

TOSCHA SEIDEL

1899-1962

Interviewed by Frederick Martens, 1919

HOW TO STUDY



Toscha Seidel, though one of the more recent of the young Russian violinists who represent the fruition of Professor Auer's formative gifts, has, to quote H. F. Peyser, "the transcendental technic observed in the greatest pupils of his master, a command of mechanism which makes the rough places so plain that the traces of their roughness are hidden to the unpracticed eye." He commenced to study the violin seriously at the age of seven in Odessa, his natal town, with Max Fiedemann, an Auer pupil. A year and a half later Alexander Fiedemann heard him play a De Beriot concerto in public, and induced him to study at the Stern Conservatory in Berlin, with Brodsky, a pupil of Joachim, with whom he remained for two years. It was in Berlin that the young violinist reached the turning point of his career. "I was a boy of twelve," he said, "when I heard Jascha Heifetz play for the first time. He played the Tschaikovsky concerto, and he played it wonderfully. His bowing, his fingering, his whole style and manner of playing so greatly impressed me that I felt I must have his teacher, that I would never be content unless I studied with Professor Auer! In 1912 I at length had an opportunity to play for the Professor in his home at Loschivitz, in Dresden, and to my great joy he at once accepted me as a pupil.

STUDYING WITH PROFESSOR AUER

"Studying with Professor Auer was a revelation. I had private lessons from him, and at the same

time attended the classes at the Petrograd Conservatory. I should say that his great specialty, if one can use the word specialty in the case of so universal a master of teaching as the Professor, was bowing. In all violin playing the left hand, the finger hand, might be compared to a perfectly adjusted technical machine, one that needs to be kept well oiled to function properly. The right hand, the bow hand, is the direct opposite—it is the painter hand, the artist hand, its phrasing outlines the pictures of music; its nuances fill them with beauty of color. And while the Professor insisted as a matter of course on the absolute development of finger mechanics, he was an inspiration as regards the right manipulation of the bow, and its use as a medium of interpretation. And he made his pupils think. Often, when I played a passage in a concerto or sonata and it lacked clearness, he would ask me: 'Why is this passage not clear?' Sometimes I knew and sometimes I did not. But not until he was satisfied that I could not myself answer the question, would he show me how to answer it. He could make every least detail clear, illustrating it on his own violin; but if the pupil could 'work out his own salvation' he always encouraged him to do so. "Most teachers make bowing a very complicated affair, adding to its difficulties. But Professor Auer develops a natural bowing, with an absolutely free wrist, in all his pupils; for he teaches each student along the line of his individual aptitudes. Hence the length of the fingers and the size of the hand make no difference, because in the case of each pupil they are treated as separate problems, capable of an individual solution. I have known of pupils who came to him with an absolutely stiff wrist; and yet he taught them to overcome it.

HOW TO STUDY

"Scale study—all Auer pupils had to practice scales every day, scales in all the intervals—is a most important thing. And following his idea of stimulating the pupil's selfdevelopment, the Professor encouraged us to find what we needed ourselves. I remember that once—we were standing in a corridor of the Conservatory—when I asked him, 'What should I practice in the way of studies?' he answered: 'Take the difficult passages from the great concertos. You cannot improve on them, for they are as good, if not better, as any studies written.' As regards technical work we were also encouraged to think out our own exercises. And this I still do. When I feel that my thirds and sixths need attention I practice scales and original figurations in these intervals. But genuine, resultful practice is something that should never be counted by 'hours.' Sometimes I do not touch my violin all day long; and one hour with head work is worth any number of days without it. At the most I never practice more than three hours a day. And when my thoughts are fixed on other things it would be time lost to try to practice seriously. Without technical control a violinist could not be a great artist; for he could not express himself. Yet a great artist can give even a technical study, say a Rode itude, a quality all its own in playing it. That technic, however, is a means, not an end, Professor Auer never allowed his pupils to forget. He is a wonderful master of interpretation. I studied the great concertos with him—

Beethoven, Bruch, Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, Dvorak, the Brahms concerto (which I prefer to any other); the Vieuxtemps Fifth and Lalo (both of which I have heard Ysaye, that supreme artist who possesses all that an artist should have, play in Berlin); the Elgar concerto (a fine work which I once heard Kreisler, an artist as great as he is modest, play wonderfully in Petrograd), as well as other concertos of the standard repertory. And Professor Auer always sought to have us play as individuals; and while he never allowed us to overstep the boundaries of the musically esthetic, he gave our individuality free play within its limits. He never insisted on a pupil accepting his own nuances of interpretation because they were his. I know that when playing for him, if I came to a passage which demanded an especially beautiful legato rendering, he would say: 'Now show how you can sing!' The exquisite legato he taught was all a matter of perfect bowing, and as he often said: 'There must be no such thing as strings or hair in the pupil's consciousness. One must not play violin, one must sing violin!'