

The Presser Story

Theodore Presser is remembered not only as the publisher of "Etude," the music magazine, and the founder of the music publishing firm bearing his name, but as a philanthropist who specialized in music education. The story of how Mr. Presser made his dream come true, starting with a capital of only \$250.00, is fascinating and impressive.

Theodore's father, Christian Presser, came to America in 1820 from the Saar Valley on the borderline between France and Germany. His mother, nee Caroline Dietz, was born in America. They were devout members of the Christian Brotherhood sect. Theodore was born July 3, 1848 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was only ten years old when his father died.

As a lad of fourteen he worked in an iron foundry helping to mold cannon balls for the army during the Civil War. At sixteen he sold tickets for the Strokosch Opera Company performances in Pittsburgh in C.C. Mellor's music store. After that, Mr. Mellor, impressed by the boy's personality, made him a music clerk. His industry and after-hour efforts to improve stock-keeping and other details of the operation impressed the owners and, before he was nineteen, he became manager of the sheet music department.

Theodore determined to make music his life's work. He had been reared in a home where all participated in musical enjoyment, and though he and his brothers played musical instruments, he had received no formal instruction on the piano. He was nearly nineteen when he began studying piano with a Lutheran minister whose name was Marksten. During his boyhood, young Theodore and his brother played guitar, a favorite instrument then as well as now. The Presser boys and their guitars went along on many serenading parties with Stephen Foster.

Because of his father's early death, Theodore was forced to postpone his pursuit of education until 1868. At age 20 he entered Mt. Union College in Alliance, Ohio. From 1869 through 1874 he was an instructor at Mt. Union College, Ohio Northern University and then Miami Conservatory of Music at Xenia, Ohio. Then followed a year of further study at New England Conservatory. Although entered as a student, the record shows that he was paid to instruct his fellow classmates in sight-singing, a music skill at which he always excelled. He refused an offer to remain on the faculty and returned to Ohio to found the Department of Music at Ohio Wesleyan University. From his \$1,000 a year salary, he saved enough money to attend the Leipzig Conservatory where he studied for two years under Reinecke, Jadassoh, Zwintscher and others.

On his return from Europe, he became Director of Music at Hollins College, with frequent appearances at Randolph Macon College for Women in Lynchburg, Virginia. It was here, in 1883, with only \$250.00 to back him, that he courageously began publication of "Etude." It was a modest ten-page paper, bearing prophetically on its title page a quotation from Horatius:

"Omne Tullit Punctum Qui Miscuit Utile Dulci" ("He who mingles the useful with the agreeable bears away the prize.").

"Etude" became sensationally successful almost immediately. Teachers who did not have the opportunity to attend domestic or European conservatories to learn the fine points of their profession were delighted to find a source of information in this inexpensive monthly magazine. Mr. Presser, who acted as editor of the periodical for many years, analyzed the music included as a supplement and recommended other compositions of a similar pattern. The result of this was predictable! The teacher subscribers wrote to "ETude" for copies of the music, and Mr. Presser was forced to become a music dealer-publisher.

The music company which bears his name has steadily grown in stature. Still adhering to the principles of its founder, it is recognized as a prestigious giant in the field of music.

The first edition of "Etude" (October 1883) was only 2,000 copies. By December 1918, subscriptions totaled 217,805 and in 1923 the staff required for "Etude" and the music company had risen to 342.

In 1884 Mr. Presser moved to Philadelphia. One of his newly gained Philadelphia friends was the young James Gibbons Huneker who was destined to become famous as a music critic and author. The but 24, Huneker contributed articles to "Etude" and, later, in his reminiscences, recounted the fun he and Mr. Presser had "starving together" in those early "Etude" days.

An astute businessman - and by the turn of the century he had become a very wealthy one - Mr. Presser did not forget his humble beginnings, his struggles as a music teacher and the very real problems that confronted the members of his early profession. IN 19806 he established his "Home for Retired Music Teachers." The Foundation has faithfully carried out his benevolent objectives since his death in 1925.

In 1916, Mr. Presser took steps to perpetuate his philanthropy by creating The Presser Foundation through several Deeds of Trust and through his Will. The Foundation was officially incorporated in 1939 following Mr. Presser's death in 1925.