

"DR. MUCK HAS LITTLE OR NO REGARD FOR HIS SOLOISTS"—JOSEF HOFMANN

Celebrated Pianist Criticises Boston Symphony Conductor's Method of Directing and Declares He Will Not Again Play with That Orchestra—Recollections of Rubinstein

By HARRIETTE BROWER

AMERICANS naturally feel a peculiar interest in the art of Josef Hofmann, for they have seen it grow and develop, from the wonder child of ten to the matured artist who stands at the apex of his profession. There must be thousands in this country who remember the marvelous exhibition of piano playing offered by the little Polish boy during the season of 1888, when, as a child prodigy, he was brought over to tour America.

He was such a little fellow, with such a serious face, as he came upon the stage in his simple sailor suit, and climbed upon the piano stool. We forgot all this after the orchestral prelude, when he began to play. Ah, then it was no longer a tiny child, but a man, who grappled with those handfuls of notes and flung them out into space with such sureness and freedom. That powerful, singing tone did not belong to the puny strength of a child of ten. Neither did that sympathetic reading of the score, that understanding of the meaning of the music.

No wonder people went wild with excitement and split their gloves in vociferous applause. It was almost beyond belief. The climax came when this mite of a boy began to improvise, on a theme handed up to him from any one in the audience. Then his powers were tested and not found wanting.

People shook their heads and said such precocity could not mature, he would probably never be heard from in the future. In that they were vastly mistaken. The child prodigy retired from the footlights and spent seven or eight years in close study. Then he returned to us a full-fledged artist. But that was not the end, only a milestone in his upward climb. Josef Hofmann was never content to stand still, content with present attainments. He has always been at work, always progressing. Each year we have watched him grow, have felt his art become finer, more expressive, more subtle, until now it seems well nigh perfect. Yet he does not take this view.

"There are still difficulties I have not yet overcome, limitations beyond which I have not passed. I have not all the power I desire, nor always the ability to express every emotion I wish to portray. There is still much I wish to accomplish along these lines." Admissions like these, coming from the lips of such a musician, is another proof of the humility of the truly great artist.

I found Mr. Hofmann in his apartments overlooking the park. A fluffy white poodle took great interest in the visitor, but was cautioned by his master, who held up a warning forefinger, "not to be a bore."

"You will meet my family by degrees," remarked the artist, smiling: "first my dog, then Mrs. Hofmann (who entered later), and my little daughter, Josepha,"



Josef Hofmann

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"It goes without saying that an artist in these days must have a great technique; it is after that really where piano playing begins. But I do not consider I possess a perfect technique, for I still have limitations. The artist, however, must not allow the public to guess his limitations. There is as much art in choosing the right kind of compositions as in playing them. There are still some pieces I would not attempt; some that require more power than I now have. The player should never urge his force to the limit; he must always keep something in reserve. If the tone is at its utmost capacity of production, it will sound hard; there must always be something back of it. Rubinstein was capable of immense power, for he had a very heavy hand and

degree of power. When all this is under control, he is ready to interpret the composition.

"I repeat that only when the player has control of the means, has he the true freedom absolutely to express himself. Then his interpretation takes on the nature of an improvisation.

"There are many circumstances which influence the artist's interpretation. His prevailing mood, the piano, the audience, the acoustics of the space in which he plays, and so on. I play very differently in the hall from what I do at home in my study. Before an audience I must take into account all the things I have mentioned. If I am to fill Carnegie Hall my dynamic scale is quite different from the one I would use in Aeolian Hall. There must likewise be corresponding differences in touch and tone color.

"You speak of the spiritual side of piano interpretation. To bring out that side surely depends on the absolute freedom and untrammelled condition, both mentally and physically, which one is in.

"I can affirm, therefore, that I do not know, beforehand, how I shall be able to play the piece, until I have tried the space, the piano, the hearers and myself. I may be able to control every point, and express myself with perfect freedom, and then I may not. There are times when it seems I have nothing to say. The notes of the piece are there, an inanimate skeleton. It is like a dinner table, daintily laid out, where the viands are wanting, and the listener goes away unfed.

"As I see it, there are two kinds of pianists. The more numerous sort may master every note, finger mark and sign of expression with commendable exactness. They form a careful conception of the piece; everything is thought out in the privacy of their studio. When they come before the audience they merely transfer this conception to the larger space, playing just as they would at home. They always try to play the piece in the same way.

