

THE BOY OF TEN PHENOMENAL FINGERS

By Mary B. Mullett

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM PHOTOGRAPHS



PHOTOGRAPH BY SZACINSKI, CHRISTIANA
LITTLE JOSEF HOFMANN
[When first attracting the attention of the musical world]

SEVERAL months ago there occurred something to which the musical world of America had been looking forward for ten years. It was the return of Josef Hofmann, the pianist. In 1887 he came over here, a dimpled little boy with warm brown eyes, a lovable smile, and ten phenomenal, small fingers. He was a child

prodigy. Even the critics were compelled to admit that. They saw more than precocity, however, in the child pianist. They prophesied that the prodigy would develop into an artist if the men who were exploiting him for commercial reasons would let him go quietly home and work out his musical salvation without pausing for concert tours. He did go back, and for a long time was scarcely heard of—indeed he seemed to be almost forgotten by the American public.

Last winter he came once more. The dimples, the smile and the warmth in his clear brown eyes were little changed, but the child had become a man; the prodigy had become an artist.

To-day Josef Hofmann is one of the most remarkable pianists and one of the most interesting personalities with whom the American music-loving public is acquainted. He has created a great furore and is the object of much adoration. Happily, however, he is not spoiled by it. In spite of his twenty-two years he is as unaffected as any good-natured lad of sixteen. He is so boyish, both in appearance and in manner, that it is not easy to think of him even now as other than a prodigy. But this impression changes with a more intimate knowledge of him. He is still a prodigy, perhaps, but a prodigy of genius, not of precocity. As for his boyishness, his love of fun, his modesty, they are apparently only the outward evidence of a temperament which is self-contained, philosophical and inflexible.

Some people who have seen him only on the platform speak of him as stolid. Nothing could be more inconsistent with his character. He has a delightfully keen sense of humor. He is devoted to athletic sports. He talks well and with enthusiasm. He produces the most vivid impression of alertness and interest. And it is not a mere form. His interest is genuine and active. Some one asked him, while he was here, whether he had any ambition outside of his music.

"Surely," he said. "I've ambition in everything I do. I want to do it better than any one else."

Hofmann is such a mixture of paradoxes that it is not altogether a surprise to find that, next to music, the subject which most keenly interests him is physics. Electricity and music apparently walk hand in hand in his dreams of the future. He has invented a horseless carriage, which he will have patented in Berlin. Edison, to whom Hofmann showed the drawings for this automobile, pronounced the invention a very clever one. The two geniuses are warm friends, given to mutual admiration, which, on Hofmann's side, goes to this extreme:

"I would rather be Edison," he said, "than be the greatest pianist on earth!"

After all, though, Hofmann has had but one idol. There has been but one man in whom he has centred the most devoted hero-worship of which he is capable. That man was Anton Rubinstein. Aside from the elder Hofmann, Rubinstein was the boy's only teacher. He gave him forty lessons—and an ideal. In return, Hofmann felt for his master a loyalty and a devotion which amounted to idolatry. When Rubinstein died, Hofmann, who was in London at the time, shut himself in his room for two days, refusing food or to see any one.

If the people who have called him stolid had said that he was undemonstrative or self-contained they would have spoken more correctly. His father says that he has never seen the boy shed a tear—never, that is, since Josef was a mere child. When anything happens to worry or depress him he goes about, sometimes for a day or two, with scarcely a word to any one. He does not appeal for sympathy. He apparently wrestles with his problems, and works them out, or gives them up, all by himself, in this way giving evidence of his independent nature.

Perhaps he owes his paradoxical temperament to conflicting tendencies which he may have inherited. His father is a German, while his mother is a Pole by birth. Josef himself was born in Cracow, January 20, 1876. The family moved to Berlin, however, when he was only two years old, so his education and environment have been German. But in many ways he is essentially a Slav. Like all Poles, he has a remarkable facility in acquiring languages and now speaks five of them fluently: Polish, Russian, German, French and English.

When he was only three years old he began to pick out tunes on the piano, playing them with one chubby, baby finger, and improvising some exceedingly infantile accompaniments with his left hand. His first real appearance in public was in Berlin, in 1886, at the Hotel de Rome.

"What the little mite, who scarcely looks nine years old, who could not yet reach the pedal with his feet, and is, therefore, in need of a special appliance in order to use it—what he accomplished as pianist and musician is so incredible that the present generation has in all probability not yet experienced anything like it."

It was in this way that one of the critics wrote after the initial concert. Hofmann played a second time, and another critic wrote: "An indescribable excitement took hold of the public. The word 'Mozart' was on the lips of every one." The next year he came to America and gave fifty concerts in New York, Boston and Philadelphia. It was a harvest of gold, but partly owing to the stand taken by certain Americans, who felt that the boy's future



PHOTOGRAPH BY SCHAARWACHTER, BERLIN
JOSEF HOFMANN AT WORK

[The young pianist studying anew the beauties of a favorite selection]

was being sacrificed, he was taken back to Berlin to finish his musical education.

At this time his father was his only teacher, with the exception of Professor Urban, with whom Josef studied the theory of music and the art of composition. Finally, however, father and son came to a point where they differed. The indomitable will of the young musician would not yield, and he describes the result by saying with a smile:

"Then I studied under Mr. Josef Hofmann for a while."

It was the realization of his dreams when he was accepted by Rubinstein as a pupil. During Hofmann's recent visit here the critics repeatedly made the mistake of assuming that the young pianist had learned to play Rubinstein's works under the personal direction of Rubinstein himself. This is incorrect. Rubinstein never gave Hofmann any such instruction.

