

SASCHA JACOBSEN: A MASTER VIOLINIST REMEMBERED

In tribute to violin master Sascha Jacobsen, the Journal presents a brief overview of his career by the violist David Wallace, and the reminiscences of the violinist Louis Kaufman and the violist Louis Kievman, who played with Jacobsen in the Musical Art Quartet.

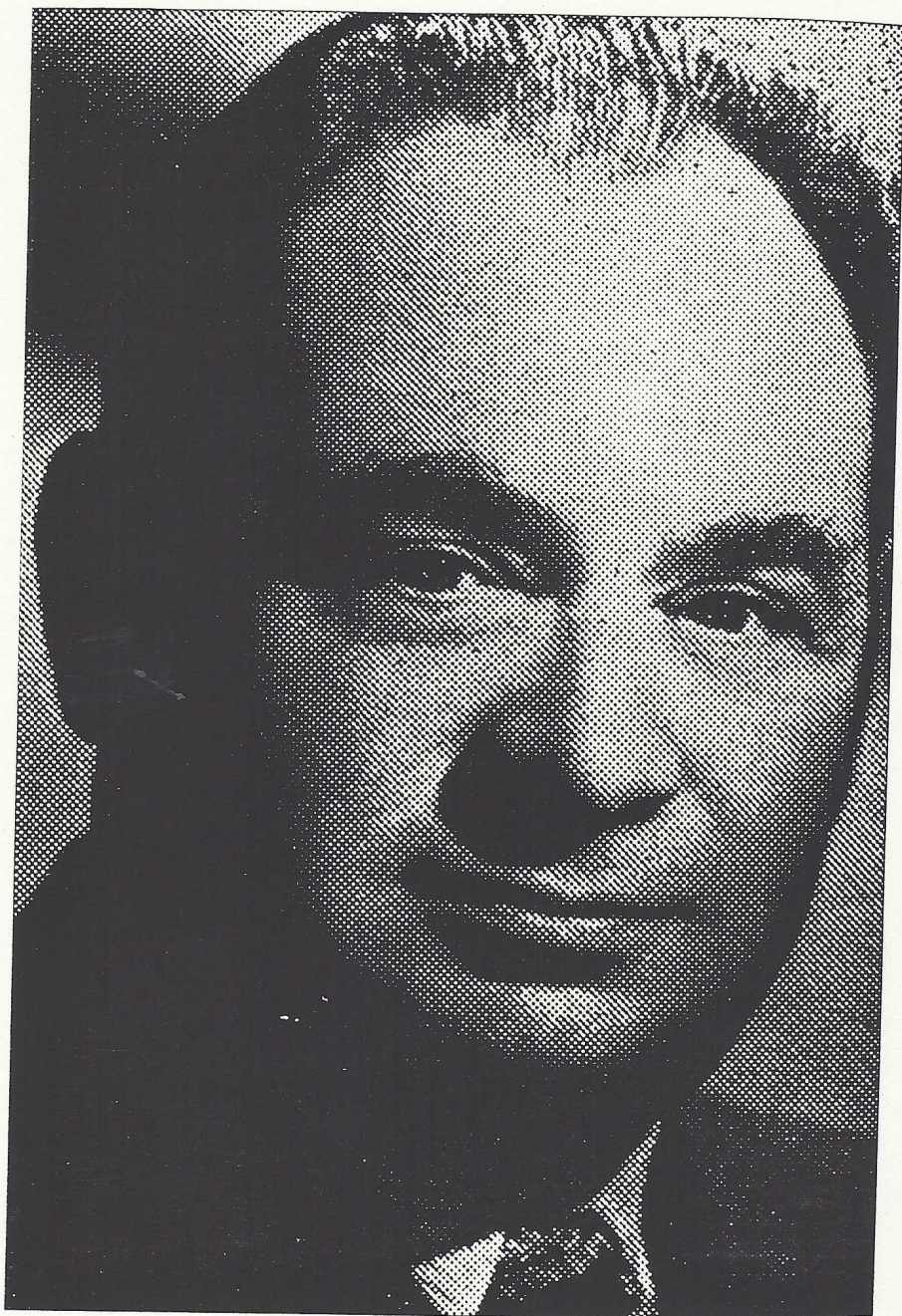
A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

