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FIDDLE AND THE FIDDLER

A Story of Maud Powell's Transition from the Baby Instrument Up to the "Strad" Period.

NOT A PRODIGY, JOACHIM SAID

But She Had Talent, Which Was Better, and Worked Hard – Difficulty of American Players and Audiences in Overcoming Puritanism.

This is a story of Miss Maud Powell and her "fiddle." The word fiddle is in quotation marks because it is Miss Powell's word. It does not behoove a stranger who is not on intimate terms with the instrument of instruments to say anything less dignified than violin.

"But I should feel that it was almost an insult to call my dear old fiddle of violin," Miss Powell says. To say 'fiddle' is like using the familiar pronoun of the Germans, 'du,' 'thou.'

And the strangers do not say "du" upon first acquaintance, and Miss Powell's violin is an instrument which should be treated with great respect, not only on general principles, but because of its age and good qualities. It is an Amati, Andreas Amati, and is 300 years old. Miss Powell has been using it for the past eight years. It is an instrument belonging to the collection of E. J. Delehanty, who loaned it to Miss. Powell. It is a "healthy instrument, has good whole wood in it, and stands the changes of this climate." That is a professional criticism and means a great deal.

Professional violinists may almost be seen to grow by their violins. Miss Powell, for instance, has about reached the "Strad" period. "Strad" is another "du" term for the famous old violin which outsiders speak in awed tones as the Stradivarius. A "Strad" in good condition and not patched up on the inside is a treasure, and one that will cost from \$3000 to \$5000, according to circumstances. Miss. Powell has played online, and when she has one of her own she will have reached the height par excellence of the violinist.

The violin she began with was, very appropriately, a baby instrument, half size, which cost only \$10. She was a small girl of eight then. She had learned to play on the piano and had become a marvel, in a small way, on that instrument when she took up the violin.

"I take credit to myself for that," Mrs. Powell says. "Everyone played on the piano, and I was so tired of it that I made up my mind that my daughter should learn something different."

"Yes," Miss. Powell adds, "and grandmother used to say that you said, even when you

were a little girl, that if you ever had a daughter she should learn to play on the violin.”

Mrs. Powell is a musician herself and composed music when she was only a girl of sixteen.

“I always say,” Miss. Powell continues with a little laugh, “that I inherited my music from my mother and my brains from my father.”

“Yes, and that makes us both angry,” Mrs. Powell makes haste to exclaim, “for I consider that I have some brains and her father thinks that he knows something of music.” That is a family joke, but Miss. Powell continues to think that her particular mental inclination comes from her father’s side of the house and her musical genius from her mother.

But to return to the violins, the little Miss. Powell of eight outgrew her baby instrument and the teacher she had in Aurora, Illinois, her birthplace, in just a year. Then she went to Chicago for further instruction, and took up a large instrument. It was too large for her, but it gave her the intervals as they really are on the ordinary violin, and she did not learn distances that she would have to unlearn later.

She was thirteen when she finished the ordinary violin and her course in Chicago, and bought another violin to take with her to Leipsic. But there is a funny little story connected with that first ordinary. Mr. Powell was connected with the public schools of Aurora and was a prominent educational man there, and when a farmer from the vicinity of the town came into the house one day and saw the violin he was surprised. It was not a new one.

“I suppose this is second-hand?” he said, with an interrogation point at the end of the remark. He could hardly believe his eyes, and he wanted to be reassured. But when he found it really was a second – and instrument he did not say anything. He was too polite, but it was evident that it was too much for him to understand why a man like Mr. Powell should get his daughter a second – hand violin. Miss Powell’s possible “Strad” will be more of a mystery to him still.

It is a pleasure to know that Miss. Powell was not a prodigy. The great Joachim said so, and he is not to be gainsaid. A prodigy, it seems, is something abnormal, genius in the form of an ex-crescence, and it is very possible when it appears that nothing solid, substantial, and lasting will result from it. So, as you walk him approved of the young woman’s work, it was a compliment that he did not consider her a prodigy. Some people might.

The English people did, when, after studying and Leipsic, and under Dancla in Paris, she made a concert tour there and members of the nobility and royalty were very kind to her. That to her was a part of her musical education. It was to give her the almost indefinable something which playing before audiences wouldn’t give. She had been well prepared for it by Dancla, for under him she had been taught not only to play, but how to hold her hands, her feet, and her body when she played. It was all most important, he believed.

“Are you a conspirator,” he asked, “that you always look down?” And after that she kept her eyes in a more natural position. And he taught her to care for her violin. If there was a bit of resin on it, he remarked about it, and if there was dust on it, he wrote her name in the dust.

“But he never did that for me but once,” cries Miss. Powell, in telling about it.

