanced instruction before he enters his teens.

And not all the prodigies realize the promise of their early youth. For success is as much a question of character as of talent. Precocity is a foe to self-control and leads many to abandon the rigorous self-denial that is inseparable from the virtuoso career. Paul Cinquevalli, most artistic of jugglers, spent two hours a day for eight years learning the trick of balancing a billiard-ball on the side of a cue. Violin technique calls for equal patience and the same delicate muscular control.

Whether the student is boy or girl, it is absolutely essential that some one watch over him constantly during the years of study. I was twelve when my mother took me abroad to the Leipzig Conservatory. My father was left homeless, wifeless, childless, to work, work, work, and send the monthly checks across the seas to meet our expenses. After four years we returned, but mother had to remain with me during my early touring days. My career meant fifteen homeless years for all of us.

That is only one side of the family sacrifice. The financial phase remains to be considered. After the years of preliminary training, at least four years of advanced study are necessary. Usually this involves leaving home, and only with the strictest economy can the cost

of tuition and the living expenses of the student and his companion be kept down to fifteen hundred dollars a year. That is the minimum, mind you. When this interval is over, the expensive business of launching the career begins. It is on this point that the most woeful ignorance prevails.

Granting that the money is available, the point of contact between the young artist and the public is one that requires delicate handling. Many who have an adequate technical and artistic equipment fail through a mistaken conception of the concert artist's function. The general public goes to concerts in search of entertainment and not education.

It seeks the stimulus of agreeable music, agreeably performed, and it is not particularly interested in art. The young artist who will take into consideration the musical capacity of his listeners and avoid overdosing them with music they are incapable of assimilating, will find his reward the more quickly. After he has convinced the public that it is a pleasure to listen to him, he can lead them by gradual stages to the higher phases of his art.

But always in the beginning his chief aim should be to make a good impression and leave his hearers with pleasant recollections. I regret to say, with all admiration for their high ideals and splendid courage, that most of our budding virtuosi start off on the opposite tack. The programs they elect to play for their debuts would tax the ripened powers of the most seasoned veteran and tire out the assemblage of the most hardened concert-goers. On the other hand, the young virtuoso must remember that bidding for cheap applause is a pitfall wherein may easily lie buried all his youthful ideals and all chances of ever becoming a real artist.

Even where success attends the inauguration of the virtuoso career, a living income is hardly possible for two or three years. Meanwhile the expenses keep up. In fact, they never end. Mrs. Theodore Thomas was the first to tell me that a great musician needed a wife or a husband, as the case may be, a valet, a secretary and a manager for safe pilotage through the mazes of professional life. Even when the success is lasting, the hard work and self-denial must go on relentlessly. From the sweatshop of preparation, the virtuoso passes on to complete slavery in the house of art, there is compensation. But the artist must find his reward elsewhere than in cold cash.

We may safely place the average income of a good orchestral player at two thousand dollars a year. It isn't a large amount according to some standards, but it will compare favorably with the average professional income. And the good orchestral player is an artist. In the estimation of thinking musicians, he ranks far higher than the mediocre virtuoso, while he performs a far greater service for his art.

While on this subject of orchestral playing, let me record my astonishment at what seems to be an almost national aversion to learning instruments of reed and brass. Somewhere, possibly, in this country, there is a native-born oboe player, but I have never met him.

And oboe players' services are always at a premium. Trumpet players, trombonists, horn players and clarinetists are always in far greater demand than players of stringed instruments. Good performers on these instruments draw salaries running from thirty-five to seventy-five dollars a week and they can always find employment all through the year.

But what chance, you may ask, have women in the orchestral field? Just as much chance as they choose to make for themselves. The girl with the fiddle-box no longer excites comment. Woman's place in the violin field is firmly established. Over a decade ago, Nora Clench sat at the first violin desk in the Buffalo Symphony Orchestra. The Women's Symphony Orchestra of Los Angeles has been in ambitious and honorable existence for sixteen years.

Several women play in the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, and we have the well-known Fadette Women's Orchestra of Boston and the Aeolian Ladies' Orchestra in London. If we have no women violinists in the New York orchestra, we have had women harp players in the New York Symphony, the Russian Symphony and the Metropolitan Opera House.

The Olive Mead Quartette has held a prominent place in our musical life for many years and the Elsa Ruegger Quartette of Detroit is a promising newcomer. In England it is not uncommon to find women in orchestral work.

The field is open to them and I see no reason why they should not be regularly employed, if they wish to be. They have the 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 thought and have marvelous powers of carrying out other people's ideas. It can also be urged that we are not so thirsty as the men!

If American women really, truly want orchestral work, they will get it, and I believe they should seek it. The Musical Union has not put up the bars against them and public opinion will prevent it from ever doing so. During a recent tour of the Northwest, I found women violinists in many of the hotel and restaurant orchestras. Several with whom I spoke told me that they had been tempted to take up the work by the good salary offered, men violinists being scarce. The majority of them were saving money to come East and prepare themselves for teaching.

Before concluding, let me call attention once more to the fact that in spite of the widespread musical culture in this country, in spite of the millions we spend annually in musical education, most of us have only the vaguest notions of musical conditions, of the essentials for success in the musical career, of the practical side of the musical profession. I have tried here to overcome this lack of knowledge with regard to the violin field.

To the American parent let me say finally that a musical talent is not a thing to be stifled or rooted out. It ought to be encouraged and developed along common-sense lines. Wherever that is done, a musical education will prove to be a commercial asset.

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