

Interviewed by Frederick Martens, 1919

A METHOD WITHOUT SECRETS



When that celebrated laboratory of budding musical genius, the Petrograd Conservatory, closed its doors indefinitely owing to the disturbed political conditions of Russia, the famous violinist and teacher Professor Leopold Auer decided to pay the visit to the United States which had so repeatedly been urged on him by his friends and pupils. His fame, owing to such heralds as Efram Zimbalist, Mischa Elman, Kathleen Parlow, Eddy Brown, Fran Heifetz, Toscha Seidel, and Max Rosen, had long since preceded him; and the reception accorded him in this country, as a soloist and one of the greatest exponents and teachers of his instrument, has been one justly due to his authority and preeminence. It was not easy to have a heart-to-heart talk with the Master anent his art, since every minute of his time was precious. Yet ushered into his presence, the writer discovered that he had laid aside for the moment other preoccupations, and was amiably responsive to all questions, once their object had been disclosed. Naturally, the first and burning question in the case of so celebrated a pedagogue was: "How do you form such wonderful artists? What is the secret of your method?"

A METHOD WITHOUT SECRETS

"I know," said Professor Auer, "that there is a theory somewhat to the effect that I make a few magic passes with the bow by way of illustration and— presto —you have a Zimbalist or a Heifetz! But the truth is I have no method—unless you want to call purely natural lines of development, based on natural principles, a method—and so, of course, there is no secret about my teaching. The one great point I lay stress on in teaching is never to kill the individuality of my various pupils. Each pupil has his own inborn aptitudes, his own personal qualities as regards tone and interpretation. I always have made an individual study of each pupil, and given each pupil individual treatment. And always, always I have encouraged them to develop freely in their own way as regards inspiration and ideals, so long as this was not contrary to esthetic principles and those of my art. My idea has always been to help bring out what nature has already given, rather than to use dogma to force a student's natural inclinations into channels I myself might prefer. And another great principle in my teaching, one which is productive of results, is to demand as much as possible of the pupil. Then he will give you something!

"Of course the whole subject of violin teaching is one that I look at from the standpoint of the teacher who tries to make what is already excellent perfect from the musical and artistic standpoint. I insist on a perfected technical development in every pupil who comes to me. Art begins where technic ends. There can be no real art development before one's technic is firmly established. And a great deal of technical work has to be done before the great works of violin literature, the sonatas and concertos, may be approached. In Petrograd my own

assistants, who were familiar with my ideas, prepared my pupils for me. And in my own experience I have found that one cannot teach by word, by the spoken explanation, alone. If I have a point to make I explain it; but if my explanation fails to explain I take my violin and bow, and clear up the matter beyond any doubt. The word lives, it is true, but often the word must be materialized by action so that its meaning is clear. There are always things which the pupil must be shown literally, though explanation should always supplement illustration. I studied with Joachim as a boy of sixteen—it was before 1866, when there was still a kingdom of Hanover in existence—and Joachim always illustrated his meaning with bow and fiddle. But he never explained the technical side of what he illustrated. Those more advanced understood without verbal comment; yet there were some who did not. "As regards the theory that you can tell who a violinist's teacher is by the way in which he plays, I do not believe in it. I do not believe that you can tell an Auer pupil by the manner in which he plays. And I am proud of it since it shows that my pupils have profited by my encouragement of individual development, and that they become genuine artists, each with a personality of his own, instead of violinistic automats, all bearing a marked family resemblance." Questioned as to how his various pupils reflected different phases of his teaching ideals, Professor Auer mentioned that he had long since given over passing final decisions on his pupils. "I could express no such opinions without unconsciously implying comparisons. And so few comparisons really compare! Then, too, mine would be merely an individual opinion. Therefore, as has been my custom for years, I will continue to leave any ultimate decisions regarding my pupils' playing to the public and the press."

HOURS OF PRACTICE

"How long should the advanced pupil practice?" Professor Auer was asked. "The right kind of practice is not a matter of hours," he replied. "Practice should represent the utmost concentration of brain. It is better to play with concentration for two hours than to practice eight without. I should say that four hours would be a good maximum practice time—I never ask more of my pupils—and that during each minute of the time the brain be as active as the fingers."