David Wallace

Sascha Jacobsen's career as a violinist and teacher spanned over six decades. Equally at home in the roles of soloist, chamber musician, concertmaster, and teacher, Jacobsen soloed with the finest orchestras of his day, formed one of the first important American string quartets, served as concertmaster of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and taught several generations of violinists and chamber musicians. By his death on March 19, 1972, Jacobsen had achieved excellence in every possible violinistic realm.

Early biographical material regarding Sascha Jacobsen is both sparse and contradictory. To complicate matters, a Philadelphia violinist named Sascha Jacobson was starting his solo career at the same time Jacobsen was.¹ Early newspaper and magazine articles frequently confused or combined information about the two, often using their surnames interchangeably. Jacobson, a Flesch student, eventually changed his name to avoid confusion.²

The most reliable records state that Sascha Jacobsen was born to Russian parents in Helsinki, Finland—then a part of Russia—during the winter of 1895.³ Jacobsen's manager sometimes publicized him as a Russian in response to the popular



Sascha Jacobsen, c. 1948 (courtesy of Los Angeles Philharmonic Archives)

success of Auer pupils, and sometimes as a Brooklyn native to appeal to nationalist sentiments. Because of numerous conflicting stories, little can be concluded about Jacobsen's earliest training and career.⁴

Facts become more concrete after 1908 when Jacobsen enrolled in New York City's Institute of Musical Art as a student of Franz Kneisel. In the next ten years Kneisel's students included such luminaries as Louis Kaufman, Jacques Gordon, William Kroll, and Joseph and Lillian Fuchs.⁵ Jacobsen received his Artist's Diploma in 1915 with the school's highest honor, the \$500 Loeb Prize. A *Musical America* review of his graduation recital proclaimed him a violinist of "far-reaching technique" with a tone that was "luscious in color and depth."⁶

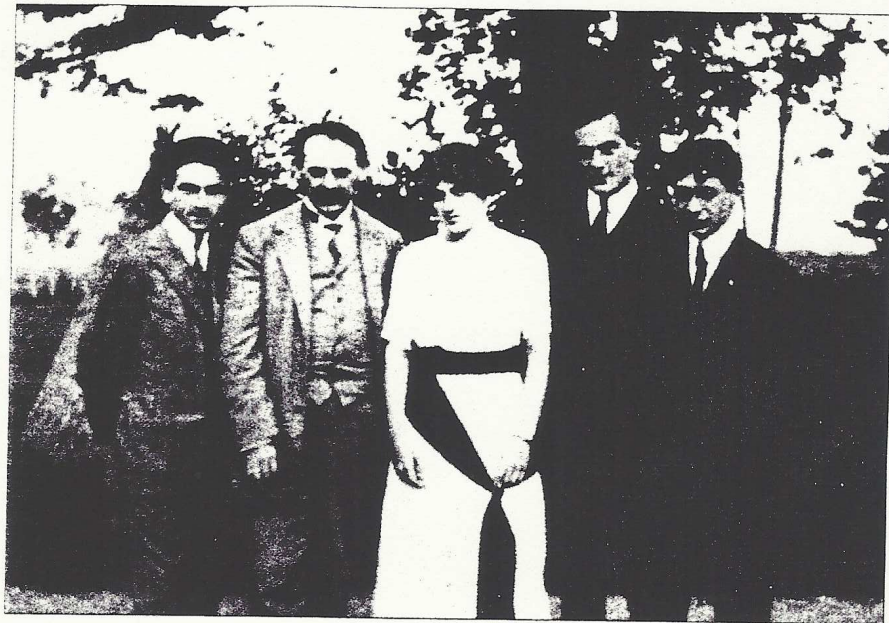
On November 27 of the same year, Jacobsen made his official New York recital debut in Aeolian Hall with a program comprised of Handel's Sonata in D Major, Sain Saëns' Concerto in b minor, the Bach Chaconne, and several short pieces. The concert received outstanding reviews from many New York and Boston papers. *Musical America* reported:

