

*[No source, no date, from Maud Powell's scrapbooks]  
[same article appeared in a Butte, Montana newspaper on October 6, 1907 with this heading:  
"Maud Powell's Great Ability, Well-Known Musical Authority Writes Entertainingly of Her."  
"Says That Flawless Intonation Is One of the Features of Her Playing — A Violin Finger That  
Seems to Possess Blazing Eyes."]*

## A VIOLIN FINGER WITH EYES

### Flawless Intonation one of the Features of Maud Powell's Playing

Well do I recall my first hearing of Maud Powell. Her violin had split open, this had cracked her temper a bit, and, broadly speaking, the "Devil was to pay." As music critic of the Pittsburg "*Post*", I had cut her performance into little checkered squares, and to my excited amazement, was complimented in a letter from Miss Powell for honesty of opinion. Only a superior artist could do an act so self-humiliating, for the reason that most artists have another and more easy way of dealing with the critic. If he be flattering in his comment, it's, "Isn't he a fine writer!" If he be severe, yet wholly honest and without bias, it's, "What does he know anyhow?"

Next time, though, all was changed! Powell's violin was healthy and sound and she gave an exhibition of intoning so flawless as tumbled a whole mountain of bravos over her head. That second left finger of hers seemed to have big, bulging, blood-shot eyes, that were fiendishly keen to the exact spot where every string on her instrument should be stopped. And those eyes never, by so much as a hair, missed the exact spot. Had the lights been turned suddenly down, I do believe those finger-eyes would have blazed out, and sparked the fierce fire of temperament that manipulated them. That "blaze" of intonation and interpretation was crawlingly uncanny at times, almost frighteningly devilish.

Maud Powell, no doubt, is one of the great, very great violinists, because all the time she has been tearing her own work to pieces and been building anew. She has been adding to her stature as interpreter, and well knows it, for, declares she, "Years ago I played the master concertos and they had no particular meaning for me, except that they forced me to raise my standard of performance. But today those same concertos take violent hold of everything about me that feels and breathes, and at times, as I play them I find myself muttering: 'Truly there is a God.' People talk much about correct breathing as an aid to proper singing, but have you ever heard of the breathing that comes when one draws hard on the violin string and the master spirit shakes your whole frame? That *is* breathing, I tell you, such as quickens its pace then clutches the throat almost to suffocation."

Miss Powell is a fiend on ownership of fine violins, and it is well worth an hour's time to listen to her use of characteristic terms when describing them. She has just secured, by purchase,

a magnificent Guadagnini that can only be likened to a great big, whole-souled, heroic, magnetic personality. It needs no orchestra's flood for support or for cover of its scratchiness in solo work. It stands nakedly alone, sings with the purest voice ever put into human throat and is ready with instant response to the tenderest touch of bow.

"You simply can't appreciate how beautiful an instrument this is," she exclaims joyously. "Look at its big broad chest under the bridge. No hollow, caved in consumptive lines there that tell of the 'one-lunger.' Then listen," rapping the wood with her knuckles, "do you hear that strong, healthy ring? This fellow never knows what it means to be frozen, husky and hoarse; he's a big, lusty boy, whom I do love to thrash and beat black and blue, so different from the other violin in the box there which is best likened to one of the gentle, many-mooded women of the world who become still-born, and for sake of peace, must be cajoled and cautiously wooed.

"Do you know," Powell said, her voice deepening and slowing down, "that the fine Strads and Amatis of the world have almost reached tone bottom, and that the Guadagninis and Bergonzis are about the only instruments of today that have good, sound bodies? Not long since I was playing one of the most famous of all the Strads ["Le Messie" or "Messiah"]. It had cost its owner \$15,000.00 and he was insanely proud of it. As I started to bow gently, its tones startled me with their strange, weird beauty. Then they excited my nerves, and I began to draw heavily across the low strings, when to my positive shock, tone power and beauty suddenly vanished. The quality had gone, Heaven knows where, and I was scraping bottom."

Luncheon hour in the interesting companionship of conscientious Maud Powell had ended and the writer was happy in the acquirement of much that had interested him or more that had lastingly benefitted his quest for knowledge. But particularly had he been impressed that some artists do *really grow* and press toward the high mark of *perfection*.

– G. Schlotterbeck

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

