

VANITY FAIR

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Jascha Heifetz: a New Star in the Musical Heavens

*Biographical Notes Concerning an
Eighteen Year Old Super-Violinist*

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JASCHA HEIFETZ

The prodigy of eighteen who has been a violinist since he was three years old, and who has only this year taken his place—in America, at last—among the great living masters of the bow

EVERY now and then the world produces a super-artist, a man who is spared the long, heart-breaking struggle with the public that must be the lot of most artists. A striking instance of this is the case of Jascha Heifetz, whose American debut was made only a month or two ago. This young Russian violinist had been loudly heralded, and the audience that gathered in Carnegie Hall on October 27 was both vast and curious.

A MATURE virtuoso in his thirties might well have quailed at the thought of facing such an audience. For it looked almost as if the entire violin playing profession were present.

Every artist of the bow in the town, including several of the world's veteran and master virtuosos, had gathered together from all parts of the world. In short, it was as critical, and, if you like, as jealous an audience as any man could expect to face.

At the end of the first number—a chaconne by Vitali—everybody surrendered. I have never seen a more splendid tribute to an artist. Here, mark you, were the masters of the guild giving an ovation to a slim, eighteen-year-old boy and acknowledging him as one of the master violinists of the world.

JASCHA HEIFETZ

Spellbound by the purity of the music the lad drew from his fiddle, the audience continued its ovation after every number; shouted, waved handkerchiefs, threw hats in air, and, at the end of the program, stampeded to the stage. The youth, though visibly weary, played encore after encore, until a merciful management turned the lights out in order to get rid of the still applauding multitude. The world had found a super-fiddler. Zarathustra had played.

And in the presence of this frenzied throng the slim youth with the bushy, brown hair, and the long grave face, never departed from the perfect simplicity and modesty of his personal bearing.

Imagine a boy of eighteen wrenching from his rivals and his seniors the admission that he is "one of the greatest artists of our time!" The man who said this to me about Heifetz is a veteran violinist. He has heard every distinguished fiddler of the last half century. But for none of them, neither Ysaye nor Kreisler nor Joachim nor Sarasate, have I ever heard him utter more unqualified enthusiasm than he did for young Heifetz.

So New York crowned a career which, if as yet short, began early and has numbered many triumphs. At the tender age of three Heifetz began to study the violin in his native town of Vilna. At five he was admitted to the Imperial School of Music in Vilna and, shortly thereafter, played in public for the first time.

At six he played the Mendelssohn concerto, a battle-horse of such mature masters of the fiddle as Ysaye and Kreisler. At seven he was taken to the famous Professor Leopold Auer in Petrograd, the teacher of Elman and Zimbalist, whose comment on his new pupil was that such a genius is only born into the world once or twice in a generation.

His first recital in Petrograd—after two years with Auer—made him, at nine, a national celebrity. Visiting Germany and Austria in 1911, he conquered the musical worlds of Berlin and Vienna. The war kept him from risking the journey to London and Paris, but not from crossing the continent of Asia and the Pacific Ocean in order to reach the United States.

At his first concert in New York that other great Russian violinist, Mischa Elman, was seated beside Godowsky, the pianist. After the first number—so the story runs—Elman whispered to Godowsky: "I don't feel well. Isn't it very hot in here?"

"Perhaps it is—for violinists," retorted the admiring pianist. "But, somehow, I don't notice the heat."