

The Successor of Anton Rubinstein

By Gregory Blattman



JOSEF HOFMANN — one of the world's greatest pianists, who recently celebrated the golden anniversary of his musical career. It was fifty years ago that, as a child, he made his first appearance in the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.

THE world has had few genuine prodigies of the piano. Mozart was one, having made his mark as a concert pianist at the age of six, 125 years ago. Sixty years later Franz Liszt captured the attention of the European public. Rubinstein and Mendelssohn were piano wunderkinder in their turn, but no one more truly deserved that designation than Josef Hofmann, who celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his debut in America as a concert pianist at a golden jubilee concert at the Metropolitan Opera House recently.

Born in Cracow, Poland, Hofmann was playing the piano at three and a half years. At five he had made his professional debut. Six months after he acquired his first piano, Hofmann gave his father, Casimir Hofmann, then conductor of the Warsaw Opera, an original mazurka for a birthday present. His first public appearance was at a charity concert and his father was promptly overwhelmed with offers for concert appearances for the boy. But the father and the mother, the latter famous a generation ago as Mathilde Wysockska, the opera singer, were more anxious to preserve the youngster's health than to exhibit him as a prodigy and permitted him to make very few public appearances.

THOSE few appearances attracted an unprecedented amount of attention. When Hofmann was only seven Anton Rubinstein heard him play in Warsaw and was so greatly impressed that he referred to him as "a boy such as the history of music had never before produced." When Josef was eight, his father for the first time yielded to pressure to allow the boy to make a public appearance under professional management. His debut took place at a matinee in Berlin's largest concert hall with the Philharmonic Orchestra. This concert made it evident that the boy pianist had an extraordinary memory as well as a special gift for detecting musical inaccuracies. At his first rehearsal he not only played the First Beethoven Concerto from memory, but after it was completed went to the conductor and said to him in French: "The cellos were not correct in the last passage: it should go so." And he played the passage on the piano for the astonished conductor who found, on examining the music, that the boy was right.

His Berlin triumph attracted attention throughout the Continent and the next few months found him travelling to Denmark, Norway and Sweden, giving concerts under the patronage of the Queen of Denmark. On his return to Berlin he played at a concert in the Royal Opera House in the presence of the Emperor. Invited to appear in Paris, he found himself in the company of such noted composers as Camille Saint-Saens, Ambroise Thomas and Leo Delibes. It was in Paris that Rubinstein again heard Hofmann and once more proclaimed him "the greatest wonder of the present age."

AFTER completing his sensational European tour, Hofmann, then ten years old, came with his parents to America. His debut in this country was set for November 29, 1887. American critics had heard of the young pianoforte virtuoso of whom Saint-Saens went so far as to say that he had nothing more to learn in music. On the night before his Metropolitan Opera concert Hofmann gave a private recital to the press of New York at Wallack's Theatre. A contemporary writer in the New York Herald-Tribune wrote that the "audience listened at first in amazement, then in admiration, and at last surrendered themselves to a feeling of affectionate regard for the Heaven-gifted genius. While he played, Hofmann ceased to be a boy. The soul of a man and to a great extent a man's power, seemed to have passed into him." The following night he took the musical world by storm, playing a long and difficult programme of solo numbers and selections with the orchestra as a critical capacity audience listened enraptured. The young pianist created a great sensation not only by the brilliance of his playing but by his unusual gift of improvisation. Members of the audience were invited to suggest themes upon which the boy would improvise, and among those who did so was Walter Damrosch. Although he was so tiny at that time that his feet did not reach the pedals and special pedal extensions had to be built for him, his calmness, poise and dignity on the platform, astonished everybody.

WITHIN three months of his American debut Hofmann had played 18 concerts at the Metropolitan Opera House and 24 on tour. Although 40 more appear-

ances had been booked for him, his parents decided to cancel the rest of the tour, feeling that it was more important to conserve his health than to add to his fame as a pianist. At this point in his career, a patron, then anonymous but afterwards disclosed to be the late Alfred Corning Clarke, of New York, offered to provide for the child's entire family, so that the senior Hofmann might devote his full attention to guiding Josef's musical destinies. Under the patronage of his unknown benefactor, Hofmann returned to Europe to continue his musical studies, studying theory and composition with Urban and piano with Moszkowski, and later becoming the only private pupil of Rubinstein.

Unlike some of our contemporary musical prodigies, Hofmann was also a real boy. Everybody who met him as a boy pianist remarked that in spite of his brilliance he had all the likeable characteristics of a wholesome youngster. Musically mature, he still had a boy's natural enthusiasm for toys and gadgets and a natural aptitude for mischief. The virtuoso who is now one of the world's most highly paid artists was once promised twenty-five cents by his parents for each concert he played. On one occasion when he had finished his program and encores were demanded he refused to play, saying: "The concert is over, and I have earned my quarter."

Later, of course, he returned to the stage, but in the artists' room he remarked to his father, "In the future you must pay me by the piece — two cents each for my own compositions and five cents each for the others." His extraordinary mental acumen was not confined to the piano. On a visit to the office of his manager he was attracted by one of the earliest typewriters. "Ha," he cried, as his eyes fell upon the strange instrument, "what is that?" And with a child's delight at a new toy, he seated himself and began to finger the keys. He had never before seen a typewriter, yet in less than fifteen minutes he had rattled off four short letters, one each in French, German, Polish and English. The work was as perfect as if it had been done by an experienced typist. Until the very moment of going on the stage, he always played with blocks or a toy steam engine, which was his greatest joy. Shortly after his arrival in New

York he was given a velocipede and he spent all the time he could riding it in the park.

Hofmann was eighteen before he returned to the concert platform and to a career of mounting success. In 1896, when he was 20, he again visited the United States and has toured there almost every season since. In 1926 he became an American citizen. Besides his vast activities as a concert pianist, Hofmann has been director of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia since 1926, and also its instructor of piano. Remembering his own youthful days, he has always been keenly interested in the careers of young musicians and is one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the Musicians' Emergency Fund, to which the proceeds of his golden jubilee concert will go.

Among those who were in the audience at the Metropolitan Opera House when Hofmann, at the peak of his career, walked on to the stage where his little feet had trod fifty years ago, was his mother, now 84 years old. Despite frequent persuasions, Mrs. Hofmann has permitted her fear of the ocean crossing to keep her from America since that memorable day in 1887 when she stood nervously in the wings of the opera house awaiting the end of her ten-year-old son's American debut.

More than half a century has elapsed since the day when Rubinstein, who was giving his seven great historical concerts in London, was told of a newly discovered infant prodigy. Shaking his head he said he did not, as a rule, believe in these wonderful children, though he admitted having heard one such boy as the history of music had never before produced. And excitedly striking the piano which stood beside him, the maestro exclaimed, "And the name of this young rascal is Josef Hofmann." Rubinstein's verdict has been upheld by two generations of music lovers. To-day Hofmann is universally recognized as the peer of pianists — the modern Rubinstein.