At the end of the concert the applause was tumultuous and Mr. Jacobsen responded with so many encores that his supply threatened to run out. He had to repeat [Cecil Burleigh's] Village Dance for a second time before the ardor of his hearers could be appeased. Many of them were reluctant to leave even after the hall was darkened.⁷

In the years that followed, Jacobsen made several appearances with the New York Philharmonic, the New York Symphony, and the Metropolitan Opera. As a recitalist, he toured Europe, America, Canada, and Mexico with pianist Samuel Chotzinoff. In Mexico, Jacobsen caused such a sensation that a cheering crowd carried him to his taxi after his first concert.⁸ His reputation and fame continued to grow.

However, Jacobsen was to share the fate of countless other violinists whose solo careers became gradually eclipsed by the phenomenal popularity of Jascha Heifetz and Leopold Auer's other pupils. Reviews of the early 1920s continually compared Jacobsen's playing to Heifetz's, usually to Jacobsen's disadvantage. When Franz Kneisel died in March 1926, Jacobsen agreed to succeed his late teacher at the Institute of Musical Art, and abandoned his career as a major soloist.

At the Institute, which eventually became the Juilliard School, Jacobsen became head of the violin department⁹ and formed the Musical Art Quartet, which performed for almost twenty years. When the quartet disbanded in 1945, Jacobsen resigned his post at Juilliard and moved permanently to California.



Sascha Jacobsen (far right) at Blue Hill, Maine, c. 1913, with (l-r) Samuel Gardner, Franz Kneisel, Helen Jeffrey, and Elias Breeskin.



At Evergreen, the Baltimore home of Ambassador and Mrs. John Work Garrett: Louis Kaufman, Sascha Jacobsen, Efrem Zimbalist, Marie Roemat-Rosanoff, and Samuel Chotzinoff

In California Jacobsen joined the faculty of the Los Angeles Conservatory, where he taught violin and coached chamber music while maintaining a modest career as soloist and chamber musician. Jacobsen even tried his hand at an orchestral career by serving as concertmaster of the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Alfred Wallenstein for the 1947-48 and 1948-49 seasons, when concertmaster David Frisina took a leave of absence.¹⁰ During the summer months, Jacobsen taught at the Music Academy of the West (1952, 1954-61) and later at Blue Hill, Maine (1963-67, 1969-70), where he had studied with Kneisel as an adolescent. In his later years, Jacobsen was known to read quartets with his friend Jascha Heifetz.¹¹

Jacobsen's more than fifty solo recordings primarily consist of long-forgotten vignettes, although he did record a few larger-scale virtuoso works such as Saint-Saëns' Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso and Wieniawski's Faust Fantasy (both with piano).¹² Of particular interest is the Canzonetta of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D Major (with orchestra). These early recordings reveal a violinist of warmth and sensitivity whose mastery of phrasing, portamento, and parlando style rivals the best of his generation. His later recordings with the Musical Art Quartet exemplify a supreme chamber musician of impeccable stylistic and technical command.

Sascha Jacobsen's true legacy continues through his many students who enjoy successful careers as soloists, chamber and orchestral musicians, and teachers—witness this partial list: Lynn Blakeslee, Alexander Brott, Alphonse Carlo, Jeanne Clausen, Bruce Dukov, George and Eleanor Grossman, William Hymanson (eventually violist in the Musical Art Quartet), Joseph Knitzer, Margaret Pardee (1937-42), Charles Jones, Young Uck-Kim (master classes at the Music Academy of the West in 1958), Bernard Robbins (chamber music), Walter Verdehr, and Zvi Zeitlin.

