

Anne Thackeray Ritchie: Concerning Joseph Joachim (1901)

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Anne Isabella Thackeray Ritchie (1837-1919)
Daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray

Before life was experience — when it was curiosity, hope, speculation, all those desires with which existence begins — the writer was sent by her father to some musical meetings, which are now so long over that the very rooms in which they first originated do not exist any more. They were Willis's Rooms, out of St. James's Street. The Musical Union was the name given to the concerts, which were an admirable invention of Mr. Ella's to try to raise the standard of music from certain shallow depths to which it seemed gradually to be sinking. There used to be an encouraging picture of a lyre on the programme, and a pretty little sentence — “Il più gran omaggio alla musica sta nel silenzio”¹ — printed in colored letters at the end of it. This, alas! is not yet the universal opinion; promiscuous clap-trap applause and boisterous encores, often before the last notes have died away, being still in fashion.



The Ballroom, Willis's Rooms

I believe the Musical Union eventually migrated to St. James's Hall, but it was in Willis's cool and stately halls, with the faded velvet seats, that the writer for the first time heard those familiar and delightful strains of Joachim's violin, which have so happily sounded on through the latter half of a century of change and perplexity, ever bringing truth and strength and tranquillity [sic] among them.

¹ “The greatest tribute to music is silence” — RWE

[...]



Thackeray's House, No. 2 Palace Green
Currently the Embassy of Israel
Illustration by James S. Ogilvy, 1902

When the writer first personally knew Dr. Joachim, it was in her father's house at Palace Green. She can remember seeing him coming in one rainy afternoon in springtime, and entering the long light-blue drawing-room. He was a young man then. He was carrying a rolled-up scroll — it was an original score of Beethoven's which some one had just given him; he showed us the cramped, fierce writing, the angry-looking notes of those calm harmonies. I have never again seen a Beethoven MS.; but the remembrance is distinct of that one, as well as of Joachim's talk of Beethoven himself, of his mighty self and his protesting nerves, and his impossible difficulties with housekeepers and maids-of-all-work. I have sometimes heard Joachim speak of Schumann with the gentlest affection and reverence, and then of Brahms, — above all of Brahms, and of his meeting with him, one of the greatest emotions of his life.

We had once the happy opportunity of hearing the Joachim quartet at Dresden. It seemed to me then, as now, that I had never heard music before, so beautiful, so exquisite did it sound in that dark, bare Gewandthaus [sic] by the Elbe. It may be a foolish fancy, but to the writer's mind music never sounds so well as when there is flowing water within reach, whether it is best for those who listen by the Rhine at Bonn or by the Elbe at Dresden matters little; or shall we write of a Romance of Schumann's, a Concerto of Mozart's, that were sounding but a few days ago in

an old Chelsea house? Joachim was not there, but it was his teaching and inspiration that called forth the harmony. One of his most faithful followers was at the piano; his friend and pupil, Mrs. Liddell, had brought her violin. To the writer, hurrying home afterwards with happy pulses, the very mists of winter seemed to bear the beautiful impression along with them, and the tides of the stream to repeat it.

But perhaps of all places the Hochschule at Berlin is the place we like best to remember Dr. Joachim, and to think of him in the midst of his young pupils, as they sit in serried rows in the concert room. It is a sight to satisfy the touched spectator, for so much that is personal goes into music that to watch the master gravely facing the pupils, and that vast young assembly eagerly attentive and following his guiding hand and glance, seems a revelation to the music itself. Many of the scholars are scarcely more than children, but they play as if they were men and women grown, and they answer in a moment to his sign. Some especial bar or cadence does not go rightly; he makes them repeat it again and again; suddenly, with a flash along the line, they understand correctly, and then the music goes on once more. It was Beethoven's great concerto for the violin that they were playing when we were there. A few parents and friends sit listening, a daughter of Mendelssohn's among them. As the countless bows sweep up and down, an upspringing wave of swelling sound seems to spread from one end to the other of the great hall. The young, serious musicians bring the movement triumphantly to its close; the master looks approving; then comes a moment's pause. "Miss Lenora Jackson will play the solo," he says, and a girl of sixteen, in a straw hat, with a long plait of hair, steps quickly forward, lays her straw hat upon a chair, tosses back her fair hair, and begins to play.

