

# Sevcik, Master-Teacher and Inaugurator of a New Method of Violin Instruction

By PAUL STOEVIING

[Portrait on Cover Page]

It was in the second half of the nineties that the fame of Jan Kubelik began to be heralded through the musical world. I remember his debut in London in the old St. James' Hall, the slender youth of nineteen or twenty with the finely chiseled head and the dark luminous eyes in an otherwise somewhat impassive face. His success was colossal.

Only a few months before I had offered the manuscript of my first book, "The Art of Violin Bowing," to a London publisher and the head of the firm in declining it, told me that he had just acquired the rights of the complete works of a remarkable Bohemian violin master, Otokar Sevcik, the teacher of a new violin wizard, Kubelik, and included in these works was a series of volumes with no fewer than 4000 bowing exercises. I was stunned, puzzled and a little dubious about a work of such elephantine proportions and asked the publisher to spell the foreign sounding name of this new star in the pedagogic heaven. He did and I left with my manuscript. Little recked I that one day, very soon, I should be one of the first admirers and ardent advocates in England of that very work for which my own had been refused.

I made the master's personal acquaintance some ten years later. He had come to London to introduce in an orchestral concert at the Queen's Hall eight of his most promising pupils from the Vienna Meisterschule. Otokar Sevcik's fame had by then traveled far and near on the wings of the success of his pupils, Kubelik, Marie Hall, Kocian and others. Students came to him from all parts of the world, in the small Bohemian town where he lived, a few hours' journey from Prague and from which he paid his weekly visits to Vienna. Again a year or so later I had the pleasure of being his guest at Pisek. I remember a wet August evening when the genial "Professor," no epithet somehow seems to fit him so well, met me on the doorsteps of his hotel. Of medium height and rotund figure, the man, with a quick energetic step toward me, extended a hearty welcome.

## An Indefatigable Walker

Rising early the next morning I found my host already up and ready after a frugal breakfast of dates and a glass of koumyss to go for his usual morning walk in the pine covered hills skirting the town. Although it had rained all night and the roads were execrable, the indefatigable professor was eager to show his guest what he loved best and what in his opinion constituted the only

thing the town could boast of interest to the stranger. In reality I thought it quite a charming little old world town, with many landmarks of an interesting historical past and a still more charming river winding its way through meadows and cornfields overlooked by wooded hills, as soon as it had left the city.

In the magnificent pine woods, reminding me of the Harz mountains, we wandered till the stroke of ten called the ever punctual and punctilious master back to his rooms at the hotel. Here he taught till 12.30 or 1 o'clock and after dinner taken in the open, sheltered behind oleander bushes, we set out for another protracted walk. From 4 till 9 or 10 p. m. without an interval of rest he taught again and finished the full day at a late hour by attending to his correspondence.

Every Saturday morning at 11 o'clock, by way of a stimulating change from the weekly curriculum, certain pupils, by arrangement among themselves, gave a recital of pieces they had studied. At these concerts, for such they were, the professor was guest of honor in company with the students' relatives. He listened without criticism or comment, making mental memoranda, however, for each performer's next lesson. All sufficiently advanced students thus appeared and the master selected from among them this or that one to be proposed for the Vienna Meisterschule, a much coveted honor.

## Pupils Have High Standards

On my particular Saturday morning at Pisek, sitting by Sevcik's side, I heard in succession Symphony Espagnole, first movement, a set of difficult variations by Wieniawski, played by a little English girl of fourteen; Concert of Richard Strauss, two movements of a Concerto by Wieniawski, Concert by Mozart, the Hungarian Airs by Ernst, the Concerto in G Minor by Bruch. One sees by these numbers, the standard of the students. Most of them showed a rare technical mastery and I marveled how the master got such almost uniformly surprising results. The Ernst Hungarian Airs were dashed off by a boy of fifteen or sixteen, a Rumanian, I think, with such ease and brilliancy that it brought a smile to his critical teacher's face. He told me that this boy showed an equal talent for the piano, and as one of his feats of precocious musicianship he mentioned that the boy had played the piano accompaniment of the Tchaikovsky Concerto from memory through simply hearing it a number of times.

Studying at the time were also Sascha Culbertson and Sigmund Feuerbach, a lad of fourteen whom I had heard and admired the winter before in the Brahms Concerto in London at a Philharmonic concert, and who was in Pisek to "brush up" with the professor. Altogether there were more than fifty students enjoying his instruction at the time of my visit. Many had come from across the seas, one from the Malay Straits, another from South Africa, and since they had come so far they also stayed even if they weren't future Kubeliks and Marie Halls, for the master was too kind to send them away or take them merely on approval under assistant teachers. He helped them all and was teacher, counselor and friend in one.

And now we hear that Otokar Sevcik is coming to the United States, to the Conservatory of Music at Ithaca, N. Y.

Is the pendulum of musical progress swinging further and further in the direction of the New World? The musical signs of the times seem to point that way, and the coming of this great violin pedagogue is one of them.

