AN ARTIST'S LIFE

by
MAUD POWELL
(Courtesy of Harriette Brower)
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The career of our American master violinist, Maud Powell, has been followed with increasing admiration by all who have watched it in the spirit of sympathetic interest. Memory goes back to student days in Berlin, when the pretty little American girl, with her long dark curls and her bright face, appeared one day at the Hoch Schule and was admitted at once to Professor Joachim's class. During a brief lull in her present strenuous tour, Mme. Powell was recalling those days reminiscently.

"I had met Prof. Joachim in London, and he had told me to come to him in Berlin and he would see that I was placed in his class. When I arrived that day at the Schule, I found a number of girls and young women assembled in the waiting-room. They had all made application for an audience, which I had not yet done, and had been waiting, some of them, an hour at least. When the Professor sent for us I was the first called to go to him; needless to say I gained what I had come for, the opportunity to study with him.

"I began music study in my home town, Aurora, Ill., when I was seven, not with the violin, but with the piano: I always had a predilection for the piano; I love it and it has retained a little place in my musical life. I must always have my piano near me; a room or a house without a piano is sadly incomplete. One feels lost without that instrument; how immeasurably our homes would lose if pianos should be absent!

"About six months after beginning piano, the violin was started. My parents were not musicians, but my father was deeply interested in music, and, of course, in my progress. He watched it carefully, especially from the mental side; he saw to it that I understood what I was doing, that I learned how to memorize and had incentives to do it. After I returned from a lesson he would ask, 'Well, what did you do today?' 'Oh, I have a new piece, or a concerto,' as the case might be. 'Are you going to learn it by heart?' 'I don't know, maybe.' 'Well, if you learn it by Christmas you'll get a five dollar bill.' That was only a few weeks away, but I made it a point to be ready at the appointed day to play that concerto from memory to my father and so secure the coveted reward.

"My public career as violinist was begun so early that it really has covered a long space, but it seems short to look back upon. I hardly take time to do that. I think that it has extended for twenty-five years. I was suddenly reminded of the fact and should have celebrated in some way, only there seemed no time--and there is so much ahead!"

The artist was seated in a great comfortable chair in the studio of her artistic New York home. There stood her favorite piano, everywhere were books, music, pictures. Above all absolute quiet reigned. "I must have it," she said; "I can work here without being disturbed by sounds from without, and that means much in this great city.

"But oh, the summer—then I can work unrestrained. Up in the White Mountains, in our bungalow, I spend several months of the year. The joy of it, to be in the heart of nature, surrounded by all her loveliness, with time for work. I love it. When there, I can really work, with my mind fully on what I am doing. One can accomplish so much more under such conditions. I work four days a week there, not whole days of course, but perhaps from nine until one or two. I prepare the concert and recital programs for the coming season, though I generally have them pretty well laid out in mind before I go to the mountains, in order to know just what music to take with me.

"Do I always play the piece the same way? No, I do not, never twice in just the same way. How is it possible? The environment is always different, so am I, so are the people, the weather, my mood; the violin, too, has moods sometimes. So you see how impossible for a violinist, above all others, to play twice in exactly the same way. This does not mean I have no plan of interpretation, for of course I have; everything is carefully thought out. When that is all done there is still leeway for variety and the unforeseen.

"Am I conscious of the audience? Yes, very much so; I do not see how it is possible for an artist not to be, if he is awake to the conditions and influences that surround him. So much depends on the audience. Some sit perfectly still, like wooden images; you feel as though you were playing to a stone wall, so unresponsive are they. Such an audience is a great strain on the player; it takes so much out of him. I feel perfectly exhausted after encountering this kind. On the other hand, a receptive audience never wearies me; I could play twice a day to such houses and never feel the effort. It is unexplainable, this mysterious <u>rapport</u> between player and listener. Two or three receptive ones in an audience help the player amazingly; they are able, sometimes, to enthuse a non-responsive crowd. Especially so if they sit near the front and have sympathy and knowledge. If they <u>know</u> when the piece is well played they show their appreciation by some demonstration at the close. The stolid people about them may look and wonder why they are clapping; but if they keep it up this very fact may arouse the others. Hand clapping is one way in which an audience can show its appreciation, one way in which it can respond and give out. That is what we musicians want, to take the people out of their self consciousness, to call forth response to what we ourselves are giving out to our listeners. Viewed in this light, applause has a deeper meaning than is sometimes considered.

"I like to feel the pulse of a town where I am to play, even if it be quite a small place. How can this be done when one remains but a few hours or a day? It is not so difficult. Soon after I arrive, I go for a walk, for I need fresh air after a night of railway travel. I explore the little town, its shop windows and principal streets. I drop into the music store, too, get acquainted with the proprietors, tell them who I am, ask about the victrola and the records. Then I meet the club people and others whom it is necessary for me to know. By the time the concert is to begin, I have a pretty good idea of the temper of that town and its people. When I go before them, I play as though that were the one concert of my life. The next night I play somewhere else and have almost forgotten the former town and the people I saw, even the very name of the hotel where I stayed the day before.

"It makes such a difference if there is a leading thought in a town. Even one person can do so much. Just suppose you went to stay in some little place, quite asleep on the subject of music. You would at once do something to stir them up; it might be a very simple thing at first. You might only call some of the people together once a week to listen to phonograph records. Then you might start a little music club, and before long you would suggest having a few artists

come during the season, to play and sing for them. And so the good work begins and goes on. The artists need not be of the highest or most expensive; many of the humbler sort are doing splendid work in just this way. They are filling the great need -- the need to make the people know and love good music. For example, I know and love the César Franck Sonata. When we play that in a music center, we know there will be a number in the audience who are familiar with it and admire it. How much greater sympathetic response would the artists secure, if all, or nearly all of the listeners understood the work. So it is understanding of what good music is that we are trying to spread as we travel the length and breadth of the land. Of course we aim to do things faultlessly at all times. I do not take as much comfort out of a recital where I am keyed up to the highest pitch, to uphold the standard of Art, as when I am playing for the love of music, to a great audience of men in khaki. They listen to Music, not to Art; their enjoyment of the music as music gives me infinite pleasure. I realize how this receptivity in the listeners reacts on the player, for I am quite taken out of myself, and am told afterwards that my playing was more spontaneous than I had dreamed. In fact, at such times, I scarcely realize I am in the body at all; I am just the avenue through which music itself is poured out to others."

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