It was a child playing to the others, a child with perfect taste and sure handling; the young orchestra listened and approved, and when she finished burst into gay, delightful applause. The master joined, too, clapping his two hands. It was a happy moment for everybody. This Hochschule, as we know, is perhaps Joachim's greatest interest in life, and to it we owe the spread of his wise and beautiful teaching.

<https://josephjoachim.com/2013/12/11/anne-thackeray-ritchie-concerning-joseph-joachim-1901/>

assertion of authority, shall prove democracy another futile dream, the ways before us are dark. The more one dreads such darkness, the more gleams of counsel and help one may find in the simple, hopeful literature of inexperienced, renascent New England. There, for a while, the warring ideals of democracy and of excellence were once

reconciled, dwelling confidently together in some earthly semblance of peace." Thus with a discreet blending of academic conservatism and broadly human democratic optimism, Mr. Wendell brings to a close what is sure to be for many years the standard History of our literature.

Blackstick Papers. No. 4 * Concerning Joseph Joachim

By MRS. RICHMOND RITCHIE

BEFORE life was experience — when it was curiosity, hope, speculation, all those desires with which existence begins—the writer was sent by her father to some musical meetings, which are now so long over that the very rooms in which they first originated do not exist any more. They were Willis's Rooms, out of St. James's Street. The Musical Union was the name given to the concerts, which were an admirable invention of Mr. Ella's to try to raise the standard of music from certain shallow depths to which it seemed gradually to be sinking. There used to be an encouraging picture of a lyre on the programme, and a pretty little sentence—"Il più gran omaggio alla musica sta nel silenzio"—printed in colored letters at the end of it. This, alas! is not yet the universal opinion; promiscuous clap-trap applause and boisterous encores, often before the last notes have died away, being still in fashion.

I believe the Musical Union eventually migrated to St. James's Hall, but it was in Willis's cool and stately halls, with the faded velvet seats, that the writer for the first time heard those familiar and delightful strains of Joachim's violin, which have so happily sounded on through the latter half of a century of change and perplexity, ever bringing truth and strength and tranquillity along with them.

For those of us who are not blessed with the Fairy Blackstick's length of life and her five-and-twenty thousand years or so of active interest, it is no little good fortune to have lived in our generation, alongside with the people whom we can understand more or less; who express what is best in us, and who have added so widely to our limited experience, just because we *can* sympathize with them and follow their well-loved lead. One is sorry for those who are born too late or too soon for their journey through life,—who are fighting against the tide instead of going along with it, or perhaps trying to stem their unknown ways alone, ahead of their natural companions. And so I repeat it is an inestimable privilege to have lived at the same time with certain expressions of consummate beauty, which contain the best ideals, the best realizations of which we are capable; and it has been the present writer's fortune to be able to count upon more than one certain and un-failing music through life, noble guiding strains which lead the way along many chances and changes, only growing more familiar, more real as time has passed on. It is quite certain that people are not made happy by remembering *tours de force* or wonderful exploits in execution,—indeed some of us are even too ignorant to appreciate them; but mere listeners, ignorant though they may be, are certainly made happier (and better so far as they are more happy) by the remembrance of an un-

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failing flow of beauty, sometimes quite beyond description, one of the revelations upon earth of some law reaching far beyond it.

All this has been specially brought home to the writer by a book which has lately appeared, an English version of Andreas Moser's "Life of Joseph Joachim," now translated by Lilla Durham. It will be found full of interesting things to those who can go back for years to the revelations of this master's noble art. In this satisfying history both the writer and the translator seem touched by something of Dr. Joachim's own sincerity and thoroughness. The first sentence of Mr. Fuller Maitland's introduction strikes the keynote of it all: "Few biographers," he says, "have had to tell the story of a life so full of dignity, usefulness, and beauty." The story flows on from the very first with steady advance.

