

# Luigi von Kunits: The Man Who Made Pittsburgh and Toronto Musical

— BY MICHAEL M. PETROVICH —

Wrote John Murray Gibbon in *Canadian Mosaic* (McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1938):

"To Serbia Canada owes a special debt for it was a Serbian, Dr. Luigi von Kunits, who laid the foundations of musical Toronto. Joining the Canadian Academy of Music in 1910, he built up the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and by his wide culture and musical knowledge exercised great influence on Canadian music." But to Serbia America also owes its gratitude, and to no lesser degree, for it was the same Serbian, Luigi von Kunits, who helped conductor Frederick Archer lay the foundations of musical Pittsburgh before the turn of the 20th century.

When the name of Luigi von Kunits came to the ears of the musical world, in 1881, he was a mere teenager. Never before had a young talent received so many laurels in advance as he. Even the great Johannes Brahms became enthralled by the child prodigy and his musical precocity that he proclaimed him as the musician who was destined to achieve the highest expression of his time in the ideal manner. He was invited by Brahms himself to play second violin in one of his quartets at the tender age of 11, an unprecedented honour for one so young.

Von Kunits was three when he first began experiencing musical longings. He listened raptly to the weekend performances of chamber music at his parents' palatial estate. At five he had little difficulty, if any, with classical pieces. Before he was nine years of age he mastered the violin fully.

Among the most important influences working for Luigi's mental development in boyhood was the encouragement of his mother, who, while she intended her son for the Church, was an earnest, thoughtful, and loving woman, and most fond of classical literature and philosophy. Music, however, was Luigi's great love. He wanted to become a concert violinist, and practiced frequently and regularly, but his mother begrudged her son's ambition. He had begged his mother to let him choose music as his life's work, but in those days that of a musician was not considered a noble

profession or a bread and butter career, to say the least. As the years went by, his mother became ceaselessly unrelenting despite her son's remarkable musical progress. To prepare her son in the service of God, she insisted he enroll at the University of Vienna which, ironically enough, served as excellent training for the career that Luigi had already chosen for himself. He completed his academic training at the University of Vienna and the world-renowned Vienna Conservatory almost simultaneously. Academic training included classical Greek, Latin, law and philosophy. At the conservatory he studied violin under such greats as Kral, Grun and Sevcik; musical history with Hanslick, composition with Jaksch and harmony with Buckner. After his graduations with honors, no less, at the age of 21 he, for a time, led the String Quartet for the *Tonkuenstlerverein* when Brahms was its president.

During this time, however, he had composed a Violin Concerto and he had been asked to perform it with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. It was so well received that he had no trouble obtaining a position with the Austrian Orchestra as its assistant conductor and concertmaster. It was also at this juncture in time that he decided to embark on a tour of the United States in 1893, abandoning the career chosen for him by his mother. His parents were heartbroken at the sudden departure of their son. He was 23.

After playing with the Austrian Orchestra at the Chicago World's Fair he decided to remain in the United States. The people of the United States took him to their heart as few nations did — certainly more quickly and generously than his native Austria, and not less so than Canada where he was to settle down later on in life.

In Chicago he taught violin and composition and led a string quartet he personally founded. He came to Pittsburgh which had been without a professional symphony orchestra until 1895 when Frederick Archer took the baton. With Archer at the helm, von Kunits had organized and shaped an ensemble into a respectable orchestra. During the next 14

years, von Kunits was the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's concertmaster, first violinist, and assistant conductor to Frederick Archer, from 1896 to 1898, Victor Herbert, from 1898 to 1904, and Emil Pauer, from 1904 to 1910.

Also, it was in the United States that he first became aware of his Serbian roots. At Chicago's Columbian Exposition he witnessed Tesla's induction motors running everything that moves electrically. In Pittsburgh he saw Serbian steel workers form the Serb National Federation in 1901, with Michael Pupin, the inventor of long-distance telephone, as one of the founding fathers. From then on von Kunits always maintained that he was by descent a Serbian though his birthplace and training was Austrian.

It was in Pittsburgh that he befriended Joseph Henry Gittings, a gifted organist and impresario, and Harriet Jane, his beautiful daughter. After a brief courtship marriage became a foregone conclusion. He brought his new bride home to Vienna for a honeymoon where his parents received them with open arms, forgiving Luigi for leaving without their blessing.

