SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1301

The Great Violinists – Volume 15

LOUIS PERSINGER was born at Rochester, Illinois* in 1887, and was playing in public by the time he was twelve. At thirteen he was enrolled at the Hochschule für Musik in Leipzig. His studies in violin and piano were equally successful, and Artur Nikisch, under whom he studied conducting, regarded him as one of the Hochschule's most talented students. He spent the next three years giving concerts and studying with Ysaÿe in Brussels; then he worked for two years with Thibaud in Paris. His American début was with Stokowski in Philadelphia in 1912. He returned to Germany to lead the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, but in 1915 he decided to return home. He moved from orchestral playing to form a quartet, and to conduct the San Francisco Chamber Music Society. About this time, also, he began to teach. Amongst his first students, and the one who brought him most renown, was Yehudi Menuhin. In 1930 Persinger succeeded Leopold Auer at the Juilliard School, where he remained until his death in 1966.

Persinger's teaching methods were particularly successful with children and, like Leopold Auer and Carl Flesch, he involved himself in launching their careers. The greatest acclaim awarded by the public at large to any of his students has gone, undoubtedly, to Menuhin; but it is fair to add that this is not unconnected with Menuhin's appearances on world as well as musical platforms. However, of Persinger's pupils many lovers of the violin have had greater regard for the two subjects of this anthology.

GUILA BUSTABO was born in Wisconsin in 1917. Her father was Italian, and her mother Bohemian. She started to play in public at the age of nine, after being taught by Leon Sametini for five years. When Persinger first heard her she was already a widely-known prodigy. It seems his immediate response was that much re-training would be necessary, and that re-training presented problems considerably greater than those of initial training.

Persinger accompanied her at her New York début in 1931 (She was then fourteen, and remained so for several years.); the audience included Erich Kleiber, Ernst Schelling and Arturo Toscanini, the critics praised. With the commencement of her European career, in London in 1934, a world-wide celebrity career seemed assured. However, she apparently decided to remain in Germany when many others were no longer welcome there, and is rumoured to have married a German officer. Little is known of her post-1945, though she did attempt a come-back in the 1960s, and she taught for some years at Innsbruck.

RUGGIERO RICCI was born in San Francisco in 1918. From remarks made by him later in life, we learn that Ricci suffered from parents determined to produce virtuoso musicians. He and his six siblings each had to learn an instrument. His choice of piano was disallowed; are we entitled to speculate that his parents may have been wiser than he recognised? He was taken to Persinger. His début followed at the age of eight, well actually ten, in San Francisco, his teacher accompanying. In 1929 he appeared, this time with orchestra, in New York; the critics more or less repeating what they had said of Menuhin two years before.

For some reason, which he later regretted, Ricci senior had signed over custody of his son to one of Persinger's assistants. An unedifying battle ensued over custody. The boy was removed from Persinger's tutelage and sent to Michel Piastro, a former student of Auer, now leader of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. After something of a crisis, Ricci crossed the Atlantic. Great efforts were made to equal the sensation created for and by Menuhin, but it was not equalled. After some lessons with Kulenkampff in Germany and Stassevich, another Auer pupil, in America, Ricci returned to Persinger.

After service in the American army Ricci rebuilt his career. His repertoire is large, and he is very highly regarded, but it is in the technically supremely demanding that he is held in greatest awe.

Bustabo, Menuhin and Ricci are from the same stable. Somebody unaware of this would within a few bars link Bustabo and Ricci, but not Menuhin; a great teacher appreciates the possibilities in each student, and develops these rather than produce clones of himself.

Bustabo's playing is exciting; a very occasional minor mishap indicating that she is willing to take risks. Ricci's playing is no less exciting, of course, in his own style; but mere mortals are unable to determine whether he does take risks - and they always come off, or his technical assurance is so transcendental that risks are unnecessary for him.

* Rochester, Illinois is given in every source consulted; however no Rochester has been traced in Illinois.

Acknowledgements: Thanks are due to EMI Archives for the dates of the London recordings, and to Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for assistance with the production.

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