

# LESCHETIZKY AND THE VIRTUOSO

How the Master Defined His Attitude Between the Musical and the Purely Technical Side of the Pianist's Art—An Interview with Mme. Melville-Liszniewska

By HARRIETTE BROWER

JUST before returning to her present home in Vienna, Mme. Marguerite Melville-Liszniewska found time to give me an hour's chat. She took up the thread of her story about where she had left it in our previous conversation. One almost forgot or lost sight of the fact that months of a busy professional season lay between the former occasion and the present.

The American pianist had spoken of her association, both as student and favorite assistant of Theodor Leschetizky. The other day she continued these reminiscences.

"People often speak as though Leschetizky cared only to bring out the virtuosity of the student, to form him into a brilliant pianist. This was true to a certain extent, but it was also true that he sought to develop the musical side, which ought to underlie all virtuosity.

"Here is one illustration of what I mean. It was the case of a little Polish boy of twelve. He really had a big talent, but was fond of putting on the airs of a virtuoso when he played. I did not prepare him for the Professor, but I knew him, as he lived in the same pension. When he came to play in class, he walked up to the piano, seated himself as though he were some great one and dashed into a Chopin Polonaise. He played it brilliantly, but had not gone more than eight measures, when Leschetizky went up, took his hands off the keys and pushed him off the stool, saying such playing was nothing but Pol-

ish exaggeration, and he didn't want to see him any more. I felt keenly for the little fellow, who was all broken up over the turn of affairs; so I tried to pacify the Professor, saying perhaps the stool was not quite right, or he may have been nervous and begged that he might have another chance. The professor turned on me then, saying, 'You women, you must spoil everything.' I was a bit cross with him for his attitude toward the little fellow, but I can see now that he saw this streak of superficiality and exaggeration in the boy and wanted to get it out. He could have done so if he had had the time to work with him. The boy needed several more such knocks. He played only a few times for Leschetizky. Five years later I heard him—now a full-fledged artist—in recital in Copenhagen. He was then merely a brilliant virtuoso, entirely superficial, and seemed to me quite on the wrong track. That special sort of superficial exaggeration was what the Professor tried to kill in the boy of twelve.

"An instance of how Leschetizky would handle a susceptible pupil. This was also a Polish lad, just over twenty, who came with his mother. She was devoted to him and looked after everything. The fellow was rather shy and given to blushing. The Professor, of course, sized up his mentality and took delight in saying things to shock him, just to see him color up. Once, when he had something expressive to play, he was asked:

"How would you make love to a girl? I suppose you would say, shyly, 'I love you'; whereas you should say it this way—the Professor struck an attitude and said the words with the greatest ardor.

"A humorous incident occurred one day in class. Someone knocked vehemently on a door quite near the piano. The Professor was somewhat annoyed that anyone should disturb him at that hour. I opened the door and found a Polish woman, who insisted she be allowed to play in class that day. She said she knew she could play well, for she had a sensation such as though cascades of water were running in her head; whenever she felt this way she could do her best. It seemed there must be something wrong with her head anyway, so I sent her up to the study to wait till the class was over. The Professor consented to hear her and I called her at the appointed time. The Professor was in a hilarious mood, as though expecting something out of the ordinary. The girls, too, lingered about to see what was going on. The woman began with Bach's Prelude in C Major. 'Oh, that's the accompaniment Bach wrote to Gounod's 'Ave Maria,'" remarked the Professor, with unctious. She followed this with some Chopin, all of it very well played.

## Questions of Interpretation

"As I have already said, the Professor never gave me special ideas for my own interpretation; he seemed satisfied with my conception. One has to be born with a sense of balance, of proportion. Leschetizky used to say, 'If you don't feel it you can't be taught it. Either you can play Schumann or you can't.'

"At first I used to think I could get

a great many ideas on interpretation by going to the class and listening to the others. But I found that he would treat the same piece quite differently for different pupils. If one took a certain reading as final, he was apt to find it changed on another occasion, if another pupil played the piece. So I gave up this idea. But when I began to take my own pupils to the Professor I saw the benefit of listening, for I began to appreciate the versatility of a great



—Photo by Mishkin.

