

The Times-Democrat
New Orleans
December 27, 1896

IT WAS MY PLEASURE. . .

It was my pleasure during the past week to converse with America's great woman-violinist, Miss Maud Powell, who had filled an evening's engagement at the new and beautiful Atheneum. There is always a good deal of a temptation to force one's self upon visiting notables, and especially those whose art has strongly appealed to one's kindred sensitiveness. I had sat under the peculiar spell of Miss Powell's interpretations and aspired to meeting her, which was accomplished through a common friend to my entire satisfaction.

A true artist, as she undoubtedly is, would endeavor to escape all platitudes written or said about her appearance; but there is so much of soul in the limpid depths of Miss Powell's brown eyes, so much of sensitiveness in her curved lips—a strange mouth, which might fitly be described as indicative of dogged impulse—that there would appear to be a distinct relation between her artistic endeavors and the result obtained. A calm bearing, a superb poise do not deceive; there is the underlying passion of great thought, the scintillation, inconstant and strange genius and still the invariable purpose to attain to the ideal which dances beyond, no matter how far her progress obtains.

"I began hard work when I was eight years old," said Miss Powell, in answer to an expressed interest, "and then probably dreamed of arriving at the present period of development. With scarcely an intermission I have labored, aiming just beyond, and still further beyond, gaining ground but never quite touching the goal. Never, did I say? Well, there are moments of inspiration, you might term them, when to my consciousness there is nothing left to ask for; the instrument responds to the strings just as the heart will to a sentiment. These moments are sudden, unexpected, impossible to depend upon; a quick star in the night is as easy to realize before it is gone. One is repaid for years of practice in one of those radiant spells, however brief it may be; it is encouragement to go on and assure the perfection promised by them."

It is a well-known fact that a new violin has not the value in any sense acknowledged as the worth of the older instrument. Never having heard this point fully explained, I asked Miss Powell about the matter.

"An instrument may be of the most perfect model and finish and still prove harsh to the trained ear. Playing upon it—not scraping or idling without melody over the strings—will benefit it gradually; but there is not the same attraction to the violinist in giving tone to his new pet that a smoker finds in the coloring of his meerschaum, although both know that their work is as an investment for values. Wood, you know, is a living thing; it warps, swells, cracks, shrinks and changes temperature. Judicious care must always be expended upon this delicate instrument; it seems to feel slights or poor treatment. Playing upon it seasons it with sound, as it were; it

mellows in tone, sweetens, responds with facility, becomes more and more a companion and a human voice. It is strange how my Amati responds to me; when first I pick it up the wood is cold, the strings hard, the general tone ordinary. Slowly the warmth spreads, the cords vibrate, the bow pulsates, the sound softens, grows richer and more lucent. What gratitude this response brings to the player! It is a reciprocity than which nothing is more precious. But the trial comes when a violin which has been seasoned by a great master, played upon with all one's nature for enraptured ears, grows old. Truly, a violin grows old; not cracked or broken, but seasoned above the receptiveness of wood. The richness of the tone lessens, the grand power fails, the thrill dies out. There is such an instance as a Stradivarius or an Amati outlasting their usefulness, strange as it may seem; but usually the instruments of a celebrated manufacturer bring a fictitious value in a sale, being purchased eagerly by people who may or may not know that some of them have lost that for which the musician cherishes a violin. A dead Stradivarius is simply a petrified corpse; the spirit has evaporated. Is it not poetical and strange and immeasurably sad that such should be so?"

Miss Powell looked all of her expressed pathos as she spoke. She herself has the spirit of an old violin in her face.

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