"He would not allow me to play his own works before him in private," said Hofmann. "He never told me how to play them. He did not want people to say that he was trying to perpetuate his own fame. Once I played his Concerto in D minor at Hamburg when he conducted the orchestra. I wanted him to let me play it for him first so that he could criticise me, but he kept putting me off. He would tell me nothing. Only—after the concert—he put his arms around me and said that I was a great young man. Me!" and Hofmann tapped himself on the breast and laughed incredulously—though his eyes shone.

It is well known that Rubinstein refused to follow with Hofmann the method he pursued with other students. It was his custom to play a new piece for his pupils so that they might better understand it. Asked why he never played anything for Hofmann he replied: "He does not need it; he gives everything out of his own self."

While studying with Rubinstein the young musician practiced three hours a day. He believes that most students make the mistake of over-practicing. When he came to this country the first time he was practicing an hour a day. For two years after his return to Germany he

practiced two hours a day. During the next two years he averaged four hours daily, and after that, until he went to Rubinstein, six hours daily. This he regards as excessive. "One's mind grows stupid and confused," he says, "and one's fingers follow the confusion of the brain. Another mistake of young pianists is that they use too much force in practicing. One should play just hard enough to keep the fingers and wrists from getting stiff. One is not aiming for artistic results as one is in concert playing. It is the fingers which need constant practice."

Perhaps these theories will not be as applicable to the ordinary student as they are to a genius like Hofmann. In the first place he has an astounding memory. While he was in this country he did not have with him a single piece of music for his own use. He brought only the scores for the orchestra. During the early part of his season here he sprained his wrist slightly, and for a week he did not touch the piano. At the end of the week he appeared in concert, and played with the orchestra a Beethoven Concerto which he had not similarly played for eight years. His only preparation was to sit up in bed just before the concert and look over a borrowed score.

When he is expecting to play in the evening he scarcely touches the piano during the day. Perhaps he plays for half an hour some exercises to take the stiffness out of his fingers. That is all. Although he seems to practice comparatively little, he has a degree of power which is astonishing. His hands are rather small, but the muscles of the palms stand out like bunches of hard rubber. His arms are like those of an athlete. Along with the medals and decorations which his playing has brought him, he cherishes a number which he has won in wheeling, tennis playing and boating.

He is devoted to skating, a fact that is evident from a story his father tells of their visit to St. Petersburg in the winter of 1897. Josef was summoned to play before the ex-Empress, the hour named being from three to four in the afternoon. It was a perfect day. The Neva was frozen over, of course, and the skating was at its height. Immediately after luncheon Josef's father found his son dressing as if to go to the palace.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"To play for the Empress."

"But you were not to go until three o'clock."

"Three o'clock! If I wait until then it will be too late to go skating. I'm going now."

He went. And it is not a surprise to any one who knows Hofmann to learn that he played for the ex-Empress as soon as he reached the palace, and that he then went off and skated the rest of the afternoon.

He is very prone to become so interested in things that he forgets how time flies, and he is quite as likely to do this when he is to play as at any other time. Often when his father and his manager, after an hour of anxious waiting, are on the point of going to the theatre and calling off the concert, Hofmann rushes in all out of breath and with hands red and stiff with cold. He plunges them into hot water to take out the stiffness, then gets into his evening clothes at top speed, jumps into a carriage and is driven to the theatre without stopping to taste food.

When Hofmann was here last he received the unstinted praise of both public and critics. But it was perfectly natural that his youth, which seems greater than it is, should make people speculate as to his future development. He himself heard more or less of this speculation, and what he had to say in reply to it is an illustration of the originality and cleverness of his reasoning.

"People wonder how I will play when I have seen more of life," he said, smiling a little scornfully. "Life and music are not the same things, and life has no direct influence necessarily on music. Music of the highest kind does not depict life—that is, not the outward details of living. It should not be so that you can say to yourself: 'This music represents a man who is going for a walk in the woods. Now he gets up; now he puts on his hat; now he opens the door; now he is going downstairs.' That is not music. There may be in music the spirit of a walk in the woods, the feeling of it all. Now, if I am capable of being touched by that spirit, it will appeal to me in the music, even though I may never have taken such a walk. If I did not have within me the capacity of being touched by that spirit I might walk in the woods all my life and yet remain insensible to it."

"People say that a musician must have suffered in order to rightly play music which expresses sorrow. Now I don't think so. If I have in me the capacity for suffering I am touched by that spirit in music. Suffering does not create in me the capacity for suffering. Do you see? As for me, I have always been pretty happy. For that reason you cannot say that I am not capable of feeling sorrow. I am, perhaps, more keenly alive to the spirit of sorrow in music than a man would be who had suffered a great deal. He grows used to it; he becomes callous. First impressions are always the most vivid. It may be quite possible, therefore, that the musician whose sensibilities have not been seared by much suffering gives the keenest response to a spirit of sadness in the music he plays. The critics who talk of improvement through emotional experience would seem to make out that one can improve in suffering."

Perhaps there is sophistry in this, but there is originality and cleverness as well.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SZACINSKI, CHRISTIANA

THE CHILD PRODIGY

[Josef Hofmann shortly after his debut as a pianist]



PHOTOGRAPH BY SARONY, NEW YORK

JOSEF HOFMANN OF TO-DAY

[From the latest photograph of the pianist]