

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1291

One could hardly have a greater contrast than that between the two great violinists who flourished in the first half of the 20th century and who bore the name Albert. Our own Albert Sammons came from the lower middle class, was virtually self-taught as a fiddler and spent much of his early life playing in cafés and hotels. The American Albert Spalding was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, frequented the best places and was schooled by the finest teachers available. What they had in common was that were both perfect gentlemen. There was something very European, almost British, a sort of patrician reserve, about the musicianship of Albert Spalding, who came from the well-known sports-goods family with "12 generations of Yankee ancestry". He was born in Chicago on 15th August 1888, but spent the winters of his childhood in Florence, where he heard de Sarasate, Joachim and Busoni, and began to play the violin given to him for Christmas 1895. He was taught in Italy by Ulpiano Chiti, but back in the United States during the summers he learnt with Jean Buitrago, a Spanish South American who had been a protégé of Edward MacDowell. At fourteen Spalding became the youngest musician since Mozart to gain the diploma of the Bologna Conservatory. He then went for two years to Narcisse-Augustin Lefort at the Paris Conservatoire, also studying counterpoint and composition. In Florence he had further composition lessons from Antonio Scontrino.

His Paris début was on 6th June 1905 at the Nouveau Théâtre in Saint-Saëns' B minor Concerto with Lefort conducting; he also played Bach's "Chaconne", de Sarasate's "Zigeunerweisen" and Beethoven's Romance in F. He then took part in some of Édouard Colonne's concerts, in one appearing on the same bill as Adelina Patti, in one of her last appearances. For a while he toured Europe, playing the Saint-Saëns' B minor Concerto under the composer's baton in Florence in 1906, and making his London and Manchester début in 1907 with Hans Richter, with, on the composer's recommendation, the same concerto. He auditioned in Berlin for Joseph Joachim, who felt he was already on the right path and declined to teach him. In any case, Joachim died only months later. Back in England, Spalding played for the Royal Family, taking care not to give them the whole of Bruch's G minor Concerto, and playing short pieces in the second half of the programme. His American début came in 1908 with a brace of New York Symphony Orchestra concerts under Walter Damrosch in Carnegie Hall; the inevitable Saint-Saëns Concerto B minor and, two days later, the Tchaikovsky concerto. In America he met the Dutch accompanist Coenraad V. Bos, with whom he visited Holland. In 1910 he toured Russia, pausing, en route, to play the Beethoven and Tchaikovsky Concertos in Warsaw. He was thrown by having to play his first St. Petersburg recital at 1 o'clock in the morning, and following the soprano Marya Kusnetzova, but he triumphed and had numerous other successes at society soirées. Going on to Finland, he played the Beethoven and Mendelssohn Concertos under Robert Kajanus, and met Sibelius, although, to his eventual regret, he did not get round to playing that composer's concerto for many years. He also gave recitals with Oskar Merikanto at the piano, and was made so welcome that he returned a number of times. Meanwhile he added to his successes in Russia, including a performance of the "Kreutzer" Sonata with Raoul Pugno at a gala evening. In 1911-12 he toured the United States, linking up for the first time with André Benoist, the great

accompanist, who became his inseparable recital companion from then on. They toured Europe together in 1912, playing extensively in Scandinavia, and visited Russia in 1912-13 and 1913-14.

Spalding's rise to prominence was interrupted by service in World War I, during which he became a close Army colleague and friend of Lieutenant Fiorello La Guardia, already a Congressman and later to be Mayor of New York. This contact led to his doing secret service work in Spain. He picked up his career again in 1919, the year in which he married the beautiful Mary Vanderhoef Pyle. Benoist and Jacques Thibaud played at the ceremony. He formed a sonata partnership with the pianist and conductor Ossip Gabrilovich, and was busy in the concerto repertoire. As will already be apparent, his background allowed him to move easily in high society circles so that he was much in demand all over the world at the houses of wealthy and titled music-lovers. During the inter-war years, much of the opulence of the pre-Great War ancien régime remained, even if money rather than rank was now the ruling factor. Spalding went everywhere and knew everyone. In their New York apartment, he and Mary played host to such musicians as Thibaud, Heifetz, Kreisler, Kochanski, Gabrilovich, Kindler, Salmond and Samehtini. The chamber music played there must have been celestial. Apart from those already mentioned, his piano partners included Ernő Dohnányi, whose first concerto he played all over America.

As America became once more at war he volunteered again, and was assigned to psychological warfare work in Italy. There he broadcast under the name of Major Sheridan. He became known as the "Father of the partisans", and was credited with saving many lives. This strenuous work took its toll on him, however, and probably shortened his life. It is said that during this period he only once played the violin, borrowing an instrument to comfort hundreds of terrified people, huddled in a cave in Naples during an air attack, with an impromptu performance of the Beethoven concerto.

He retired in 1950. His last public performance was a rather more orthodox performance of the Beethoven concerto, with the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra, under Efrem Kurtz, at the Lewisohn Stadium. He died on 26 May 1953.

Albert Spalding wrote enjoyable memoirs, *Rise to Follow*, and a novel about Tartini. At the time of his centenary in 1988 his love letters to Mary, written during his travels, were published. His musical compositions included a quartet, two violin concertos and *Etchings*, a set of pieces for violin and piano. He was a prolific recording artist. His first contracts were with Edison, and then with Brunswick. His records with these companies were, as was usual then, of many short pieces. Fortunately he was next taken up by Victor, for whom he recorded more substantial fare. However, what was potentially his most popular recording, of Mendelssohn's E minor Concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy, did not turn out as well as was expected, and the performance was published only in the Compact Disc era. A 1940 recording of his own Sonata for Solo Violin has remained unissued. After his retirement Spalding made records for Remington and for Allegro, and various related labels. These show him in decline, but represent him in important repertoire, including the Brahms Sonatas with Dohnányi at the piano.

Albert Spalding, a handsome, cultured, dignified man, was essentially a classical player, although with his schooling he also made a fine effect in the French repertoire. His playing was invariably in perfect taste, and, at his best, he gave poised performances with

a good deal of inner tension. His recording of Spohr's *Gesangsszene* is regarded as the finest ever accorded the work, more controlled than that of Kulenkampff and more sympathetic than that of Heifetz. In Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante he and the great Scots-born violist William Primrose, a player of similar classical instincts, are ideally matched. With his long-time partner André Benoist he gives ideal performances of sonatas by Handel, Tartini, including his own cadenza, Mozart, Brahms and Franck. The present album includes some of his finest records, all of them well recorded for the time.

If we feel unease on listening to certain artists because of their moral attitudes and political associations, it is because we believe that a work of art, including a musical performance, is not an isolated thing in itself, but a communication between human beings. The art of Albert Spalding is to be enjoyed in comfort; he was an accomplished artist and a thoroughly decent human being.

Tully Potter

Acknowledgements: The illustration is from the Tully Potter Collection. Thanks are due to Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for assistance with the production.

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