

## Music

*The other night [Mother] was accompanying Miss Rolda in Figaro, and we had not the music; and then I was aware where Uncle Toddy had got the expression that she has in the picture in the dining room at home. In the longing to find the right chord, in the anxiousness to hear the notes of the song, in the love of the music itself, all the soul came out and gave the expression of that picture. I have always wondered how Uncle could draw a character and not a likeness, because I had never seen Mother look like that; but Monday night August 12, 1907, I saw that picture living." Muriel [Budge] to Margery August 10 1907*

When Susannah decided to marry Herbert Bentwich she gave up the dream of devoting her life to music. Twenty years later her daughter Margery's talent seemed to promise vicarious achievement. As a small girl Margery adored her older brother Norman. When Norman learned to play the violin, she listened and wanted to play herself. When she was ten she was allowed to start on the violin, and take lessons from Norman's teacher. Once started, she made such remarkable progress that four years later Susannah considered the possibility of her having a professional career as a violinist, and wanted an expert evaluation of Margery's talent.

Alfred Kalisch, a friend of the family, was a music critic for several London newspapers; he was willing to ask Fritz Kreisler, the leading violinist of the times, to hear Margery play; Kreisler agreed reluctantly, warning Kalisch that he would give an honest estimate, however painful. The audition went well. Kreisler was pleased. He told Susannah that Margery was a musician, and that she could certainly become a violinist if she wanted to, but it meant penal servitude for life on the four strings. He advised Margery never to practice more than four hours a day and to cultivate every other avenue of learning -- to steep herself in books, art, music of all sorts. With this encouragement Margery was allowed to leave school and carry out Kreisler's program as best she could, starting with a course of lessons from Kreisler himself. She remembered the next few years as total bliss "with the freedom to browse in libraries, to go to all the concerts and theatres, to take part in quartets with the Hambourgs, Harold Bauer, and many others, --a liberal but extravagant education."

In 1905, Mischa Elman, a fourteen year old violin virtuoso, came from St Petersburg to London, and Susannah, always on the lookout for musical talent, made the Bentwich household a

## Music

second home for him. The next year, when Mischa Elman's teacher Leopold Auer, a great violinist with several remarkable students came to London, Margery took lessons with him. Margery continued to study with Auer each summer from 1906 to 1910 at the spas in Germany where he spent his vacations. At the age of twenty Margery was a charmer -- a slight, graceful, figure, with blue eyes, delicate features, and a sprightly style. She admired Auer as a musician and as a violinist, and appreciated what he had to teach. On a personal level she thought of him as "the dear old professor" (Auer was then in his early sixties). Writing to her mother from Bad Oeyhausen Margery described a lesson: July 28, 1907: "The only one he gave that day. Ronay wanted to listen, but seeing that I rather objected Auer sent him out. and it was much better." Margery had dressed very carefully, asking advice from a friend who, after a very thorough inspection of Margery's wardrobe, chose the new Redfern costume, hat and best blouse. She wrote to her

I think it pays to make oneself look nice. Anyhow it did yesterday, because after an hour and a half solid working on the Mozart, Auer said he was too tired to hear me [play] anything else, the doctor forbid him to teach any longer; but as I looked very disappointed he gave in; he said he couldn't resist and gave me just what I wanted on the Zigeuneweise. There is no half-heartedness about his teaching here, he is so splendidly in earnest, and I do believe I am improving heaps. He is very pleased with me and I am to tell you that I am a very good girl! When it came to fixing up my next lesson he found he had nothing before Sunday except Friday morning which he wanted to keep for himself. He owned he had no bath [at the Spa] that day and I begged so hard that he gave it to me, and I am so pleased as he is even better quite fresh in the mornings. "Warum tue Ich eigentlich das?" he said, "when you are so unamiable to me?" And I am sure I don't know why he do; just because he is an awful old dear I think."

Susannah, back in London, had her own opinions about the relationship described by Margery. She vetoed Margery's proposal to travel alone with Auer to another resort. Margery was offended. Her sister Budge tried to mediate: "I know you can take whatever Mother says for best and right, so all the business of not going to Nordenei with Auer --well I know she could not have said what she really meant to say to you in her letter because it shouldn't have made you the least bit hurt. Mother explained everything to me this morning. It isn't that you aren't to be trusted --what an idea. Mother would trust you above any of us except Norman; but it is bad enough in London when one is alone; & a beautiful & catching-looking girl like you abroad is even more liable to something disagreeable."

