

Good Housekeeping
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THE STORY OF A FAMOUS VIOLINIST

By Gustav Kobbé

When I speak of Maud Powell as a woman violinist, I use "woman" in a descriptive or decorative sense, not in a qualifying one. Miss Powell is famous because she is a great violinist, and she is great because she measures up to the standard of violin playing established by virtuosos of the highest rank, without any allowance being made for the fact that she is a woman. "She is a blood descendent of Spohr," wrote a distinguished critic [W. J. Henderson] of her last winter, "and when she tucks her fiddle under her chin, she makes a solemn reverence before the altar of music and officiates as a priestess in the temple."

The will power which Miss Powell can bring into play in surmounting seemingly impossible difficulties is illustrated by an anecdote of her study course with Joachim.

"That master," she said, in telling me the story, "had an assistant named Jacobsen, who was so very sarcastic and cutting in his comments on the pupils' work that often I have seen girls in tears as they left his class. If you never made me cry it simply was because, if he said anything disagreeable to me, I answered him back in kind. But he got even with me by giving me longer lessons than could be made ready without exceptionally hard work. I always prepared them, however, and so he made them harder and harder. Finally one Tuesday he gave me as a climax the *'Moto Perpetuo'* of Paganini to make ready for Friday. This was an almost impossible task, but fortunately I had tried it by myself and I made up my mind that not only would I master it technically, but treat him to an extra shock by memorizing it.

"In due time, on Friday, I appeared in the class. He asked if I was ready and I told him I was. With a mean grin, he took out the music, put the violin part open on the stand, placed the music for the accompaniment in front of himself and sat down at the piano to play it. I closed the violin part. *'Auswendig?'* (from memory) he asked, with another grin. I nodded and he started off, doubtless thinking that it would be a farce of very short duration; that I would soon come a 'cropper.'

"My heart was thumping when I began, but I was only a little more than half through before I could see him getting on the edge of his chair and showing in every way that he was more anxious that I shouldn't break down than I was myself. When I finished there were no sarcastic comments from him, I can assure you, and from that time on we got along capitally."

No wonder!

Maud Powell comes from the west. She was born in Peru, Illinois. Her father was Welsh and his knowledge of music was limited to singing hymn tunes in sections as they were “lined out” in the old style from the pulpit, the minister reading a line and the congregation then singing it, and so on through to the end of the hymn. “My mother, however,” says Miss Powell in telling of her own early years, “is musical, but her talent, whatever it might have been with cultivation, remained undeveloped. She often says to me, ‘I have achieved through you what I never was able to do myself.’ It was my mother who, so to speak, first ‘tried music on me’ to find out if I was musical.

“Without desiring to seem egotistic, let me say that whether I was to have a ‘career’ or not depended at that time more on what I may call ‘character’ than anything else, the habit I had acquired, although I was even then only twelve years old, of doing what was expected of me and of trying to do it a little better than was expected of me. Whether it was playing baseball with my brother or walking or learning my lessons, I wanted to excel. And so, from the time I was set to study the violin I would slave to achieve not only the task that was given out, but a little more – a little more, at all events, than my teacher anticipated. It was in this spirit that I memorized the Paganini ‘Moto Perpetuo’ for Jacobsen, and in this spirit I still approach every composition I add to my repertoire and prepare for every concert appearance.” It is this constant keeping up to concert pitch, this constant keeping herself in tune, so to speak, that shows Miss Powell’s reverence for her art. For the true devotee of art best proves that he reveres it by a constant preparedness to contribute his best efforts toward its advancement.

Miss Powell began taking violin lessons in this country when she was eight years old. Her first teacher was William Lewis of Chicago, who, doubtless because of her very evident earnestness, took great interest in her. She describes him as an “unfettered” player, without much refinement of technique, but extremely vigorous and “rugged.” Within artistic limits Miss Powell puts a splendid energy into her own playing and there seems little doubt but that some of this energy can be attributed to her early lessons with this “unfettered” player. Elemental strength is a great attribute in art, and fortunate is the virtuoso who does not lose it in acquiring that finished style of execution which is the aim of almost every teacher. Miss Powell studied with Lewis four years. When she returned from Europe and made her preliminary debut in the Theodore Thomas summer concerts in Chicago, her old teacher was in the audience. She played the . . . [Bruch] Concerto, and when he heard the artiste, who, as a slip of a girl, had left him to go abroad, playing this concerto with complete mastery of its difficulties and a full understanding of its depth and beauty – playing it as he could not have done himself – “the dear man,” to quote Miss Powell, “sat there dissolved in tears.” Soon afterwards she had the “joy,” as she expresses it, of playing for his violin class, and it always has been a source of satisfaction to her that she had the opportunity of doing this because, before another similar chance would have presented itself, he had died.

It is worth noting here that, while she was taking lessons of William Lewis, Miss Powell also was receiving instruction from a woman [Agnes Ingersoll, who partnered Lewis in chamber music] who was “objective” in her teaching, that is who did not approve of individuality of expression but believed that the composer’s meaning and intention should be carefully reproduced by the player. In this way the girl got a solid classical foundation. To a certain extent

music is today suffering from excess of temperament, the substitution of super-fervid expression for solid musicianship. There is nothing of temperamental exaggeration in Miss Powell's playing, although it is amply individual to satisfy modern taste; and, just as she considers that she owes her energy to the early training she received from Lewis, so she is grateful to her piano teacher for those "objective" lessons.

When Maud Powell went abroad, a girl of twelve, she studied first with Schradieck in Leipsic and then with Dancla in Paris. Afterward Joachim heard her play in London and offered to take her into his classes in Berlin without obliging her to go through any further preliminary studies. The great advantage of being with Joachim was to hear him illustrate. He would be listening to a pupil, stop him in the middle of a phrase and say, "Play it this way," then pick up the violin and play it for him. And the sincerity of the man was so great and his personality in music so powerful that he made every example of this kind a "shining example."

"It is a strange thing about Joachim," says Miss Powell, "but I believe that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred he dwarfs the individuality of his pupils. He is a man of such tremendous individuality himself that many of them are just little copies of him. I have seen pupils of his sit in a chair and curl their feet around the legs of the chair just as they had seen him do when playing quartets. I was three years in getting back to myself after I had studied with him. But I would not take anything in exchange for my lessons with him. To come in contact with his high ideals was a baptism."

I heard Miss Powell when she made her debut with the New York Philharmonic in . . . [1885] in the Bruch G minor concerto. She played even then with a large, solid tone and a technique that was finished without being finicky. Classical repose, romantic tenderness, grace, esprit and great technical nerve – all of these are points in her style and can be brought into play by her when called for by the composition she is interpreting. She is sufficiently modern to re-create through her own individuality whatever she interprets without, however, turning a piece inside out so far as perverting its composer's meaning is concerned. Practically everything that is worthy in violin literature is in her repertoire and she is constantly seeking to add to it by trying over new music. Like all distinguished violinists she finds the music for the instrument limited in quantity and she is now going back and making re-discovery of some of the very old Italian violin compositions – works by Tartini, Corelli and Vivaldi, who were masters of the instrument in their day and composed many pieces which can, she finds, with slight modernizing, be made to serve in the repertoire of the twentieth century. "It is startling," she says, "how soon some of the new music begins to sound old-fashioned and how new some of the very old music is beginning to sound again." And then she takes up her violin and makes the room echo and re-echo with Tartini's *Trillo del Diavolo* or the Bach *Ciaconneu*, thus illustrating her remark with one of those "shining examples" of which she spoke when referring to her own great master, Joachim.

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