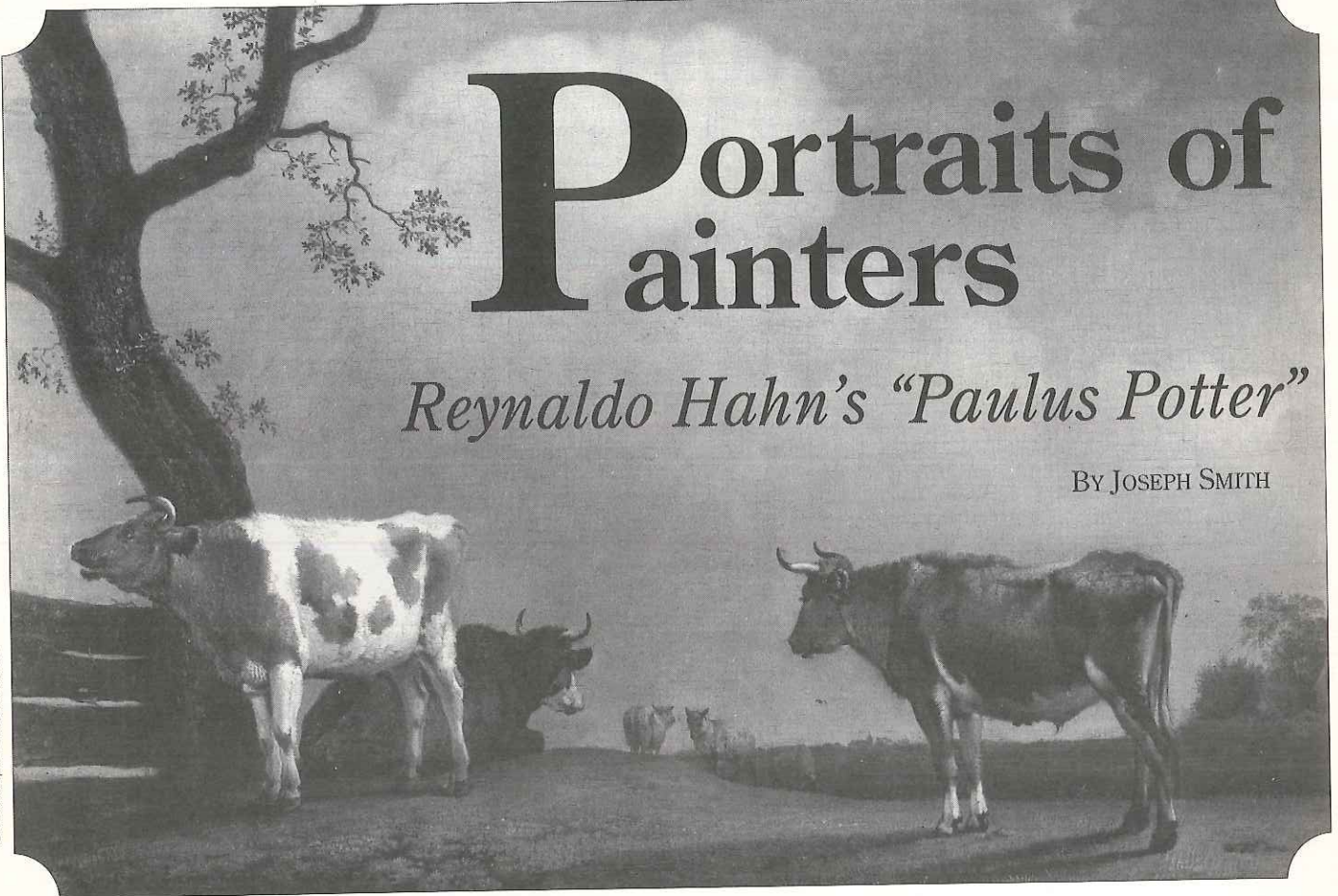


Portraits of Painters

Reynaldo Hahn's "Paulus Potter"

By JOSEPH SMITH



Giraudon/Art Resource, NY

"La Prairie" By Paulus Potter

The Venezuelan-born French composer, Reynaldo Hahn (1874-1947), was a remarkably versatile musician. His languid, insinuating songs conjure up a lost world of elegant, decadent Parisian salons. In the Operetta *Ciboulette*, the most famous of his many stage works, he finds opportunities for endless delightful harmonic finesses. His instrumental works include a fine piano concerto — light and ingratiating, but never trivial. Not content with composing, he conducted (including Mozart at the Salzburg Festival), wrote five books, served as music critic, and performed and recorded both as singer and accompanist. Often he would employ three of his talents at once, accompanying himself in his own songs, while smoking a cigarette. (Although he acknowledged that smoking while singing was a bad

habit, it did prove, he pointed out, that one could achieve perfect enunciation without excessive movement of the lips.) In his writing, he may have overused that vague word "charm," but his recorded singing eloquently defines it.