After a long honeymoon, they returned to Pittsburgh, where their two daughters were born. As an enthusiastic Greek scholar and a bit of an eccentric he had them duly christened *Nasicaa*, for the daughter of Alcinous in the *Odyssey*, and *Aglaia*, for the Three Graces in Classical Mythology.

They were busy and fruitful years, devoted to raising a family and building a career. Besides the Pittsburgh Symphony, he directed a series of String Quartet concertos, taught at the Pittsburgh Conservatory, and later at his own school. Then in 1910, he made a decision to return to Vienna to give concerts throughout Europe, appearing not only in recitals as a guest artist with orchestras, but also in chamber music concerts. Back from his concert tours, he was widely acclaimed by his peers. Moriz Rosenthal, Louis Ree, Vladimir de Pachman, Emil Pauer, Fritz Kreisler and Eugene Ysaye all came to pay homage to a fine musician as was customary in music circles

of the day. Between recitals, von Kunits remained active by teaching at the world-famous Patony Conservatory.

In 1912, Dr. T. Alexander Davies, a young medical student who had come to take a post-graduate course at the University of Vienna's Medical School, came with an offer from the late financier and patron of the arts Colonel Albert Gooderham of Toronto. From the Philadelphia Orchestra, came another offer, requesting von Kunits to be their conductor. Von Kunits, whose first love was conducting, was recovering from a mild heart attack at the time, and so decided in favour of Toronto. (The man who accepted the Philadelphia post declined by von Kunits was Leopold Stokowski.)

The von Kunitses sailed to Canada with their newly-born son, *Astyanax*, aptly named in the Classical tradition. His daughters were left at a boarding school to complete their education. But with the outbreak of the First World War, von Kunits got the news that his estate was lost, confiscated by the Austrians who were at war with Serbia. (Von Kunits came from a line of Serbian noblemen who fought Ottoman occupiers at the borders of Austria and Hungary. When Turks threatened to invade Western Europe, von Kunits' ancestor rescued a prince of the realm who was badly wounded in battle, and consequently received a patent of nobility for his heroic action.)

His daughters soon joined the family fold in Toronto. When Canada entered the war, von Kunits found himself in an untenable position even in Toronto. He was considered an enemy alien even though he renounced his allegiance to Austria. Canada, gripped as it was by war fever, engaged in a fiercely hostile attack on anything or anyone Austrian and German. He persistently maintained that he was by descent a Serbian and had severed his ties with Austria for that reason. Abuse and antagonism was felt by von Kunits throughout the war years. It was a tragic time for him. He had to report in line with all the rest of alien-borns once or twice a week. It included not only Austrians, Hungarians and Germans, but even Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Czechs, Slovaks, Rumanians,

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Ukrainians and other nationalities who came from the territories ruled by the Hapsburg Monarchy. "He would arrive at home white and drawn after these sessions. It was not an easy task for a sensitive musician and scholar, man of honor and simple kindness to face this ordeal," says von Kunits' biographer and daughter, Mrs. Agliss Edwards.

"He never uttered a word of complaint. Stoically he realized he simply had to report and that was the thing to do." But he did not withdraw completely from his concert work, he played at concerts where and when he could. He lived a secluded life in Toronto which was to be his home for the rest of his life. During this period he founded The Canadian Music Journal, taught violin and harmony to his admiring students, instilling the love of chamber music in them all. The war over, von Kunits returned to the concert platform with a recital in Massey Hall. The sorrowful waiting through the long war years brought fruit finally. Von Kunits, who renounced his Austrian citizenship at the beginning of the war, became a Canadian citizen.

He recalled when he played under Victor Herbert's Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in 1897 and made his first visit to Toronto for a performance with the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir. He was astonished that such a magnificent group of singers had been formed and still flourished in a city which was, musically, not yet on the map. He was confident that Toronto would have a brilliant musical future. His optimism was shared by the critic Augustus Bridle, who asked "Is Canada Musical?" in the October 25, 1913 issue of the Canadian Courier, and wrote, "there is at present, and will be for a long time to come, a huge wave of musical development all over this country comparable to the best known in any country, and on a basis of population superior to any." And in the intervening years both von Kunits and Bridle proved themselves profoundly right.

Von Kunits always stressed that the education of a well-rounded musician should include studies in music history and composition as well as performance skills on an instrument.