## Music

Margery's lighthearted flirting with Auer contrasts with the feelings expressed in a letter to her father: "How grateful I am to you and Mother for giving me all my heart's desire I cannot express; when I think of all your blessings, and all I can offer you in return is my music. But I am writing this letter especially to thank you for giving me something much more precious; the real Jewish education and upbringing. I know now that of all the blessings in the world this is the most precious, rare, and enviable. At home I didn't feel it so much, but in this land [Germany] where the atheism is something appalling, my religion is like an oasis in the desert, Just like that...And I give you my promise that I will carry on what you have done, not out of dutifulness to you but from absolute conviction and love for Judaism for its own sake."

### Eisenach 1906

Auer's niece, Kathleen Parfit, Margery Bentwich

Seated: Leopold Auer, Mrs Parfit



## Music

Nonetheless, when a gala party at which Margery was to play turned out to be scheduled for a Friday night, and Kathleen Parlow (a fellow student, about the same age as Margery) was to play twice, Margery told her diary, "I had a most miserable night, madly jealous of her & angry at my lost opportunity. The first chance of my life & to come on a Friday night. It is too bad!" In the end the evening turned out well, Kathleen played the first two movements of the concerto splendidly and then overcame the disaster of a snapped E string. "She grabbed the 1st violin's fiddle & and started the [3rd] movement on it. Her pluck is magnificent and it was nothing short of wonderful not to forget a note in all that nerve shaking....After the concert we all had supper together, for my sake salmon grilled with potatoes & mayonnaise, most delicious.... At 12 Auer and I started home after drinking prosits to each other in wine, it was a jolly evening "

At the end of the summer Margery going to say goodby, put on her evening dress "for a joke" and "went round to show it to the Prof. He was very entzuckt [charmed], but luckily had a head on his shoulders for practical things and asked me if I had money enough to get home. I just remembered that the bank closed at 6, flew home and changed, and was round at the Bank on the tick of 6. Got my £3 and was back at the Professor's in about ten minutes altogether. He liked the dress and Coiffure enormously, kissed me to his heart's content but I wouldn't allow him on my lips. I don't like it. He said I was the most charming girl he ever saw in his life and then he gave me a sweet bracelet. For Kathleen he had bought a pendant 'for my two favorites.' "

Back in London Margery resumed her life as a Bentwich daughter. The first weeks at home were given over to celebration of religious holidays --the fast of Yom Kippur. and then the happy week of Succos, with "heaps of visitors" and "heaps of white grapes." She went shopping with Nita for some hats, and observed that "Everybody looked very smart and bright. The shops looked lovely." It seemed that dress had never been so artistically beautiful as the latest fashions, "very expensive and extravagant but exquisitely simple; long flowing skirts and dresses perfectly plain, but the loveliest classic lines, just like Greek draperies and similar soft gauzy materials. Really dress-making is a great art."

Listening to classical music with its appeal to idealized emotions, Margery, a devout concert-goer could be swept away. She and her friend Rebecca Clarke heard the singer Julia Culp

## Music

and judged her "a supremely great ,noble artist." She went with Norman to hear Don Giovanni at Covent Garden and felt "all the melody, drama and colour of Italian opera in its most perfect form." A few weeks later she and Norman stood for hours in the outside gallery to hear Tetrizzini sing the title role of Lucia di Lammermoor, "a voice something like Melba's, but infinitely sweeter and full of life and colour."

Margery tended to be more sharply critical of violinists. Kubelik was "the first violinist I have heard who is absolutely a machine, without a trace of musical feeling, style or natural capacity." Szigetti had "a beautifully fluent technique, lovely runs and plays easily and simply, but lacks intensity and variety of tone." Thibaud, playing in Albert Hall was "very fine but too refined," the Lalo that he played was "too delicate for such an immense space." Ysaye was "not a patch on Kreisler;" young Zimbalist, another student of Auer, had "perfect finger technique... but nothing particularly striking or individual. " But "Mischa" was a favorite. At Queen's Hall he "played marvelously...with enchanting ease and grace and humour...Had quite a long time in the artist's room with him. Very anxious to hear about Ysaye and Zimbalist. He really is a jolly boy."

At first her own professional progress moved slowly. A "lovely letter from Auer" enclosed a note to the agent Daniel Mayer recommending her for the provinces. She notes "He is a most sweet old man. I'm afraid I really do love him and miss him and his caresses." Armed with the letter, she went to see Mayer, but he was out. After the Succos holiday she went to see Mayer by appointment, but "the wretched man was out, never even turning up after an hour's waiting." Finally, on October 9: "Went to Mayer's with Mother. Had to play as soon as I came, and was very nervous and shaky in the Nocturne; a little better in the Handel Sonata. He was very straightforward and says I must conquer my nervousness before risking a London debut. Thinks a provincial tour would be best and will see about concerts around London. Felt very sick about my nervousness. I don't know why I can't control it. A charming letter from Auer awaited when I got home."