Blackstick herself might have presided at Joachim's birth. We read of the usual fairy seventh child, the son of Julius and Fanny Joachim, born near Presburg in Hungary in 1831; of the grave, reserved father, devoted to his home; of the loving, capable mother; of the family in modest circumstances, not rich people, but placed beyond the struggle for daily bread. We do not learn that this was in any way a specially musical family; but one of the sisters, called Regina, could sing, and little Pepi could listen, and with all his might.

The writer has heard Dr. Joachim say that he first learnt to play on a little toy fiddle, which some one brought him from a fair. Happy friend to have given such a gift to such a "Pepi"! The little fiddle is written of in the memoir, and we read that a friend of the family first taught the child to play upon it; then the father, recognizing "Pepi's" great natural gifts, determined to have him seriously taught the violin, and, being a sensible man, took him to the best violinist in all Pesth. He was Serwaczynski, Konzertmeister there, and we have his portrait in the book, an anxious-looking man in a black satin stock and an old-fashioned

coat with a high collar. There is also a picture of little Joseph himself, with rows of beautiful, stiff curls, and, notwithstanding his tender years, the same calm expression that we are accustomed to. A pretty story is told how, after thirty years, Joachim somewhere recognized the tones of his first master's violin which he had heard as a child, and was able to buy it for his own. It was an Amati and a valuable instrument.

At the opera at Pesth very good music was to be heard. Beethoven's "Ruinen von Athen" was given there, and the overture to "König Stephan." It was at Pesth, in the Casino, that Pepi made his first appearance, by his master's wish. The picture of the little fair-haired boy, with his stiff curls, was taken at this time, and the delighted audience seems to have applauded as loudly sixty years ago as it does to-day. Dr. Joachim's only recollection, however, is of the sky-blue coat and the mother-of-pearl buttons which he wore for the occasion. A delightful, spirited lady now appears upon the scene; this is a relative, Fräulein Fanny Figdor, who entreates that her charming little cousin Pepi should be sent to Vienna, where music is more vibrating and alive than at sleepy Pesth—she is like a character out of Goethe, so confident and full of resource and conviction. Her persuasions and those of his teacher prevail, and the father and Fanny and Pepi all set out together for the Capital.

The first master to whom they applied was Helmesberger, a distinguished teacher, whose two young sons were also admirable performers. He declared that nothing could ever be made of little Joachim because of the stiffness of his bowing. Joachim's father, who hated half measures, though bitterly disappointed, at once resolved to take his boy away and bring him up to some other profession. Happily for the whole world, Ernst happened to come to Vienna about this time, and immediately recognized Joachim's rare gifts; he advised the parents to continue his musical education, to put Pepi under Joseph Böhm, from whom he

himself had learned wisdom and music.

This kind, austere teacher took Joachim to his own home and treated him as a son. He had no children, but he loved his pupil and he loved true art.

At the time when Joachim first went to Vienna, the great traditions of the past were somewhat waning. Beethoven and Schubert had been dead some twelve years; the cheerful and homely melodies of slighter composers were better suited to display the brilliant powers of those who rather wished to show their capabilities than to play great music. Paris was supposed to be the centre of all art and of all success, and there was consequently some talk of sending Joachim, after his studies with Böhm, to Paris. Again the spirited Fanny, now Frau Witgenstein, with a home and husband of her own in Leipzig, interfered for Joseph's benefit. She declared that Leipzig was the only place for Joachim, and the only school where he had anything to learn.

Mendelssohn was at Leipzig, the director of the concerts there, and he brought many musicians round about him; he was successful and popular, respected, and greatly loved. Moser says that among others "Robert Schumann looked up to Mendelssohn as to a high mountain." Some master pen, a Carlyle's, a Jean Paul's, should paint for us this charming centre, all these brilliant and delightful people, coming and going in the streets of the ancient town, and dwelling in their special atmosphere of music, of good fellowship, of high endeavor.

