

Chatting with . . . Percy Kahn

A "Zionist Record" Reporter
Enjoys Himself



Percy Kahn

"ARE you the Percy Kahn, the boy soprano, I heard singing Tosti's 'Good-bye' and 'Cherry Ripe' some forty years ago?"

Percy Kahn rubbed the white parting on the top of his head reflectively as a voice over the telephone from Boksburg asked him this question. The incident took place when I called on him at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

He said to me: "That Boksburg man is right. I burst forth as 'Percy Kahn, the famous boy soprano' at the age of ten."

At that time the young singer appeared in churches and synagogues and was quite a sensation among the boy singers of his day.

During his present and first visit to South Africa, Percy Kahn is shining gloriously as the perfect accompanist to Richard Tauber, the gifted singer. His unobtrusive accompaniment at the piano of the singer on the platform is an indication of the perfection an accompanist can attain.

At one period, Percy — whom I found a most lovable and entertaining fellow — toured with the famous Dame Nellie Melba. Would he speak of some of the musical celebrities he had known? He would — rather! Percy is a great talker when the subject of music is mentioned.

With Elman

"Mischa Elman? I was with him for seven years, and an extraordinary bond of sympathy grew up between us. We were like brothers. We could play together in complete agreement as to interpretation, without his ever having to say, 'Play this in such and such a way.' Our musical moods were identical. It is the same with Richard Tauber, who has never once told me that he wants such and such an interpretation.

"Ah, there is fire and genius, a sort of savagery, in Mischa's playing. And people used to say of him when he was young, 'Yes, he plays very well for his age.' And that reminds me. It was in that period that Joachim, then quite an old man — when his intonation wasn't quite as good as it used to be — was giving a recital in Berlin, and Mischa went along to hear him. People were thinking how interesting it was, the young genius hearing the old master, and, 'Well?"

they asked Mischa when the recital was over. 'Yes,' said Mischa, 'he plays very well for his age.'

And Then Pachmann

"That naturally leads me on to another master, Pachmann. It was in the pre-war St. Petersburg that Pachmann one morning was strolling down the Nevsky Prospekt when he met the Grand Duke Constantine, who was also a pianist. The Grand Duke was effusive. 'Ah!' he said. 'Pachmann, Pachmann! How are you, my dear colleague?' Pachmann drew himself up to his full height — which was not very great. 'And since when,' he asked, 'have I been a Grand Duke?'"

"Yes, I was for seven years with Mischa Elman. We played all over Europe and did eight coast-to-coast tours in America together. It was in Calgary, where we played the Mendelssohn Concerto, that one of the music critics got muddled up with the fact that it is in three movements. 'Tell me, Mr. Elman,' he asked at the conclusion of the concert, 'what were the names of your first two encores?'"

"And it was in Detroit that I got a rap over the knuckles from an indignant member of the audience. Mischa and I were playing the Beethoven Sonata in C minor, in which the piano has as much to say as the violin, and often has to predominate. It was after the first movement that the indignant one came to our manager, Defoe. 'Look here,' he said, 'you tell that little fellow at the piano not to play so loudly.' Defoe explained the position and the part the piano played in the sonata. 'I don't care about that,' complained the aggrieved. 'I paid to hear Elman play the violin, not that little guy at the piano.'

Some Celebrities

"Celebrities? Yes, I suppose so. I've been playing in international celebrity concerts now for twenty-five years. I've played with Melba, Kubelik, Jean Gerardy, Ysaye, Heifetz, Toscha Siedel, Tetravzini, Kreisler, Scotti, McCormick, Mischa, of course — and then there are those others, other musicians and music-lovers — for instance, when I was with Mischa and we used, in our pyjamas and dressing-gowns, to practise at the Knickerbocker Hotel in New York, many a time have I seen Pavlova steal into the room and sit silent, curled up in a chair listening; and Rachmaninoff, gloomy and saturnine"

There was Caruso

"And Caruso! There is that record you may know of my 'Ave Maria.' Caruso singing and Mischa Elman's obligato, to my accompaniment. We made that record five times. The first time some whistling noise crept in. The second time — something wrong. The third time it was perfect. Magnificent. I could not contain myself and jumped from the piano stool as we finished, crying, 'My God! That was wonderful!' — and it came out on the record. How Caruso laughed. I can see him now. There was a screen in the room, and he stood against it, knocking his head against it and laughing while the tears ran down his face. He was a great singer and a fine man.

