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MUSIC AND MUSICIANS

Miss Maud Powell, who, by her wonderful violin playing, has recently filled Johannesburg audiences with admiration, was kind enough to grant me an interview the other day, in the course of which I obtained some very interesting particulars of her career, a career that has been watched with interest by devotees of the art, and with the greatest possible enthusiasm by Miss Powell's countrymen and countrywomen – for Americans are as patriotic in the matter of art as in all else.

Born in Aurora, Illinois, Miss Powell began to learn the piano at the age of seven, and a year later turned to the violin. "Every girl I knew," Miss Powell remarked, "seemed to be learning the piano, and I thought I would like to be different from them." It was in her native town that the first steps were taken that were destined to lead to the future, which is now the brilliant present. Journeying to Chicago, Miss Powell used to trudge alone from her home to her master, Mr. William Lewis, "with her fiddle box in one hand and a roll of music in the other." It is to Mr. Lewis that the subject of this sketch attributes that virility – almost to be described as energy – of style which is today a feature of her method. "He was," she added, "a sort of genius – he played because he couldn't help himself." Side-by-side with this infectious spirit was one of severe classicism, imbued by Miss Powell's piano mistress, though the contrast between the two was a matter not for immediate, but for the notice of a mature mind. Traveling to Leipzig, Miss Powell went right into the first classes of the Conservatoire, where she was regarded as the representative violinist of America. A big success at the Gewandhaus, and then to Paris, where, at the Conservatoire, she was adjudged the best of the eighty applicants.

"But I did not quite like the training there," said Miss Powell. "I had no chance of playing chamber music, for instance, and I would gladly have exchanged my four violin lessons a week for two violin and a piano and harmony classes. I did not seem to come into touch with the sort of music that has a broadening effect. Then it was suggested that I should go to London and get some public experience, though I was still in short skirts, and had my hair down. I played before the then Princess Louise and the Duke of Edinburgh in London, and in the provinces. I was introduced to Dr. Joachim, who told me I must immediately go over to Berlin. I played before the begowned and bespectacled committee, and entered the doctor's class without the usual preliminary studying with a sub-professor. At the end of the year I went home."

Miss Powell made her debut in New York with the excellent Philharmonic Society's orchestra, of which the conductor was Theodore Thomas, "whom I always look upon as my musical godfather," she adds. Her playing of Bruch's G Minor Concerto created a furore, and it may be remarked that this concerto owes its popularity, in a large degree, to Miss Powell, whose

interpretation is singularly fresh and vivid. Engagements with all the principal Philharmonic Societies followed, during which time the gifted violinist started a quartette. "I adore quartette playing," she said. "It is the only thing in which a violinist can find real satisfaction. Look at the solo literature! And the concerto is a queer sort of thing after all." In 1892 Miss Powell toured Germany, Austria, and other countries, and she recalls with delight her experiences with the Maenner Gesang Verein Arion. "It was a sort of triumphal tour. I will never forget the trip down the Rhine, with all the salutations and decorations. At Cologne there was an immense crowd, but from what I heard I gather that the people expected to see and hear Negro artists from America!" Then came the World's Fair, at Chicago, at which Miss Powell represented America, and in addition to playing read a paper. Other tours followed, alike only in one feature, and that the tremendous success she achieved in Russia, Denmark, Bohemia, Belgium, Holland, Poland, and France.

Very interesting experiences fell to the lot of Miss Powell, especially in Russia. On one occasion, when it was announced that the Czar had left town, the playing of the National Anthem was invested with great secrecy and importance, those in the hall facing the Royal box, of which the curtains were drawn. It transpired later that the Czar had been within his box the whole time, but the fact had to be suppressed.

Miss Powell was vastly impressed and moved by the terrible contrast of immense wealth and absolutely degrading poverty which is to be seen in Russia. She quotes as an instance of this the scene in St. Isaac's Cathedral, St. Petersburg, where the pictures are set in gold frames ornamented with jewels, the priests clad in bejeweled vestments, while the poorer worshipers are indescribably ragged, covered with vermin, and unalterably wretched.

Now for one word of comment on Miss Powell, if such be permitted. In the first place it may be asked, "Where does she stand in comparison with other great violinists?" At the risk of falling into the evils of comparison, which are doubly odious in art, I would say that she has more positive genius than any woman player in the world, and as much as any man, if not more. She has more introspective and interpretative power than either Kubelik, Kocian, or Kreisler and to my mind more grasp of the meaning of music than Lady Hallé. Again – I write this not so much from South African experience as from having heard Miss Powell in the concertos of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Tschaikowsky, and Bruch – she has the philosophy of Joachim, and, if the expression be allowed in reference to Tschaikowsky, the genial humor of Brodsky. On the question of technique I need say nothing. It is with Miss Powell as with every artist who is really great, only a part in a homogenous whole; and the greater part is the spiritual and emotional potentiality – a quality which Miss Powell possesses in a truly astounding degree. There is as much mentality in her playing as there is technical virtuosity. Miss Powell is a broad-minded artist who knows and admires other manifestations of art than that in which she is pre-eminent. Chatting with her on these other matters, I gathered the impression that while a worshiper of the classics, she still pays homage to Strauss, to Elgar (whom she regards as the master of instrumentation he undoubtedly is), Tschaikowsky, Dvořák, and, to a certain extent, Saint-Saëns.

Mr. Benno Scherek has under his guidance undoubtedly one of the best organizations that have visited South Africa. Quite apart from its brilliant central figure, Miss Mukle, for instance –

the praise is perfectly discriminate – is one of the finest cellists I have heard. Her technique is perfect, quite abnormal, in fact, either for a man or a woman; but as I said in regard to Miss Maud Powell, this is not the sole stock-in-trade of the artist, and Miss Mukle possesses the other quality which justifies the assertion that she, too, is a consummate artist. Especially is she in sympathy with the modern school, and her playing of such things as the solos of Popper, Dankler, and the rest is delightful. I do not mean to imply that Miss Mukle could not interpret the older masters. On the other hand I should think she would do so well; but her tendency is towards the romantic in music. The library of the cellist – with the exception of a few and interesting concertos – is limited to thankless solos and undesirable *pot-pourris*. Miss Mukle will in the future, unless I am much mistaken, much increase the reputation she has already won for herself. Her thoughtful and expressive face suggests determination as well as that appreciation of the beautiful which makes her playing a real delight.

Then there is Miss Helena Brain, who, choosing the uncommon trumpet as her instrument, has done exceedingly well. Her playing, indeed, does away with the idea that a lady can never excel as a wind instrument player, and her really artistic solos have been characterized by good tone and excellent phrasing. Miss Visser, the soprano, Mr. Creighton, the baritone, and Mr. Nicol, the tenor, have all shared the favor with which the company has been received, and Mr. Shereck, of whom I hope to write at length one of these days, has been an orchestra all by himself. He is a wonderful accompanist and a fine artist, truths which I will elaborate in due time.

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