Mme. Marguerite Melville-Liszniewska, Distinguished American Pianist and Former Assistant of Theodor Leschetizky

teacher, in being equal to every emergency, ready to fit the case to each moment.

"The longer I am in the work, the more I see the lack of talent for interpretation in the average pupil or even in those who have more than the average aptitude. Perhaps not more than one in fifty has any sort of idea of how the piece should sound as a whole, without being told. You would think they might feel where this part should be subdued and that part be brought; where the melody should be prominent,

or a hidden theme heard; where a retard or pause would be effective. Why must they always be told these things, why can they not be felt? These things come natural to me, and the Professor always said: 'Keep your individuality.'

## Tone in Piano Playing

"It seems to me the principal thing in playing is tone—a beautiful, sympathetic quality, as near like the human voice as possible. When Casals plays the opening scale passage in the C Major Prelude of the Bach Suite, as he does with such marvelous shading on each note, it is the tone which holds a New York audience spellbound; for there is no accompaniment to take away the attention from the player. It seems to me the greatest art that is thinkable.

"I always try at once to interest my pupils in tone study. It is a great incentive to those who have not formerly cared much for their music, or who have lost interest in it for any reason. To make everything they touch beautiful, if it be only a scale, chord or a Czerny study, gives zest to one's practice. I never allow them to hit the keys, but rather to press or caress them. Even chords can be pulled up, to draw the tone out of the piano. Of course, the fingers must have well-developed action. I might say they are like perfectly trained little animals, that run here and there to do our bidding; or they are the brushes with which we paint the pictures.

## Music Study in General

"It is such a beautiful thing to study music; I feel it is especially necessary in America to study it. We need this counter interest here, in a country so full of the superficial, the rush of business and of material interests. Artistic things get so easily crowded to the wall or pushed completely out of our lives. Even the least inclination to learn music should be encouraged in people of all ages. No one can foresee all it may mean to the individual. Americans are naturally artistic, the soil is receptive, but many material things swamp the artistic ones.

"I wish there could be more concerts given in the evening, when the men would have leisure to attend. How shall we ever cultivate our fathers, brothers and husbands, if they have so few opportunities to hear good music? It seems the fad to have the best concert in the daytime, when only the women can go. Let us begin to cultivate the man's artistic sense. What a boon to him, after the day's drive in business, to be able to hear some good music at night!

"The attitude of some of our people toward music is not one that is going to help this cultivation. We haven't sufficient respect yet for the art, the artist or the teacher. Some think if they don't like the playing of this or that performer, the trouble is with the artist, when it is doubtless with themselves. They are not willing to be humble enough to learn from one who is so far above them in knowledge. One sees this spirit in the students who go abroad. If in the lesson, Leschetizky only heard a small portion of the piece and chose rather to talk and expound his ideas, they often grew restive, wanted to turn the page, get over a lot of ground—get their money's worth! 'You should be glad to hear what I have to say; it is of more value to you than for you to play the piece,' he would say.

"We have not much musical history or experience behind us, it is true. When we have more, we may learn more reverence. It would be a great help to us to cultivate more of it now.

"I sometimes hear it said of a young musician who has come before the public in recital that he should not have ventured out yet; he was not ready, and so on. I feel differently. He had probably come to a point in his experience when he wanted to give out something within him which could no longer be repressed. For him it was a step forward, a test to show him where he stood. He no doubt will reap much more benefit from it than will his listeners. For now he can advance more surely and intelligently."

Mme. Melville has arranged to return to us next October, so that we may look forward to hearing again her fine, sympathetic playing.

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Pasquale Amato, the Metropolitan Opera Company baritone, left last week in his new motor car for his summer home on Lake Placid. The baritone was accompanied by his wife, his two sons and his chauffeur.

Marie Kaiser, the young American soprano, has given 100 concerts in seventy-one cities, covering fifteen different States, this season, and has thirty-eight to be added to her list before it ends.

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