Then Joachim comes into the story, and the Guarnerius period arrives. It was in London that he met Miss Powell and advised her going to Berlin, and, of course, she went. Joachim’s word is law, and to have instruction from him means something. His opinion of her talent did not decrease with acquaintance, and he selected the Guarnerius for her. And with that “fiddle,” after she had completed her studies, she came home to make her debut at one of the Philharmonic concerts in New York. She was only seventeen then, and she made an immediate success. And she calls herself an American player out and out. She does not even say that she received her education abroad.

“And I have never had anything to complain of in American audiences,” she goes on, “they have always been very kind to me. But an audience here is quite different from an audience abroad. Take a Vienna audience. When I played there they stood upon their chairs and applauded; they came down to the front and gathered around me; they kissed my hands and my skirt, and I was glad to get back to my hotel to escape them.

“An American audience cannot give way. Perhaps they are not sure of themselves though that may not be true of the musical audience. But there is a certain Puritanism about Americans; they cannot give way and allow their feelings schools and. It is the same with the player. One of the first things an American musician has to learn is to let himself go, to throw himself out. It is that certain Puritanism. And there is something in the climate, too. Foreigners speak of it. When I came home after my trip abroad with the Arion Society I felt the difference immediately. I played the same music and I was surrounded by the same old friends, but I could not play.”

There is one period in Miss Powell’s career that she does not think of with pleasure. She wanted something larger towns, and she bought a new “fiddle,” a Duiffoprugcar. Then she began and acquaintance with it and she wept.

“The space of time during which ‘my new violin’ becomes ‘my dear old fiddle’ may or may not be agreeable. There are the new colors to be learned and the new possibilities to be discovered. It is exactly the same process through which one would pass in developing and your acquaintance into a dear friend. If there are great hopes, and then no sympathy, no responsiveness, no new and tender chords struck, the process is a torture and the result distress. So it was with the new violin. It had larger tones, but nothing else. It would not respond; it was cold and heartless. Any woman would have wept. But there was a reason for it all. The new violin was a base pretender; it never could become a dear old fiddle; it was not a Duiffoprugcar, but an ordinary \$40 violin.” But that period is past and the Amati period is on.

All this is the fun of violin playing, the part that shows. It is all a pleasure, for that matter, but the practicing looks like hard work to an outsider. Even now, during the summer, Miss

Powell practices from three to three and a half hours a day, and abroad she practiced more than that.

“The first ten or twelve years of one’s work one ought to practice very regularly,” she says. “It is much more valuable than spasmodic work. For five or six years I used to practice six or eight hours a day. I have practiced from seven to nine hours at a time. Usually I practice with intermissions, though I have practiced for two and a half hours in perfect self-forgetfulness, walking up and down the room.”

“And I say sometimes ‘can’t you sit still for a little while?’ But she is up again in a moment,” Mrs. Powell says.

“Yes it is hard not to do it on the stage,” Miss Powell goes on. “The tendency is to walk about. There is a great strain in playing. There is the physical effort in standing and holding the arms raised, and then the position of the fiddle held up against the knack under the year, vibrating against the vocal chords. Sometimes I get entirely out of breath.”

But the practicing is not done on the present “dear old fiddle.” A good violin that is overworked comes as near having nervous prostration as is possible for an inanimate thing. It is tired all over and in every part; it loses all its energy of tone and expression and becomes useless for good work. And it would never do to practice on a second-rate or poor instrument. The ear would lose its power of detecting delicate shades of color and the hand its power of bringing them into being.

“It is not well for the beginner to use a poor instrument,” Miss Powell says. “But he need not use the best. It would be brutal to put a very fine instrument into the hands of a novice who did not know how to use or care for it. There is a certain way of using the fingers and bow; it must not have too much heat, and the strings must be kept in good condition and must be kept clean. A violin is sensitive, and if one part is not in good condition all will suffer from sympathy.”

And while Miss Powell has her fiddle and the pleasure it brings, there are a great many other things that she does not have. She doesn’t have a bicycle, because she would not dare to ride one for fear of some accident such as happened to Josef Hoffmann the other day, when he had of fall, injuring his hand, and was unable to play for a time. She loves boating, and she dare not row; she loves skating, and she dare not skate. She never sews, and nothing would induce her to hold a book in her left hand on the day in which she is going to play. But she does swim and, oh, she dances!

“It is such a natural thing to do,” she says. “I can’t understand why everyone who plays does not dance. Why, if you have a desire to express rhythm with your hands, shouldn’t you have the same desire to express it with your feet? But dancing in America is not everything that it might be. There is too much of the decided ‘tum, tum, tum’ to it. In Vienna it is an art.”

This is something of the story of Miss Powell and her fiddle. There is a good moral in it

for people who have musical aspirations without talent or a love of hard work.

It is interesting to hear of Miss Powell just now, for she is soon to go abroad, where she will probably remain for a couple of years, and when she returns she may be received with even more esteem than now, if that is possible.

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