Mendelssohn was greatly interested in the young student. His first recommendation was that Joachim should have a tutor, not for the violin—in his art the boy wanted but little teaching—but for Latin, for geography, for history, for divinity, for all the education befitting a superior man; but at the same time Félicien David, the great violinist, who was then at Leipzig, gave Joachim many hints which afterwards he knew how to make useful.

What, notwithstanding every draw-

back, would not any of us now give for a ticket of admission to that concert at the Gewandthaus where Joachim made his first public appearance in Leipzig! The concert was given by Madame Pauline Viardot, who sang, while Schumann stood behind the hall listening to the performance. Madame Schumann and Mendelssohn played one of his compositions together on two pianofortes; Mendelssohn accompanied Joachim, but, unfortunately, just at the beginning of this piece Joachim's string snapped, owing to the heat of the room. They had no sooner started once more when there was an alarm of fire, and the whole company rushed out of the place.

Joachim was six years in Leipzig. Mendelssohn's constant advice to his pupil was to never play anything but the best music, conscientiously, with more thought for the composition than for the effect which was produced. Young as he was, Joachim had his own standard; he responded to Mendelssohn's serious views that he did not care for virtuosity, and from what he had heard rather shrank from an introduction to Liszt. It is interesting to read of Mendelssohn's reply to Joseph when he expressed this feeling. "Wait a bit, my son; there is so much that is unusual and beautiful in his playing that I feel sure you will return converted. God speed you. Greet Liszt from me." And Mendelssohn was right in his prediction.

When Mendelssohn died suddenly in 1847, the whole musical world mourned for Lycidas. To Joachim it was a deeper, personal sorrow, one of the keenest he ever experienced.

There is always something satisfying in the thought of past and present friendship between people who are one's friends in spirit—it is only an accident whether one knows them or not in person. The friendship between Joachim and Mendelssohn is as delightful to think of as that between Jonathan and David. It is always a sort of music to hear of true friends. Can one not imagine these two as they come walking together in the evening, and the boy Joachim answers Mendelssohn's

charming talk with intelligent apprehension and caps a quotation from Jean Paul with the apt application of a passage from his "Flegeljahre"? Mendelssohn looked at him with surprise, and from that evening we are told his interest in the "*Teufelsbraten*," as he called him, grew to the greatest affection. He agreed with Schumann, "and only placed in the first rank artists who could not only play, possibly one or two instruments, but who were also human enough to understand the writings of Shakespeare and Jean Paul."

When Joachim first came to England in 1844 (his second visit, when I first heard him, was in the fifties), Mendelssohn wrote to the secretary of the Hanoverian Embassy:

These few lines are to introduce Joseph Joachim, from Hungary, a boy of fifteen, of whom I have become exceedingly fond during the nine months I have known him; indeed I really love him and think very highly of him, a thing I can say of few of my recent acquaintances. . . . His interpretation, his perfect comprehension of music, and the promise in him of a noble service to art [is it not finely said?] will, I am sure, lead you to think of him as highly as I do. . . . Be kind to him, look after him in great London, introduce him to those of our friends who will appreciate such an exceptional personality, and in whose acquaintance he for his part will also find pleasure and stimulation; I here allude principally to the Horsleys.

This letter of Mendelssohn's recalls to the writer's mind one unforgettable meeting with Joachim many years after, when one misty afternoon, with a young cousin, a friend of Miss Horsley, she went to inquire for Mrs. Horsley, the mother of the family, who was dangerously ill in her house on Campden Hill. There was a garden in front of the house, and the door opened as we came up, and then some one who had been watching from the window ran out quickly from within, passing the maid who had come to the door, and saying, "I saw you crossing the garden. Come in, come, both of you. Come quietly; my mother is very, very ill. But Joachim is here, he has come to play to her; she wanted to hear him once more. . . ." In

a dim, curtained, back room looking across another garden the dying mistress of the house sat propped up with cushions in a chair. Joachim stood with his back to the window holding his violin, and we sat in silence by the doorway. He played gravely and with exquisite beauty, and the sad, silent room was full of the blessing of Bach, coming like a gospel to people in need of rest.