Von Kunits was fondly remembered by his pupils. At least part of his popularity came from the charm of his personality and his intellectual background which embraced literature, politics, philosophy, art as well as music. The rest of his popularity, it is said, was attributed to his sense of humor and eccentricity, an eccentricity which commanded respect. "One amusing story is repeatedly told," says Mrs. Edwards. "His pupils, eager for their lessons, always used to arrive ahead of time. On winter days von Kunits would be surrounded in his studio by their overshoes, boots, wintercoats, violin cases, music stands. It became unbearable at one point, and not wishing to hurt his pupils' feelings, he placed a notice on his door for everyone to read. It caused audible laughter for days before it came to the attention of Dr. Augustus Vogt, Head of the Conservatory. Dr. Vogt telephoned von Kunits to remove the notice on the door. "Why?" exclaimed von Kunits in all innocence. "Luigi, go out and read it again," came the reply with a quite chuckle as the receiver clicked in place. He did. Underlined with red ink were carefully printed words: **Pupils Please Leave All Wearing Apparel Outside.**

He also contributed instructive articles and critical reviews to many journals. He wrote a book, "The Hero as Musician — Beethoven" in 1913. Many of his critical reviews had a byline "A.L." "Once a friend asked what the initials 'A.L.' stood for, von Kunits replied, 'All Lies.'"

Although Toronto had been a major music centre in Canada until 1917, in 1922, it

was without a professional symphony orchestra. Two young musicians, Louis Gesensway and Abe Fenboque, decided to approach von Kunits to tackle the difficult job of rebuilding the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. The Toronto Star had, about that time, mentioned an attempt by Lady Eaton to get Rachmaninoff for the podium, but all that came to naught.

The sixty musicians who turned up for the first rehearsal were all from the orchestral pits of the silent-movie houses; the only free time they had for concerts was between the matinee and evening shows. Von Kunits was assured that "there were sufficient skilled players, some of who had played in Frank Weisman's Toronto Orchestra — an organization founded in 1907 and which had become a casualty of the war in 1918 — and some of whom, as von Kunits knew, were better musicians than their theatre jobs allowed them to show."

After some reflection von Kunits accepted. Through the winter, he coached and encouraged some of his more advanced students so that they might be ready. He worked with theatre house musicians. And he spent sleepless nights re-scoring the music for his players and their instruments, keeping in mind their capacities.

By spring, von Kunits had brought the orchestra together. Making it coalesce from its disparate elements was not easy. One musician of that time recalled a rehearsal when von Kunits could not get any kind of warmth and color from the cello section, even though the piece was marked *appassionato*.

"He tapped his music stand, looked solemnly at the whole string section, and said quietly: 'Would all those men under 60 please vibrate.' The difference at the next attempt was most notable."

On April 23, 1923, at five p.m., the New Symphony Orchestra, with Luigi von Kunits at the baton, made its debut in Massey Hall. With an initial compliment of some 60 players, it soon became the 85-member Toronto Symphony Orchestra in 1927, offering full-length concerts. After successful tours in Canada and the United States, audience got bigger. Von Kunits brought recognition and wide appeal. The excellence of his string section became the envy of other orchestras. Stokowski invited two of von Kunits' pupils, Gesensway and Manny Roth, to join the Philadelphia Orchestra. By drawing into it some of the world's finest instrumentalists, Stokowski succeeded in creating the distinctive "Philadelphia sound" which brought his orchestra international acclaim. Another von Kunits' pupil of note was the U.S. composer Charles Wakefield Cadman. Indeed, von Kunits shaped a generation of string players, some of whom continued to play with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in 1980.

After nine years of struggle to win a place for a first-rate orchestra in Canada, von Kunits died on October 8, 1931.

He was a versatile musician, almost as gifted in other instruments as he was a violinist, and a composer as adept in the light music as he was in such serious works as string quartet, a violin concerto, or a repertoire of pieces for the violin and piano. His best pieces for the violin include Violin Concerto in E minor, Violin Concerto, Der Frühling (overture), String Quartet in D minor, Villa Sonata, Suite, Legend, Romanza, Four Pieces, Three Etudes, and Scotch Lullaby.

Von Kunits left behind a tradition of dedicated musicianship and a solid framework of two potentially fine orchestras — The Pittsburgh Symphony and the Toronto Symphony — an achievement often overlooked today. Conductor Sir Adrian Boult of the London Philharmonic Orchestra once said of von Kunits that he was "rehearsing a soul without a body."