

MAUD POWELL'S DEBUT AT NINE

by
MAUD POWELL

This version of this story by Maud Powell is taken from a manuscript in The Maud Powell Society Archive. The story was published in The Pictorial Review, March 1908 and reprinted in The Musician, March 1910.

When I was a little girl of nine, my teacher, “Billy” Lewis and his associate in chamber music, Miss Ingersoll, gave a concert in their suburban town near Chicago at which they introduced me to a Hyde Park audience. In my home town, my father belonged to a vocal quartet and upon occasion on a Saturday night they would go to a neighboring town to give a concert. I sometimes went with them as solo violinist. Also our local organist, who conducted the orchestra in Aurora, Illinois, had me play at church song service frequently.

My studies abroad were broken up by a year of concert playing in London. I was in my very early teens. A musician in the pension where I lived in Portland Place, introduced me to an ambitious young manager, a woman, who, when she heard me play, sent me out with a little concert company. I do not remember much about the business details, but I remember I did get my modest fee and I believe the manager made some money too.

I became acquainted with George Henschel and other distinguished musicians through that charming and gifted woman, Mrs. George B. Carpenter, mother of our now distinguished and well known composer (John Alden Carpenter) (Mrs. Carpenter was among other well known people staying at this famous Portland Place boarding house). Through being heard by these people other engagements came and I was invited to play before Royalty.

But my real beginning as a youthful artist was in New York City. My introduction came to Theodore Thomas through “Billy” Lewis, my Chicago teacher. It seemed impossible to make an appointment with Mr. Thomas as Mr. Lewis’ letter was disregarded. I reported this to Mr. Lewis, who straightway wrote another and a stronger letter to Mr. Thomas, in which I understand some strong language was used. Mr. Lewis said “damn it” he must hear Maud Powell; that he, William Lewis, was not the person to recommend anyone to a man in Mr. Thomas’ position, whose talent was not worthy of the introduction.

All through the earlier part of my American career I had the secure satisfaction that Mr. Thomas was watching my development, standing sponsor for my talent and lending a helpful hand occasionally with a real engagement. That early experience with orchestra—still in my teens—was of inestimable help in all my future work.

When I went to England to live, fifteen years ago or more, I gave my initial recital in London, which did not do a scrap of good, except that the three line criticisms were good, although practically lost in a mass of other mentions of concerts. At any rate managers knew I was on hand and the musicians became aware of my presence. I had a few letters of introduction which brought me few engagements, but I felt that I was not getting on and would never get on in conservative England unless something extraordinary happened.

I went over to Berlin, gave a recital, and while there played the Second Concerto by Max Bruch to the composer himself, whom I had met when I had studied in Berlin as a girl. I apparently pleased him very much, whereupon I ventured to ask him for a card of introduction to Dr. Hans Richter, who held the most important post in England, conductor of the Halle Orchestra in Manchester.

Armed with this I returned to London, called up my nice conservative, reliable old manager, Mr. Vert, who had never taken more than a perfunctory interest in me, told him I wanted to meet Dr. Richter and that I had this card from Dr. Max Bruch. Richter, who was not in town and would not be, and was too busy to see anybody when he did come, turned out to be coming incognito to Mr. Vert's office the next morning.

An appointment was made and I, an artist with a reputation behind me, swallowed my pride and went down to Mr. Vert's office and played parts of the Tchaikovsky and the Beethoven Concertos for the distinguished old man himself. His eyes glowed and he said: "You shall play either the Tschaikowsky or the Beethoven at one of my concerts in the autumn. It depends upon what the concertmeister, Mr. Brodsky, decides to play. If he plays Beethoven, you play Tschaikowsky and vice versa." Well, I played my Tschaikowsky and according to the local music critics I made a sensation. After that it was all easy sailing in England, and continental work followed that.

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