"The other kind of artist—and their

number is small, I admit—never play the piece in just the same way. They strive for the control which gives absolute freedom of expression. They realize how many forces react on the artist upon the platform—even the temperature! If I am playing the Appassionata Sonata on a sultry day, the passion may be somewhat milder than it would be if the atmosphere were more bracing. I think I can say I belong to this small class of pianists who yield to the inspiration of the moment and improvise the composition at the piano.

"If one is to play with freedom and inspiration, one must strike out boldly and not hold back in timidity or bashfulness; these are bad faults. We sometimes see people in society who fear to make a *faux pas* here or there; so they hold back stiffly and bore everybody, besides being very uncomfortable themselves. The player must cast fear to the winds and risk everything. He should be an absolutely free and open avenue for the emotional and spiritual meaning of the music. When one can thus improvise the composition, it seems that the piano no longer sounds like a piano. It has been said that when Rubinstein played, the instrument did not sound like a piano. As you have heard Rubinstein, you remember how different his piano sounded from the ordinary kind; like a whole orchestra, or like another sort of medium, in spite of the wrong notes. He often struck false notes, yet in teaching he was very exact; he would not endure wrong notes, or slips of any kind, in his pupils or in himself. But in public he took the risk; he was not troubled about the false notes if only he could present the emotional content in the most compelling light.

"I heard Rubinstein play in Berlin, at his last concert there. Moszkowski sat beside me. Rubinstein, in playing his Valse Caprice, missed all but one of those treacherous high skips. When he hit that one correctly, Moszkowski turned to me and whispered humorously, 'We must excuse him, for he can't see any more.'

"I notice, Mr. Hofmann, that you have a metronome standing here. In one of your answers to questions in the *Home Journal*, I believe you disapproved of it."

"That is a misunderstanding. We cannot do without the metronome. It is the policeman! I may have said not to play with a metronome; as a true sense of rhythm cannot be taught in this way. But I never said not to use it. On the contrary, the metronome is a necessity to give us the correct idea of tempo; in that capacity I use it frequently.

"What do I think of modern music? Some of it is only contortion: Stravinsky and Schoenberg, for instance. Yet it is sought after as a fad, from curiosity. If one falls in a fit on the street, people run together, curious to see what has happened. What do they see? Contortion. The Stravinsky work, recently given at the Century, was fascinating in color, movement and ensemble, but the music was again—contortion.

"The absolute control of all means in the performer's power does not only belong to the pianist, it may belong to the flute player, the violinist or cellist. It must be possessed by the player who would improvise his interpretation.

"The piano is the universal instrument, the one independent medium. All other instruments either require, or are improved by an accompaniment, even the voice. But the pianist stands alone, and controls everything. He can express every emotion, even despotism, by means of his instrument. We often say the piano expresses all these, when we really know it can say nothing at all without the pianist. If he have a variety of emotions and the ability to express them, the piano will do his bidding."

"We regret you elected to give but one recital in New York this season."

"But I am playing a number of times with orchestra here. You have good ones in America."

"The Boston Symphony, for instance?"

"A very fine orchestra, but I do not enjoy playing with it, as the conductor, Dr. Muck, has little regard for the soloist. Indeed he does not greatly care to have a soloist, as he considers his orchestra sufficient without. The soloist receives little or no consideration. That is the reason I shall not again play with the organization. An orchestra should take the part of an accompaniment, and although the conductor directs it, he should not make himself prominent enough to detract from the soloist, but should, for the time being, efface himself. This the conductor of the New York Symphony is able to do. After we have played together five or six times, we come to be in perfect accord. A soloist ought to play with orchestras in smaller places before appearing in the large cities, if he wishes his ensemble to be at its best.

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CULLED FROM JOSEF HOFMANN'S PHILOSOPHY

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a child of nine, of marked artistic instincts, who is already doing creditable sketches in water color.

We spoke first of the little Polish boy, who aroused such a furore in America, at the age of ten.

"That was in '88," said Mr. Hofmann. "At that time I played the Mendelssohn Concerto in G Minor, also his Capriccio, and the Beethoven in C Major and C Minor."

"Do not forget the improvising."

"Oh, yes. I improvised, of course."

"Surely one who has such a perfect technique can accomplish all that one desires."

arm. His fifth finger was as thick as my thumb, think of it! Then his fingers were square on the ends; it was a wonderful hand.

"I do no technical work outside of the composition, for the reason that I find plenty to do in the piece itself. Every passage that presents the least difficulty is studied in minut detail, with well raised fingers, clear, distinct touch, taking care to put the finger down exactly in the middle of the key, and not on the side of it. The piece is studied with every kind of touch, tempo and dynamics, studied till the player has command of every possible variety of tone, touch and