

On the Watchtower.

By JOSEPHUS.

One should like to say a few words on Jascha Heifetz were it not that in these drab days one's superlatives have become rusty through disuse. Not that superlatives are always more significant and expressive than mere positive estimates, but since one's emotional nature comes to the fore in moments of ecstasy, these superlatives are necessary safety-valves intended rather for the relief of the critic than for the true appreciation of the artist.

In the case of Heifetz the critic is disarmed at the first note and forgets his role competely. His usual categories fail; he will begin with the usual antithesis of technique and expression of emotion, but will soon find that where art imperceptibly melts into life the question of technique disappears, there is no technique of living—no conscious technique, at any rate, where life is unstilted and flows its natural course. Sentimentalism too, is something derivative; there is nothing sentimental about a beautiful sunset unless the onlooker is not strong enough to stand it and is overpowered by a phenomenon as natural as anything in nature.

The myth that Heifetz is unemotional is dissipated as soon as one hears the first few bars of his playing—nay, as soon as one sees his sensitive face and his quivering nostrils, but this sensitiveness is restrained by a personality which seems to be characterized by power, pride, a certain impassiveness, and the ethereal aloofness of a man who stands above his art and masters it completely. Like Plato's chariotier he controls the higher and the nether parts of the soul with equal mastery, subordinating the emotions to the intellect and softening the intellect by the emotions. On listening to the magic sounds of his fiddle you forget that you are dealing with an art which is governed by strict mathematical divisions of time, as uncompromising as those of a railway time-table. You forget, too, that these sounds welling forth from the soul have to pass through a rather capricious material element before they can reach us. It seems as if the notes are plucked from the ether—those strings which usually need so much soothing to keep their temper and correct tone seem to have shed their material attributes and melted completely in the harmony of the spheres. It is impossible to extract a greater purity from a material medium—one begins to believe that bad joke of the philosophers that matter does not really exist, at any rate one feels sure that it can be eliminated and subjected to spiritual and intellectual control.

It is this subordination of matter to mind and soul which is the highest ideal of life and also of art. On this plane true art and real life meet, and the question of technique disappears or it is relegated to its subordinate position, being held in complete subjection under the suzerainty of the spirit. The true artist who dominates his material cannot be a mere technician, his technique is a mere means to an end. The technique of Heifetz is perfect but it is obvious that his art does not end there. Mere technique does not move, for a skilful manipulation

of matter only commands approval or at best admiration; but being material it cannot bring about that communion of souls which true art achieves.

It is true that Heifetz uses a great deal of artistic restraint. He does not wear his soul on his sleeve; he is ever on his guard against that crude sentimentalism into which the Jew of the ghetto so readily lapses—a sentimentalism which even such masters as Zangwill and Golding found it impossible to suppress. The Jewish nature has a genuine pathos which can rise to prophetic heights, but this pathos, soured and saddened by circumstances, so readily overflows into self-pity; the austerity of the Jewish faith and philosophy, and the heroic fight against absorption, melt into the gentler intimacies of family ties; the heroism of historic loyalties give place to household affections, and the tremendous tensions of a truly remarkable people are resolved into facile rhythms of a sickly sweetness—a sweetness so soothing to the tormented soul tired of the struggle and ready to capitulate in an orgy of sentimental self-abasement

The essence of Judaism is its austere objectivity, but the Jewish artist, a prey to his wounded pathos, so often lies powerless and prostrate grovelling abjectly at the feet of his Muse. Not so Heifetz. Heifetz dominates his art with a supreme mastery. The figure that leaps most readily to my mind is that of a horseman mounting a spirited steed—a symbol of physical energy. But the famous figure of Watts should really have been named spiritual energy: the horseman controls his steed easily with one hand leaving the other free to shade his eyes scanning the distant horizon The figure is thus one of repose and contemplation—a repose in tension, it is true, and a contemplation which depends on physical power, and which, like all spiritual life, only becomes possible when the physical and technical sides of life have been completely conquered.

The width of Heifetz's horizon is astounding. He recreates life at any level with the same skilful mastery; the buzzing of the bee and the anguished tremors of the human heart are reproduced with equal fidelity and power. Human problems find their serenest solutions, cosmic conflicts melt into heavenly harmonies, the material impurities are dissolved and a world emerges consisting of a succession of pure ideas and emotions, ideas purged of cant, and emotions free from the taint of a spurious sentimentality.

Never have I heard so noble a solution of the Jewish problem. . . . Yet , nowhere does Heifetz's fiddle ring with greater depth and sincerity than on the sacred soil of the Holy Land. On that holy ground, the cradle of the world's great religions, the home of its greatest prophets and seers, cant seems impossible and sentimentality unspeakably sordid. There the air is saturated with an austere simplicity and sincerity. An overwhelming spirituality broods over the land and every tree and brook seems to murmur. Thus saith the Lord.

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