To appreciate Otokar Sevcik as a pedagogue one must, I think, go deeper than is suggested by the transient fame and success which a number of unusually talented pupils bring to a master. Sevcik's greatness and significance are revealed in his work. Any one who has examined these works with an unbiased and schooled mind and with pedagogical experience and insight, must acknowledge, whether he is in sympathy with them and their aim or not, that he stands a monument of industry and wholehearted devotion and a master thinker of the first order.

In any of the works of the master we meet always the same keen analytical penetration, the same originality in finding and unerring mastery in using the right means to obtain a desired end. To appreciate these unique qualities never before combined, to my knowledge, in any pedagogical achievement, we need only compare the works as a whole or in part with those of other writers in the same field. While the others seem to touch the shell, Sevcik goes to the kernel and lays it bare. Before his time little was known of the psychological and physiological laws underlying the activity of the muscles, of the principles of muscular relaxation and nerve impulses. Difficulties for both right arm and left hand were piled up regardless of the complexity of the muscular apparatus at work and the mental one behind it and in bowing a chronic rigidity in this or that part of the arm, in the left hand faulty intonation was too often the result. But with the intuitive grasp of genius, Sevcik, knowing the trouble finds the remedy, divining the laws he supplies the means of applying them.

## Inaugurates New Method

It would exceed the limits of this article to go into detail, but what among many things can be more admirable than the way he has arranged his material in "The Method for Beginners" after the principle of repeated single bar practice with mental exclamation signs? Is this not what we have always recommended our pupils to follow and what they persistently ignored because it is more inviting to play a whole study through, repeating it with all the mistakes of course, and calling that "practicing?"

I do not hesitate to say that much is due to Sevcik and his works that violin teaching generally has greatly improved in the last fifteen years or so, and not least in this country whence the largest number of his pupils hailed and where they are to be found in many smaller

cities promulgating the master's precepts and example.

But what of the excess of detail in his works, the superabundance of study material to which so many object? While agreeing with this objection, I think it should be remembered that in works of such encyclopaedic dimensions and completeness, the author could not very well measure his efforts by the standard of endurance and ability of this or that student, any more than Shakespeare could have accommodated his creative genius to the limited possibilities of one or another actor of his time. Excess can be remedied by intelligent choice, an omission remains an omission. And since excess was held by the Bohemian master to be preferable to omission, there is nothing to be done but to make the wise choice of an *embarras de richesses*.

## Umbrella-Sheltered Audience Applauds Rosalie Miller in N. Y.



Rosalie Miller, American Soprano

Two recent appearances made with success by Rosalie Miller were her solo engagement with the Police Band of New York at Prospect Park, Brooklyn, on Aug. 1, and with the National Symphony, Walter Henry Rothwell, conductor, at the Lewisohn Stadium in New York, on Aug. 13. At her Brooklyn concert the rain came down and the audience had to hear part of the program from under umbrellas. But Miss Miller sang "Elsa's Dream" from "Lohengrin" and "Il est doux" from "Hérodiade," to their great satisfaction and was encored. Herman Neuman played her accompaniments admirably.

At the Stadium Miss Miller offered the "Balatella" from "Pagliacci," which she sang with great spirit. She was also encored on this occasion.

## Cadman Sees Growth of Film Music

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chestra in himself—in playing would shout out to us the entrance of the various instruments); then follow full orchestra rhythms, and detailed development of themes and arabesques, bringing the whole overture to an almost sensational climax. Withal, it was not too free in form; there was a "Tchaikowsky flavor" about some of the themes, proving the point which Mr. Cadman had made, i.e., "a primitive folk-music is related, whether it is Indian, Cossack, or oriental."

"The modernists," said he, "many of them, at least," are too far away from real music. I believe in being progressive, but I do not go in for insanity, or faddism! The life of the people and their folk-music is in reality the foundation of our entire musical life. We will never be a musical nation until we educate the children in our public schools in music, teaching them, especially, the great American folk songs which are indigenous to the soil—the songs of the negro, the Indian, and those of Stephen Foster."

Mr. Cadman plans to write, next, the picture music for a great "Red Man" film to be made by a movie-firm of which Princess Tsianing (the Indian maiden who has concertized with Cadman for

the past several years) is vice-president. "Up to this time," said Mr. Cadman, "screen music is an undeveloped field, and yet in the near future it is bound to become one of the most important branches of musical work. There is no reason why the best-known American composers should not be enrolled in this great undertaking."

Asked how he worked, Mr. Cadman answered that he "laid aside everything else but the one thing of the moment." This absorbed concentration was noted as the composer dashed out of the room to telephone to the movie studio for an appointment to show us some of the pictures in the making.

Certainly here in "Los Angeles, the Beautiful" (the name of a city song which Mr. Cadman has just completed, and which he invited us to play over during his absence at the telephone) dwells an artist who does things in the spontaneous, normal manner which best fits a real American—an artist who can mow his own front lawn by moonlight, can talk blue prints with all the fervor and enthusiasm of an architect, and can also write operas, sonatas, and other large art works, as well as countless art-songs which are sung the world around.

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