In homage to his teacher Franz Kneisel, Jacobsen bequeathed his musical library to Kneisel Hall, Blue Ridge, Maine, where he and so many other Kneisel students, as well as his own, had spent memorable summers.

1. *New York Telegraph*, July 13, 1914.

2. *Musical Courier*, April 23, 1916: "Before beginning his career in America, Jacobson will change his name, so as not to conflict with the other Sascha Jacobsen." In his *Memoirs*, Flesch, in writing about Kneisel, cites Jascha Jacobson [sic] and Jack Gordon among his outstanding students (282). While at Curtis, he recommended three former students as teachers of preparatory classes: Jacobsen, Frank Gittelson, and Emanuel Zetlin (351).

3. According to Juilliard School records, Jacobsen was born on November 29, 1895. *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1940 ed.) lists his birthday as December 11, 1895. Boris Schwarz in his *Grand Masters of the*

Violin writes that Jacobsen, born about 1897, was in fact a native New Yorker, but his manager tried to make him into a Russian fiddler because it was the rage of the day (507). In answer to a query by Annette Kaufman, Sascha's son Leo, who died in June 1966, assured her that his father had been born in Finland.

4. According to a March 7, 1914 *Musical America* article about the Philadelphia Jacobson, "Sasha [sic] Jacobsen [sic] Abroad," Sascha Jacobsen's childhood teacher was Paul Meyer of Philadelphia. Unfortunately, this information cannot be taken for granted since the violinists' surnames are reversed in this article and since Jacobson's Philadelphia ties would logically make him the student of Paul Meyer.

5. George and Eleanor Grossman, "An Appreciation of Sascha Jacobsen" (unpublished).

6. A. S., "Sascha Jacobsen's Recital," *Musical America*, April 10, 1915.

7. H. B., "Sascha Jacobsen Makes His New York Debut," *Musical America*, December 4, 1916.

8. "Sascha Jacobsen in Mexico," *Musical Courier*, September 18, 1919.

9. "Next Kilbourn Concert on Dec. 4," *Rochester Times Union*, November 24, 1928.

10. Orin Howard, Los Angeles Philharmonic archivist.

11. H. Axelrod, *Heifetz*, 584.

12. James Creighton, *Discopaedia of the Violin*, 345-47. In *Great Violinists in Performance* (Los Angeles: Panjandrum Books, 1987), Henry Roth offers a brief biography of Jacobsen, including the anecdote about Jacobsen and the Red Diamond Strad mentioned below by Louis Kievman.

MEMORIES OF SASCHA JACOBSEN AND THE MUSICAL ART QUARTET

Louis Kaufman

Editor's note: The editor wishes to thank Dr. Annette Kaufman for providing the accounts of Louis Kaufman and Louis Kievman of their experiences as members of the Musical Art Quartet. Their memoirs were originally written at the request of George Grossman, who had hoped to produce a book on Jacobsen which would include contributions by his fellow pupils. The project was never realized and the manuscripts were eventually given to the music library of the Juilliard School by George and Eleanor Grossman.

My first encounter with Sascha Jacobsen was during one of the summers I spent studying with Franz Kneisel at Blue Hill, Maine. Sascha had graduated from the Institute of Musical Art (now Juilliard) long before I arrived there in 1918, and had embarked on a solo career. I heard that he was already a very fine violinist when he arrived from Russia to study with Kneisel. However, he did not take part in the evening chamber music sessions under Kneisel's direction.

We met again a few years later when I was 19 years old and he asked me to play quartets with him, as a violist. We tried out Franz Höne and Bernard Ocko for second violinist and eventually settled on Paul Bernard, who had studied with Paul Stassévitch. Our cellist was always Marie Roemaet-Rosanoff, who had studied