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American Maverick

Violinist Maud Powell dazzled critics and crowds throughout the world

By *Miranda Wilson*

“It is doubtful whether Sarasate himself is more nimble on the fingerboard or has greater mobility of the right wrist,” reads a British concert review in *Musical Courier* magazine from 1900. “Miss Powell is . . . the most sensational violin player that we have ever heard. She cultivates a kind of demonic style, laying about her in a continual frenzy where there are

rapid or complex passages to be played . . . Even the most formidable passages in the concerto came out with a rip and a snap that were always eloquent of the performer’s fiery energy, correct musical ear, and thorough grasp of the composition.”

The performer that so dazzled the newspaper critic was the 33-year-old Maud Powell (1867–1920), the first Ameri-

can violinist—indeed, one of the first women violinists of any nationality—to become a soloist of international standing. The story of how she got there, as documented by her biographer, Karen Shaffer, reads like an adventure novel.

Born in the unlikely location of small-town Illinois, Powell was the daughter of an unusual family. Her father, a well-known educational reformer, and her mother, a suffragist and amateur musician, believed in careers for women and spared no effort in educating their daughter. Though playing the violin was considered unladylike by some in polite American society, little Maud found her first role model in the French violin virtuoso Camilla Urso, whose touring visit to Illinois proved a lifelong inspiration. Even if Powell’s choice of instrument challenged social convention, she found no opposition from her family, who sought the best violin teachers for her in Chicago and beyond.

Powell flourished in her early studies, but at that time, the music conservatories in the United States were no match for those in Europe. Aged 13, Powell moved to Germany, accompanied by her ambitious mother and her younger brother, while her father remained behind in Illinois. Over the next four years, Powell became a star student of three famous pedagogues of the violin: Henry Schradieck in Leipzig, Charles Dancla in Paris, and Joseph Joachim in Berlin. Through their very different teaching styles, Powell became the heir to the greatest traditions of European violin playing. Though she could have built her career in Europe, she chose to bring her talents home to the United States, where the classical music industry was still in its infancy.

It was not an easy life, and Powell often recalled just how difficult it was for a woman to build a music career. Her stamina for the touring life, including grueling train journeys and often substandard hotel rooms, brought concerts to every corner of the United States. Famed for her warm-hearted sense of humor as much as her virtuosity, Powell became a beloved figure even in the smallest, most remote communities.

Powell was quick to promote new music. Notably, she gave the first American performances of many of the greatest violin concertos of the 19th century. These included the G minor concerto of Max Bruch, a personal friend. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, another friend, dedicated his violin concerto to her—though he had to resend the score and parts to America after the originals sank with the *Titanic*. Powell's New York premiere of the Tchaikovsky concerto was described by critics as "victorious: her bowing was large and even, her tone full and clear and sweet, though powerful." Antonín Dvořák was so moved by her Carnegie Hall performance of his concerto that he rushed backstage to congratulate her. An elderly Camille Saint-Saëns insisted on conducting her performance of his third violin concerto, pronouncing her playing "magnificent." Jean Sibelius, writing to thank Powell for performing and promoting his violin concerto in the United States, called her "The Violin Queen." Powell was also a tireless advocate for American composers and helped further their careers by widely performing their works.

Powell was sensitive to the sacrifices her parents and brother had made for her career and often expressed ambivalence about whether young women should aspire to a professional life. In a 1908 opinion piece for *New Idea Women's Magazine*, she posed a difficult question to her readers: "Shall you become a great artist and have the multitude at your feet (if you are lucky), or shall you marry the faithful and honest Dick, live a life of humdrum domestic felicity, and suffer ever after with a gnawing sense of defeated and thwarted ambition, a bitter 'might-have-been'?" After debating whether it was fair for a professional woman to marry at all and

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recounting a few cautionary anecdotes about the downfalls of various overambitious women professionals, she concluded: "Frankly, I say to you that 'the game is not worth the candle,' unless your music is a part of your very fiber, your breath of life. If you love it thoroughly, love it objectively (so few women do that), and cannot be happy without it, then go ahead."