"There was the time I played for him at Lady de Grey's home in London — the Marchioness of Ripon. Queen Alexandra was there. Caruso was wearing all his decorations — he had dozens from various countries — ribbons and medals, including the German Red Eagle, which had been given to him by the Kaiser. Queen Alexandra was very interested in them, and made him explain them all to her. When he had done so and reached the Red Eagle, 'But,' she said, 'how did you get that? For that is a decoration usually reserved for noted generals and so forth.' Caruso agreed. 'But you see, madam, the Kaiser asked me the same question about my decorations as you have done. And when I had answered him he said, 'And now I will give you one worth all those others put together,' and he pinned the Red Eagle on my breast.' 'He would,' said Queen Alexandra. 'Isn't that just like him!'"

"I Like Australia"

"Australia? Yes, I have just come from there on my way to South Africa. I have played with many notable Australians. Evelyn Scotney, Stella Power, Florence Austral, Wilma Berkeley, Harold Williams, Frances Alder, Peter Dawson, Lauri Kennedy — and Melba. And I have recently made a record with John Brownlee — 'King Charles.'

"In fact apart from that I have very close ties with Australia. My first cousin, Esther Kahn, my father's brother's daughter, is a Sydney girl. She is composer and pianist. And my mother's brother married the sister of Sir Lewis Cohen, who was a number of times Lord Mayor of Adelaide; so that I have many blood relations here. I was born in London, and won a scholarship at the Royal

College of Music when I was fifteen years of age. I studied for four years under Sir Walter Parratt, and studied the 'cello with W. H. Squire. There was a chance that I might have become an organist, but the fates decided otherwise.

"So I have travelled all over the world — but my home is in London, where my wife and daughter are now. My wife, who married me after saying . . . but I will tell you what she said. You see, her mother brought her to me first of all for me to teach her singing. She was singing with one of those hooting, contralto voices, and she sang for me 'The Hills of Donegal.' And I imitated her, singing as though I had hot potatoes in my mouth. And then I told her mother all her singing faults. They retired to talk it over. 'You know,' her mother told her, 'I think he might be able to do your voice some good.' She demurred. 'I wouldn't have anything to do with that rude little man,' she said, 'not for a thousand pounds.'

"She sings beautifully now. Listeners to the B.B.C.-programmes know her voice well as that of Olive Kavann. If people ask her why she married me she says, 'Oh, I thought it would be a good idea to have an accompanist around the place.'

And Richard Tauber

"And now I am out here with Richard Tauber. I have been with him for four years and consider it an honour to be associated with him. He is, I consider, the greatest musician with whom I have been associated. He is an artist — a great artist. A great musician. He composes all day. He is not only a singer but also a fine conductor, with a complete knowledge of orchestral work. When he broadcasts with an orchestra it is he who conducts as he sings and brings in the various instruments as he wants them. I cannot tell you how happy I am in our association.

"I am happy to be in South Africa. It is my first visit. I met a number of old friends here. It was pleasant to spend an evening with Isador Epstein, the gifted piano virtuoso, and his attractive wife. It was pleasant to meet so many interesting new people and to realize the great interest which is being taken in good music."

And that is Percy Kahn, who is himself a great artist and a charming man. This is what he told me Augustus Yorke said to him, speaking of "Potash and Perlmutter": "By Jove, Percy! What a fine Potash you'd make!"

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