

# JAN KUBELIK

JAN KUBELIK was born at Michle near Prague on July 5th, 1880. His father was a market gardener and an amateur musician of ability who could get by on most instruments and, as best musician of the area, he led the village band.

He started teaching Jan's older brother the violin when he was seven, but Jan at five years begged to be allowed to play and within half a year of being given an instrument was well ahead of both his brother and his father. By the age of eight studies under Karel Weber and Karel Ondricek were sufficiently advanced for him to play a concerto by Vieuxtemps as his *début*. His father, however, despite poverty, refused many offers of rapid riches so that his son could remain at home and continue at school. Only at twelve did he enter Ševčík's class in the Prague Conservatory. He also studied composition. His studies continued until he was eighteen and his graduation piece was Paganini's first concerto with the cadenza by Sauret. His career commenced with a two year tour with L. Schwab as accompanist and he was fortunate to be heard at his Viennese *début* in 1898 by a Count Brozche, for he so impressed the Count that he was rewarded with the gift of a fine instrument. During the next decade his successes resembled those of a modern 'pop' idol and his financial improvement was likewise. In Rome he was decorated by the Pope, in London he was declared to be the new Paganini. In 1900 he played for Queen Victoria, in 1903 he was awarded the gold medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society, the youngest ever to receive it. In 1903 he married into the Hungarian aristocracy. The Daily Mail, for example, treated the event on par with a royal wedding today and enlightened its readers with full details of the Countess's previous marriage. He purchased a castle with lands in Silesia and several estates in his own country.

In study he was a master of long, slow practice, often for twelve hours a day until his fingers bled. In concert the technique was dazzling in its audacity and bravoura, but he was never given to fast playing as a demonstration of virtuosity. We have referred to a decade of successes. From 1910 on his popularity was less marked. His technique may have begun to slip a little or maybe the public wanted to be conquered by new idols or perhaps taste, his and that of the public too, was moving away from the merely dazzling to the more serious. To imply however, and as this issue might suggest, that his repertoire was only of the dazzling and the light would be unjust. He did play the major concerti; Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart; he did play Bach's Chaconne. At that period, however, the quality of reproduced sound (as distinct from what can now be extracted from records of that period) did not warrant the issue of large scale orchestral works. By 1915 he had turned to composition. Whether this was caused by the conditions of the time or by private

reasons unknown to us or because he himself felt that his repertoire was dating or his popularity waning can now be matters only of speculation. There may have been a personal crisis: Fred. Gaisberg thought that he suffered from an ear problem. Whatever the reason, he re-emerged shortly after the war with a repertoire in which weightier works now predominated. In addition to the main concerti, albeit some of them still with piano accompaniment, there were now six of his own. However by then the battle of Waterloo had been fought - for violinists, not in 1815 in Belgium, but in 1917 when a certain Jascha Heifetz appeared in the United States. From Elman to Zimbalist only Kreisler emerged unscathed. To write this is to measure not the inferiority of Elman, Hubermann, Kubelik, Spalding and Zimbalist but to realise that even in that breadth and diversity of extraordinary talent the newcomer was something special. Kubelik's playing, his style, is hard to put into words. Of any great artist even the briefest recording even of low technical quality reveals more than the longest dissertation. That there is much of his native land is evident when, for example, one hears the singers Emma Destinn and Otakar Marák. There is a feeling of wildness, of animal vitality in the playing which at once dispels any expectation that the long practices could have led towards staleness. Indeed the more fearsome the technical wizardry the more is the sensation that he is just extemporising for fun. His great teacher Ševčík is often represented today as a tyrannical slave driver. If he was indeed so it is not apparent in the playing of his greatest student.

His recording activities spanned most of his career. About sixty sides were made of which about half were not published. Alas, there is almost nothing of musical importance. He is not a speed merchant and there is the occasional minute scrape or moment of imperfect bow contact. Sometimes he climbs to a note in a manner reminiscent of many singers and to some ears similarly unattractive. But the transcendental technique, the very individual sound, the very personal vibrato and the dazzling double stops astonish and spell bind, and in so doing banish from the memory any momentary peccadillos.

The advances in recording are very apparent. In general the surface noise decreases and the maximum side length increases. The *Lucia di Lammermoor* sextet from the first session is perhaps even more exciting though only about half as long as the later version. The two pieces from *Carmen* are amongst the most electrifying playing this writer has ever heard. In any case, for him, Sarasate's arrangement is more enjoyable than the opera. In the Bazzini piece the note written to be played consecutively on all four strings is hard work. This is puzzling for one of Kubelik's abilities. The "Moto Perpetuo" is played more slowly than usual maybe because the player is not interested in speed as a form of exhibition but more likely to suggest a clock-like perpetual motion machine; perfect and unceasing in regularity. The Wieniawsky and Hubay pieces which follow, suffer for being recorded on an unsteady turntable but the listener should persevere for they are quite remarkable. The listener who has not heard Kubelik before may like to pause and for a moment to consider what he expects to hear next (in itself always a healthy thing in a CD recital) for these two perhaps of all his recordings bring together most successfully the qualities we have been trying to describe. If he did decline then they are just

within the years of his peak and coincidentally at a time by which recorded sound was much improved.

In the mid-30s Kubelik made a series of electrical recordings about which absolutely nothing is known beyond that eight sides have survived; luckily in remarkably good condition. They have plain white labels, the style and the numbering correspond to the work of no company so far identified and there is no indication whether they were for issue or just for private use. Even the date is a guess based purely on their technical quality as recordings. The gaps in the series could have been of other artists, but some at any rate must have been of Kubelik as two sides are the second parts of pieces. The first six are of his own compositions. The idiom is very much his own and if at first the music seems strange then on further acquaintance it becomes likeable if not great. What cannot be gainsayed is that if there had been any decline then he was fully recovered.

Kubelik appeared with other artists from time to time and just as Elman made records with Caruso and Kreisler with McCormack, so he with Melba. He also had his own quartet for a few years. These are no records of this and one is forced to guess that, along the lines of the Elman Quartet of which there are records, the other members were definitely accompanists.

He continued to undertake heavy tours. For example, from October 19th to November 15th 1934 he gave eighteen concerts in as many towns from Birmingham to Worthing, from Torquay to Ipswich. A friend who heard him about then (probably in Exeter in 1938) reported that he went through the motions, but that little if any sign of greatness remained.

In 1940 to mark his 60th anniversary he gave a series of ten concerts in Prague. These were highly acclaimed though whether in those dreadful times the desire to salute a great national hero took precedence over critical assessment cannot now be known. His death occurred later in the same year.

He generally played a Guarnerius or a Stradivarius. He owned more than one of each. It is thought that for the records he used a Stradivarius.

His national language was Bohemian but as he travelled through countries in which English, French and German were spoken he rapidly acquired those languages. A group of six records which he made for the Supraphon Company will appear later in this series.

On behalf of collectors Symposium Records thanks Raymond Glaspole for his generosity in sharing records from his collection, many of them unique. Thanks are also due to Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for help and assistance with the production.

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