Mrs. Horsley only lived for a few days after this, and now her daughter has followed her, that charming, gracious, emphatic, gray-haired Sophy, bestowing kindness and help and music upon all in her path. She had been the intimate friend of Mendelssohn, who dedicated one of his most lovely compositions to her. She treasured his portrait and his drawings; one almost seemed to see him there when she spoke of him.

Weimar, that wonderful little Olympus where so many gods have congregated, seemed to have an instinct for great men, and first offered to Joachim official recognition. The sketch of Weimar and its musical politics and vehement partisanship is well given in Dr. Moser's book. One can realize it all, and the battles of the new and the old school, under the rule of Liszt, the great man, the arbiter of these passionate strifes. Liszt himself belonged to the school of those who would weave impulse and passion into their art rather than beauty, order, and self-suppression. Anyhow, he was the irresistible and brilliant leader and advocate of the new school of music. Raff and Bülow were also at Weimar studying under the great Kapellmeister. Joachim, who was now appointed Konzertmeister, was for a time, as Moser tells us, "completely conquered by the magic spell of the new characteristic music." He took immense pains to raise the standard of the Weimar orchestra, and, together with his friends, constantly gave and conscientiously rehearsed Wagner's music. Bülow, we are told, was delighted to have won Joachim over, as he thought, to the magician's influence, for Joachim himself was regarded as only next to

Liszt at Weimar in importance and power.

One day came a letter from Richard Wagner to Liszt, which is given by Moser:

I have just been reading the score of my "Lohengrin"—as a rule I do not read my own work. I have an intense longing that this work should be performed. I hereby beseech you, perform my "Lohengrin." You are the only man to whom I would make this request; to no one but you do I trust the making of this opera.

I have read somewhere of the circumstances under which this letter was written. It was in Paris, after his great disappointments there, that one day sitting in his room, lonely, despondent, poor, numbed, as he said pathetically, not knowing where to turn, to find rendering for that which was his creation, Wagner's eyes happened to fall upon the score of "Lohengrin," lying neglected on a shelf. Suddenly an immense pity came over him, a pity to think of that beautiful music buried for ever in a sepulchre of paper and fruitless hope. It was under this influence that he wrote, and almost by return of post he heard from Liszt that "Lohengrin" was to live and to be produced to the best of their ability by the musicians on the Weimar stage.

There is one happy, idyllic interlude which must not be passed over in the story of Joseph Joachim's life; the coming to Weimar of Bettina, Goethe's child-friend, now a mother with charming grown daughters. To her rooms, day after day, come the young, happy musicians; they sing, they make music, they wander by moonlight, they make love—at least Grimm makes love and eventually marries the attractive Gisela. On the last night they all sit up till three in the morning to see the ladies off by the earliest train.

Stern times followed upon all this happiness and gayety. Joachim was appointed to Hanover as Konzertmeister, while Liszt was still ruling at Weimar and bringing the "new school" more and more to the front. He was performing his own and Wagner's compositions almost exclusively; and not only this, but he was preaching a some-

what arrogant doctrine, and declaring that both conductor and performers must possess a certain power of enthusiastic *divination* for the proper performance of his works! Then it was that Joachim made a protest, notwithstanding the cost it was to his loyal and responsive nature. But he had to speak the truth and without reserve. "I am quite impervious to your music," he writes, in a memorable letter to Liszt; "it contradicts everything in the works of our great masters on which my mind has been nurtured since the days of my early youth. I cannot be a helpmate to you, and I must no longer let it appear that I serve the cause that you and your disciples advocate."

Rubinstein compared Joachim in his youth to a novice in a convent who knows he can choose between the convent and the world, and who has not yet taken his part. We know which part in life Joseph Joachim has always preferred.

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