

# Legacy Of Maud Powell To Be Celebrated - Brevard, NC The Transylvania Times, June 22, 2017

By Pamela Blevins

June 22, 2017



Courtesy photo

Violinist Maud Powell photographed at home in 1917. An autographed photo from her friend Jean Sibelius, whose violin concerto she premiered in America, is above her. Sibelius held Powell in high regard for her courage in championing the concerto that bewildered critics. (Courtesy photo by The Maud Powell Society)

When we think of pioneers, images come to mind of men conquering frozen wastes, inventing airplanes, computers, the telephone or exploring science in ways that improve life for all of us.

Rarely do we consider pioneers in classical music, and even more rarely do we acknowledge women whose ground-breaking contributions changed the face of music.

On Wednesday, June 28, the legacy of the great pioneering American violinist Maud Powell will be brought to life as part of the [Brevard](#) Music Center's 2017 season.

BMC is presenting a chamber music concert in honor of the 150th anniversary of Powell's birth. BMC faculty members will offer a program of music that informed Powell's life.

As part of the concert, Powell's biographer and [Brevard](#) resident Karen A. Shaffer will be on stage discussing Powell with Jason Posnock, BMC director of artistic planning and educational programs.

The concert, titled "Maud Powell: An American Legend," will begin at 7:30 p.m. at Ingram Auditorium on the [Brevard College](#) Campus.

"Maud Powell's life was a profile in courage," Shaffer said. "She was born on the [Western](#) frontier of Illinois in 1867 at a time when women had no rights. Women like Powell's musically talented mother, Wilhelmina ("Minnie") Paul, were often forbidden by parents or husbands from pursuing such unladylike passions. Their place was in the home, raising a family and acting in socially acceptable ways."

With her own ambition as a composer thwarted by her Calvinist adoptive parents, Minnie Paul was determined that her first-born son would have all the opportunities she had been denied - he would be allowed to study music.

However, her first-born child turned out to be a girl whom her parents named Maud.

From an early age, young Powell was a strong-willed, determined girl who took to music naturally.

Once she held a violin in her hands, there was no stopping her.

"Maud was fortunate in her liberal, open-minded parents and in her family heritage," Shaffer said. "Her father, Bramwell, was an innovative educator. Her Uncle John Wesley Powell, a Civil War hero, was the first white man to explore the Grand Canyon. Along with his brother Bramwell, he was a founder of the National Geographic Society. The list of achievements by the Powell family is long and impressive, so it is no surprise that young Maud was born with the grit and will that would ultimately make her a pioneer in her own right."

As the depth of Powell's gift revealed itself, it became imperative that she study in Europe. The Powell family made a decision that appalled friends and brought a shower of criticism upon them.

They would split the family. Minnie would go to Germany with Maud and Maud's younger brother, Billy, while Bramwell continued his work in Aurora, Ill. It was a sacrifice they were willing to make and one that would ultimately change music history.

"Maud studied first at the Leipzig Conservatory before moving on for additional studies at the Paris Conservatory, both times with the great violin teachers of the day," Shaffer said. "Powell made her professional debut in England before turning to study in Berlin with Joseph Joachim, the close friend of Brahms."

Returning to America in 1885, in an act of boldness impossible today, she approached the conductor Theodore Thomas after a rehearsal of the New York Philharmonic, and asked him for an audition. He agreed.

After hearing her play, he engaged her to make her American debut with him. She was 17 years old.

"From then on, there was no looking back," Shaffer said. "Maud Powell let nothing stand in her way and won the respect and admiration of critics and audiences alike. She was a risk-taker from the beginning, daring to tackle new music, to promote music by women, by young composers and by black composers, the latter at a time when to do so was unheard of."

"She premiered violin concertos by Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, Sibelius, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and others in America. It is difficult for us today to think of this music as 'new,' challenging and startling in its modernism, but in the 1890s and early years of the twentieth century, it was.

"The Sibelius concerto bewildered critics who called it "bitter as gall" and predicted its demise. But Powell believed in Sibelius, a friend, and in his music. She played the concerto into the repertoire. Today, it is one of the most recorded 20th century violin concertos."

During her career, Powell traveled hundreds of thousands of miles to bring music to people from all walks of life, playing before royalty on one hand and performing for people in remote parts of our nation who had never heard classical music.

She pioneered the violin recital, was the first instrumentalist to record for the Victor Red Seal Label in 1904 and set a standard for violin playing that endures today.

"People often ask me if Powell married. She did - to H. Godfrey Turner, an English theatre manager she met while on tour with the Sousa Band in 1903," Shaffer said. "So many women musicians with promising or established careers gave them up when they married. Fortunately, Powell did not fall into this trap. Her husband became her manager and devoted his life to her in an unusual reversal of roles."

In the second decade of the 20th century, Powell's career was flourishing.

She was a best-selling recording artist, her concerts were sold out, and her advocacy for other musicians and composers was opening new doors for many. Her name was a household word.

Then tragedy struck.

While performing in St. Louis on Thanksgiving Day 1919, Powell suffered a heart attack on stage. She managed to play the final notes of a composition before slipping down into the arms of her accompanist.

She rested and resumed performing in January. While warming up for a concert in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, she suffered another heart attack. This one proved fatal. She was 52 years old.

"News of Powell's unexpected death shocked the music world," Shaffer said.

"Life seemed to stop while those who knew her or had heard her perform tried to take in what happened. Tributes poured in from around the world. The New York Philharmonic devoted a concert to her memory. Then, all went silent, and Maud Powell all but vanished to become little more than a footnote to music."

How could a woman who had made such an impact on music, who educated a nation about music and who inspired so many be forgotten so quickly?

The answer lies in technology. Powell died shortly before the advent of electronic recording (with microphone) made it possible to record large-scale compositions in their entirety and with greatly improved sound quality.

She was not around to become part of this technical revolution that helped make the names of violinists Fritz Kreisler and Jascha Heifetz.

Powell's legacy and contributions might have gone unnoticed had it not been for Karen Shaffer, who discovered Powell in the 1970s.

"I saw in her life, the book I was destined to write," she said.

In addition to the book, Shaffer also reissued Powell's recordings (eventually reissued again by the international recording label Naxos), wrote a children's book, and launched the Maud Powell Society for Music and Education now based in [Brevard](#).

"Maud Powell was the first American-born violin virtuoso of international stature of either gender and a powerful force for musical advancement in America. It is important that we celebrate Powell," Shaffer said. "Serving humanity with her art was the motivating spirit of her life. Her influence as a supreme artist and humanitarian left an indelible mark on all who heard her play. And today, her enduring legacy continues to inspire musicians and music lovers throughout the world."

Tickets for "Maud Powell: An American Legend" are available at the BMC box office and may be ordered by phone at (828) 862-2105, or online at <http://www.brevardmusic.org/performances>.