NATIONALITY VERSUS THE CONSERVATORY SYSTEM

"I think there is more value in the idea of a national conservatory than in the idea of nationality as regards violin playing. No matter what his birthplace, there is only one way in which a student can become an artist—and that is to have a teacher who can teach! In Europe the best teachers are to be found in the great national conservatories. Thibaud, Ysaye—artists of the highest type—are products of the conservatory system, with its splendid teachers. So is Kreisler, one of the greatest artists, who studied in Vienna and Paris. Eddy Brown, the brilliant American violinist, finished at the Budapest Conservatory. In the Paris Conservatory the number of pupils in a class is strictly limited; and from these pupils each professor chooses the very best—who may not be able to pay for their course—for free instruction. At the Petrograd Conservatory, where Wieniawski preceded me, there were hundreds of free scholarships available. If a really big talent came along he always had his opportunity. We took and taught those less talented at the Conservatory in order to be able to give scholarships to the deserving of limited means. In this way no real violinistic genius, whom poverty might otherwise have kept from ever realizing his dreams, was deprived of his chance in life. Among the pupils there in my class, having scholarships, were Kathleen Parlow, Elman, Zimbalist, Heifetz and Seidel. VIOLIN MASTERY "Violin mastery? To me it represents the sum total of accomplishment on the part of those who live in the history of the Art. All those who may have died long since, yet the memory of whose work and whose creations still lives, are the true masters of the violin, and its mastery is the record of their accomplishment. As a child I remember the wellknown composers of the day were Marschner, Hiller, Nicolai and others—yet most of what they have written has been forgotten. On the other hand there are Tartini, Nardini, Paganini, Kreutzer, Dont and Rode—they still live; and so do Ernst, Sarasate, Vieuxtemps and Wieniawski. Joachim (incidentally they only great German violinist of whom I know—and he was a Hungarian!), though he had but few great pupils, and composed but little, will always be remembered because

he, together with David, gave violin virtuosity a nobler trend, and introduced a higher ideal in the music played for violin. It is men such as these who always will remain violin 'masters,' just as 'violin mastery' is defined by what they have done."

THE BACH VIOLIN SONATAS AND OTHER COMPOSITIONS

Replying to a question as to the value of the Bach violin sonatas, Professor Auer said: "My pupils always have to play Bach. I have published my own revision of them with a New York house. The most impressive thing about these Bach solo sonatas is they do not need an accompaniment: one feels it would be superfluous. Bach composed so rapidly, he wrote with such ease, that it would have been no trouble for him to supply one had he felt it necessary. But he did not, and he was right. And they still must be played as he has written them. We have the 'modern' orchestra, the 'modern' piano, but, thank heaven, no 'modern' violin! Such indications as I have made in my edition with regard to bowing, fingering, nuances of expression, are more or less in accord with the spirit of the times; but not a single note that Bach has written has been changed. The sonatas are technically among the most difficult things written for the violin, excepting Ernst and Paganini. Not that they are hard in a modern way: Bach knew nothing of harmonics, pizzicati, scales in octaves and tenths. But his counterpoint, his fugues—to play them well when the principal theme is sometimes in the outer voices, sometimes in the inner voices, or moving from one to the other—is supremely difficult! In the last sonatas there is a larger number of small movements—but this does not make them any easier to play. "I have also edited the Beethoven sonatas together with Rudolph Ganz. He worked at the piano parts in New York, while I studied and revised the violin parts in Petrograd and Norway, where I spent my summers during the war. There was not so much to do," said Professor Auer modestly, "a little fingering, some bowing indications and not much else. No reviser needs to put any indications for nuance and shading in Beethoven. He was quite able to attend to all that himself. There is no composer who shows such refinement of nuance. You need only to take his quartets or these same sonatas to convince yourself of the fact. In my Brahms revisions I have supplied really needed fingerings, bowings, and other indications! Important compositions on which I am now at work include Ernst's fine Concerto, Op. 23, the Mozart violin concertos, and Tartini's Trille du diable, with a special cadenza for my pupil, Toscha Seidel.

AS REGARDS "PRODIGIES"

"Prodigies?" said Professor Auer. "The word 'prodigy' when applied to some youthful artist is always used with an accent of reproach. Public and critics are inclined to regard them with suspicion. Why? After all, the important thing is not their youth, but their artistry. Examine the history of music—you will discover that any number of great masters, great in 'the maturity of their genius, were great in its infancy as well. There are Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt, Rubinstein, d'Albert, Hofmann, Scriabine, Wieniawski—they were all 'infant prodigies,' and certainly not in any objectionable sense. Not that I wish to claim that every prodigy necessarily becomes a great master. That does not always follow. But I believe that a musical prodigy, instead of being regarded with suspicion, has a right to be looked upon as a striking example of a pronounced natural predisposition for musical art. Of course, full mental development of artistic power must come as a result of the maturing processes of life itself. But I firmly believe that every prodigy represents a valuable musical phenomenon, one deserving of the keenest interest and encouragement. It does not seem right to me that when the art of the prodigy is incontestably great, that the mere fact of his youth should serve as an excuse to look upon him with prejudice, and even with a certain degree of distrust."