This, in effect, was what Powell had done herself. Happily, her trailblazing career did not have to preclude the possibility of marriage. While touring Britain with John Philip Sousa and his band, Powell met a concert manager named H. Godfrey Turner. The two became fast friends, and soon enough, more than friends. After some anguished

reflection, Powell agreed to marry him. Unlike many middle-class Victorian husbands, Turner did not expect his wife to relinquish her career. Nor did it trouble him that she did not take his name, though she adopted the title "Madame Powell" as a compromise. Cheerful-tempered, adoring, and entirely unthreatened by his wife's fame, Turner acted as Powell's manager for the rest of her life. Their marriage was devoted, supportive, and by all accounts very happy.

Despite Powell's seemingly unstoppable energy and a constitution robust enough to tolerate all the discomforts of life on the road, she suffered a heart attack before a concert in Pennsylvania and died shortly afterwards. She was only 52 years old. Her family were devastated; Karen Shaffer recounts a poignant anecdote of Powell's elderly mother sewing quilts out of Powell's old concert gowns as she grieved her daughter.

Though Powell's life was cut short, her recorded legacy lives on. Fortunately for posterity, Powell lived in the era of early recording technology, and somehow found time between 1904 and 1919 to make dozens of recordings for the Victor Talking Machine Company. These are now available in digitally remastered versions on compact discs and streaming services. Even through the crackling of the relatively primitive technology, we can hear the brilliance of Powell's violin playing. In Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen*, she matches a dashing tempo with almost unbelievably crisp articulation. Her finale to Mendelssohn's violin concerto (with piano accompaniment, as the recording equipment could not handle recording it with an orchestra) shows exquisite attention to detail in phrasing. She is generous with vibrato and, in comparison with other early 20th-century recordings of string players, sparing with audible slides. Above all, she possesses a tone unmatched in power and directness of emotion.

Powell's passing was mourned all over the world. Her obituary in the *New York Times* lamented the loss of "the foremost woman violinist in the world, and . . . one of the greatest musicians ever produced in the United States . . . She proved the estimate of the great Joachim by continuous advance to the highest realms of her art." ■

Maud Powell



Violinist Maud Powell won a Grammy Award in 2014, which, while a decided honor, may not sound like such an unusual thing until you consider that at that time, she'd been dead for 94 years. The Recording Academy decided to honor Powell anyway, bestowing upon her its Special Merit Award for Lifetime Achievement. She was indeed an early entrant to the world of recording, her playing etched into the discs of the Victor Talking Machine Company's Celebrity Artist series beginning in 1904. Often called upon to discuss Powell's impact on string playing, having dedicated a 2007 recording to her legacy, Rachel Barton Pine heralded her importance in a piece on Grammy.com. "Every industry needs its pioneers, and the recording industry found one in legendary American violinist Maud Powell," she said. "She stood for the highest achievement in the art of violin playing and radiated an unbounded spirit of adventure."

Thus, Powell seemed an obvious choice during the surprisingly difficult process of selecting musicians to include in this issue's

special section—a new focus on historical pioneers of the string-playing world: profiles of conductors and players and composers (and player-composers) who nudged boundaries aside and led the way for others with their passion and creativity.

The task was onerous only in that *Strings* provides finite space. We could've filled it five times over and still wished for more. So if you enjoy the section, we could easily be convinced to do it again. Perhaps there are particular musicians you'd like to see featured next time. Please do let us know.

String pioneers aren't to be found only in that section, however. There are forward thinkers profiled throughout these pages, including bassist Avery Sharpe, violinist Lindsey Stirling, cellist Maya Beiser, violinist Scott Yoo, and many others. The string world is a tantalizing mix of past, present, and future, of gazing back with respect as one strides ahead. I hope you enjoy this issue's mix meant to reflect that reality, and, as ever, I'd love to hear what you think.

—Megan Westberg

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