

by Sibyl Wilbur
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HOW MUSICIANS LISTEN

MAUD POWELL TALKS INTERESTINGLY OF THE EXPERT EAR.

It Analyzes Music More Minutely Than Does That of the Lay Brother

In the large and fashionable audience gathered last evening to listen to the marvelous singing of a mellow Amati in the hands of Maud Powell, few who listened with the sense of the soul and rejoiced with the exquisite gladness of artistic sympathy were aware that they were permitted the delight only through the impulse of the mother of Miss Powell, an impulse which shaped this artist's career. While the violinist was still a small child her mother went to hear the great Camilla Urso, and while under the spell of the music she determined to put a violin in her daughter's hands and urge her in every manner to a noble approach to perfection in its use. The child was not even fond of music. She loved to draw, however, and filled up her idle moments making sketches. Like Marie Bashkertseff she sketched the familiar faces around her on every waste scrap of paper. Today she makes a more creditable drawing of anything that interests her than many who have struggled with technique of the crayon for years.

Yesterday afternoon in a quiet corner of the West parlors I chatted with the artist and her mother. The latter I asked if she thought she had done well to alter the course of her daughter's genius.

"She might have been a greater artist with the brush than with the bow, yet who can tell. I held her to one form of art until she mastered the technique, her artist soul was awakened and she has done the rest. Still it might have been wiser to have aroused it on the other line."

"And you, Miss Powell, do you think that you could have loved music if you had pursued painting?"

"Loved it, yes! But I could not have created without these years of devotion to its study. And without having created music one cannot feel all it has to give, cannot understand its finest message. You know music has a message—musicians speak to one another by this language. I cannot say the language is translatable into words, but it thrills, it draws one up, it makes the soul strain at the bonds which hold it in its shell."

Miss Powell had just come in from a long afternoon's rehearsal. She had thrown herself into a big Turkish chair in an attitude of weary abandon, but as she spoke of the power of music she lifted herself in her chair, threw out her hand to her auditor in an explanatory gesture and

lifted her fine head as though listening to some esoteric music which thrilled for a second on the surrounding ether. There is nothing dramatic in her attitudes or manner, but an exceeding naturalness which makes the realm of art seem easy and familiar until one withdraws from her society.

“Do you think, Miss Powell,” I asked, “that by cultivating one line of art, until one succeeds greatly, that other forms of perfection or arts are opened and made possible to him?”

“Well, indeed, I can’t answer that. If there is only one life, it would seem as though they must be. How could any one do more than master one thing, and life is too short to do even that, as the masters will tell one. Yet, even if one could appreciate other arts than his own, one could scarcely execute in that line.”

“And do you think music is the highest form of art?”

“Music is the least understood. What does it mean to us? It moves us so many ways. It tears us to pieces, it exalts us and some times it undoes us. If you measure its greatness by its effect, I think it is the greatest.”

“How do musical people listen to music?”

“Oh, variously. They listen intellectually, that is they wait for the form which they know it will take. If it is built on the sonata form, for instance, they know it will shape itself. Then they enjoy the daring strokes of the composer, his departures from the beaten track, his unique manner of following a method. They also listen earnestly to the phrasing, waiting for the performer’s personal equation. This is the emotional listening. But the two blend together. I enjoy tone colors, the new combinations of instruments; sometimes, when I am longing for harmonies, my violin will not give me what I want.”

“Which requires the greater genius, harmony or melody?”

“Oh, I believe it requires the greatest genius to create simple and stirring melody which is inspirational. Moderns love harmony more than melody; however, in the old days, when the world was swept with Italian opera, which was mostly made up of melody, they would have thought our music of today chaotic with its richness of color and harmonic effects, whereas we revel in it. So great is the tendency to harmony that there is a danger of abolishing melody, but the greatest composers see the necessity of marrying the two. Wagner, in his great harmonies, still has a continuous succession of harmony [melody].

“And what do you think of Wagnerian music?”

“Well, great as it is, I am wondering if it is indeed the decadence school. You know they say we have entered that period of musical composition. Now, if it is the decadence, it is still a certain development. It seems to me like this.

“Recently when in New York, I went to hear Ysaÿe play. He did many things well, and I listened critically, approving intellectually, you understand. At last he played the Beethoven violin concerto. This ceased to be excellent, it became perfect, it was pure religion. I could not criticize; I wept. Musicians around me wept, and old orchestra players, worn out with musical routine, worn out emotionally, I mean, wept as well. I could have done nothing that was not good after listening to that. Later I went to hear Wagner’s ‘Tristram and Isolde.’ It was marvelously great, it was rich, it was original. Yet where I had wept before, listening to Beethoven, I now found myself panting. The effect was sensual instead of spiritual. It was entirely on the physical plane.”

“And what is to be the result, if music is set in that direction?”

“Ah! what is to be the result in literature, in painting; isn’t all art tending that way? We can do no better than to cling to the masters. There are none greater than Beethoven in music. And musicians will gradually settle back from the Wagner craze to a true sense of their proportional genius.”

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