A month later Mayer booked Margery for her first engagement, to play at a dinner at the Criterion Restaurant. The next night she and Budge, who was to accompany her on the piano, put on dresses they had worn as bridesmaids, and Susannah did Margery's hair in curls. They went

## Music

off, accompanied by Ernst, the butler and handyman. Margery noted in her diary:

"The Freemasons looked grand in their costumes. The pianist played first, and then the man singer, who was splendid and did an encore, and then I had to play and chose the Polonaise. They were very enthusiastic. I played the Humoresque for an encore. They all came up and congratulated me after. At the end the Master of the Freemasons came up and spoke to me; he thought Budge and I were Poles or Hungarians. He said he must get Mayer to let me play at his house. The man who seemed to be arranging things gave me my guinea there and then, and said he was sorry it was so little "

The next summer, Margery played Bach's Double Violin Concerto with Mischa Elman in Queen's Hall in July 1908 *Musical News* called it "a magnificent rendering." Later that season she played to an enthusiastic audience in Harrogate. About this time she bought (with money left to her by her grandfather Joseph Solomon) the Maggini violin, which she loved and played all her life

In August, back in Germany studying with Auer, she gave a successful concert in Nordeney. Yet she enjoyed playing her fiddle alone in her little room even more than playing for the public. She wrote home: "There wasn't a soul stirring in the entire neighborhood, everybody had gone to see the fireworks. I never enjoyed playing so in my life. You know Bocklin's picture of the old hermit with the angels --well it was better than that because I play better than the hermit! Sometimes it is good to be alone with nothing between you and the highest things." (Bad Oeyenhausen, August 1908)

On November 8, 1908 Margery played a Vieuxtemps concerto with the London Symphony Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall, Landon Ronald conducting. At that concert George Szell, then a boy of eleven, made his first London appearance, playing his own Overture, and Mendelssohn's Capriccio. A few days later Margery's solo recital in Bechstein Hall was well received. The Daily Telegraph wrote: "Miss Bentwich is au fond a real artist; her tone is superb." The Globe critic said " Miss Margery Bentwich obviously has a real soul for music." In the spring of 1909 she played the Saint-Saens Concerto in Berlin. In August she went again to study with Auer in Bad Oeyenhausen . In the fall of that year she gave concerts in Berlin and in Breslau.

## Music

From Breslau at the end of December she wrote "Dearest Mother...I know you'll be disappointed but I did not excel myself nor even equal the Bechstein Hall Corelli....Anyway I was the only one to get an encore. Everyone was of course "begeistert"[enthusiastic] (I do hate that word now), and after I had held reception in the artist room we went on to Frau Ollendorf's who had a great big dinner party of over 30....I never was at such a funny dinner in my life. One plate only a piece on which had to go everything that was passed around. I managed alright not mixing meat and butter; but Mr Auerbach [a pianist], next to me, let not a single dish go by and took a double portion of each into the bargain, and I am not exaggerating; he had tongue, roast beef, smoked beef, smoked salmon, sardines, filled eggs, herring salad, cheese sandwich and cucumber, at one time on his plate, and multiplied by 2 or 2 1/2! It disappeared too in no time, washed down by tea and wine, and then made place for doughnuts and other confectionery....After dinner everybody was very gay, and I never had my hand kissed so many times in my life. It is the custom in this part of the world, and the men certainly seem to take advantage of it."

The next day, at another dinner party with Frau Ollendorf and the Auerbachs Margery and Mr Auerbach entertained the company after dinner with the Dvorak Humoresque, " which is still new here, and still works wonders" At the age of twenty two, Margery seemed fairly launched on a professional career. Nevertheless, she was still tied to the family at 58 Avenue Road emotionally and financially. When Mr Auerbach suggested that he make a tour of Schlesingen towns with her the next spring, she wrote home: "It really would be awfully jolly if only I could manage it. Altogether it would be much the most sensible thing for me to live in Berlin instead of London as HQ --but I suppose it can't be done"

Apart from playing as a soloist, Margery had several pupils. One of them, Ernest Howard, was "a delightful English gentleman of middle age, lover and patron of all the arts, buyer of Strads, and passionate amateur of string quartets. She enjoyed playing in chamber music ensembles. Her best friends among the young musicians of her age were Rebecca Clarke and Myra Hess. Margery played quartets together regularly with Rebecca Clarke as viola player and Margery's sister Thelma as cellist. They practiced every week and gave drawing room concerts at Howard's home (67 Finchley Road), that were attended by "Huxleys, Galsworthy, and artists of all sorts." On a summer holiday in Tintagel, Cornwall in 1912 Mischa Elman introduced Margery and Thelma to Schubert's Quintet with Two Cellos. It was difficult. They worked hard on tricky passages, but to compensate they had "the young Elman's lyrical, really angelic tone, especially in Schubert....We felt like Keats on first looking into Chapman's Homer....We were bound up in

## Music

music together the greater part of our lives. "

From the beginning Susannah had been closely involved in directing and supervising Margery's musical career; but when Thelma --the ninth child and eighth girl--was growing up, Susannah's time and energies were taken up by dinner parties and "at homes," by commitment to charitable organizations, by a husband who did not become less demanding through the years, and by the needs of her older children. When Thelma was five, Lillian was of marriageable age, Norman was entering Trinity College at Cambridge, and so forth.

Like all the Bentwich children, Thelma expected to play an instrument. Years later she told a radio audience that as a small girl, she "used to watch my big sister [Nita], playing the cello and I wanted to make it my instrument. I loved the cello more than the violin because its voice was more human and because it looked so comfortable to sit at." Thelma decided on her own that playing the cello offered rewards worth a lifetime of effort. Unlike Margery, Thelma was not singled out for special treatment. At South Hampstead High School she was a good student, who enjoyed sports and plays. With her siblings, she received religious instruction on Sunday mornings at Dayan Lazarus' class at the neighboring Brondesbury Synagogue. "In those days," wrote Margery, "religion and music went hand in hand for the Bentwiches, and the enforced silence of the instruments on the Sabbath was not only accepted but welcomed, as a counteraction to what could easily have deteriorated into grind.

In Thelma's early teens she was roped in by Margery for quartets with Mischa Elman. Working hard to come up to their level she became a practiced chamber player. When she was fifteen, Thelma heard Pablo Casals play Bach's G major Suite, and was bowled over by his purity of thought and execution. From then on, he was the dominant influence in her musical life. She arranged to play for him. At the audition Casals was impressed by Thelma's earnestness and receptivity despite her lack of technique. He worked with her for almost two hours and before she left told her she must go to him after every concert for a lesson. Susannah, present as accompanist and chaperon, could hardly believe her eyes and ears .

A year later Thelma won a three year scholarship to the Royal College of Music. Susannah wrote:" I sometimes think God has been too good to me and showered more blessings

# Miss Margery Bentwich,

❖ Solo Violinist. ❖



*Photo by Elliott & Fry.*

## Some Press Notices.



Telephone 793 P.O. Mayfair.  
Telegrams—" Musikchor, Wesdo, London "

Concert Direction E. L. ROBINSON,  
7 Wigmore Street, W.



### THELMA BENTWICH.

Music

## Music

At the college, Thelma took the cello part in pupils' chamber music practice, and in all orchestra rehearsals. Margery thought she was the college's cello drudge. Thelma thought "the College has not taught me overmuch --but one thing it has taught me: that individuality is the thing that counts, and it cannot be had without a preliminary struggle with the technical difficulties; but ultimately it is the one thing and the only thing."

When Thelma's scholarship ended she was granted a solo appearance, playing Max Bruch's Kol Nidrei, as part of the final concert. On the threshold of a career she bought a diary. Her first entry, Thursday March 19, 1914 reflects: "These years are my precious years and every deed in them matters; I pray that every day may record some fresh activity, all leading to the great goal --the truth in music as in all....The life of man is short, but he can make it long who strives every hour and every day for something beyond himself --the ideal that has no beginning and no end." On March 23 she wrote: "I live for tomorrow....Let me play that they shall rise up and say 'Here is one who shall rise above the crowd.' If I cannot do it in Kol Nidrei I will never do it." The next day sobered but unbowed she wrote "I did not do it, and yet I cannot think I never shall. Experience, experience, that is what I hunger for."

During Thelma's years at the college she also continued her occasional lessons with Casals. His lessons concentrated on his conception of cello in particular, and music in general, illustrated by his playing for her the works she had played to him. In June 1914, Thelma had opportunities to play the D'Albert Concerto at Harrogate, and at the Bechstein Hall in London. Both times, though she was happy with what she had done, she was growingly aware of her need to keep working and learning. When she received a letter from Casals saying "he would 'facilement' be able to see me and to hear me later, "Travaillez bien et nous nous verrons"[Work hard and we will see each other]," it gave her "such a whiff of true happiness as only comes on rare occasions. It contained such a longed for hope; it has given me a great impetus to work, which is one of the best things that can be given."