His best friend is remembered too — for writing one of the most penetrating idiosyncratic, profound (and certainly the most obsessive) works in all of world literature — *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Marcel Proust was that great rarity — a novelist who could write both sensitively and plausibly about music and musicians. His description of the "little phrase" from "Vinteuil's" imagined violin sonata, which becomes the "national anthem" of Swann and Odile's love is in fact more evocative than the real one from Saint-Saëns's Violin Sonata which suggested it.

(The contemporary American Joseph Fennimore has had the audacity and sympathy to compose a lovely quartet in the presumed style of Vinteuil.) While Proust learned the piano in childhood, and was passionately fond of music before he met Hahn in 1894, doubtless Hahn's observations, opinions, and gossip supplied material for Proust's masterpiece. If Proust was fascinated by music, Hahn was no less so by words. He confessed that "before a purely instrumental work, I experience admiration... [but I am involved] only when there are words." At one time, he even expounded the dictum (to which, fortunately, he did not adhere) that "the role of music in a song should never be greater than that of the footlights in a play."

The series of four *Portraits of Painters* represents a rare collaboration
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Glossary

This handy guide lists some of the technical terms you'll find in this issue.

a tempo (al tempo, au mouvement, Im Tempo, Tempo Io, Tempo Primo) — back to the original tempo (found after a *rit.*, *rall.*, or *accel.*).
allegro — a fast, lively tempo.
andante — a moderately slow tempo.
andantino — a little slower than *andante*.
animato, animado — animated.
animando — getting livelier.
attacca — do not pause, continue.
con — with.
cresc., crescendo (literally "growing") — getting louder.
dim., diminuendo — getting softer.
dolce, dolcecemente — sweetly.
douloureux, doloroso — sorrowful.
e, et, ed — and.
espr., expressif, espressivo — expressive.
espressione — expression.
f, forte (literally "strong") — loud.
ff — fortissimo, very loud.
grazioso — graceful.
langsam — slow.
legato — play smoothly, with no separation between notes.
lent, lento — slow.
mf — moderately loud.
mp — moderately soft.
m.s., m.g., l.h. — left hand.

marcato, marqué — marked, stressed.
meno — less.
moderato, modéré — moderate.
molto — very.
mosso — movement (or agitation).
non troppo — not too much.
p, piano — soft.
pp, ppp, pianissimo — very soft.
ped., con pedale — with pedal.
più, plus — more.
poco, poco a poco — little, little by little.
rall., rallentando — slowing down.
rit., ritard, ritardando — slowing down.
ritenuto, retenu — holding back.
rondo — musical form characterized by the repetition of a principal theme after each introduction of a new theme.
sf, sff, sfz, fz — accent.
sans — without.
semplice — simple.
sempre — always.
simile — same.
sost., sostenuto — sustained.
tr — trill.
tranquillo — calm, tranquil.
un peu, un poco — a little.
vite — rapid.
volta — time (2*da volta* = second time through).

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Portraits *continued*

tion between Proust and Hahn. At this time, the year that they met, Proust was only twenty-three and Hahn not yet twenty, but Hahn was easily the more established, having composed his celebrated *Chansons Grises* the year before. Although in the published music, Proust's poems appear simply as epigraphs, at the first performance (in a salon, of course), they were read during the music. Here is the poem to the seventeenth century Dutch realist, Potter:

Paulus Potter
By Marcel Proust

Somber sorrow of uniformly gray skies,

Sadder still for being blue in the rare gaps,

And which, therefore, let filter on the frozen plains,

The warm tears of an unappreciated sun;

Potter, melancholy mood of somber plains

Which stretch out without end, without joy, without color;

The trees, the hamlet spread no shadows,

The barren little gardens bear no flower.

A farm hand hauling pails returns home, and his pitiful mare,

Resigned, troubled and dreaming,

Anxiously raising her pensive head,

Snorts with a short breath the strong breath of the wind.

This composition is not the only one that Hahn dares to end without returning to the tonic chord — his song, "Offrande," for one, ends on a five-seven chord.

Each reader must decide for himself just how specifically Proust succeeds in "translating" Potter into words, and Hahn, Proust's words into this suavely dejected music. Or perhaps we could commission an artist to "paint" Hahn's piece... and see how closely the result resembles Potter! ■

from *Portraits Of Painters*

PAULUS POTTER

REYNALDO HAHN
(1874-1947)

Andante
en traînant un peu

p

...désolé

p plus expressif

p

dim.

p

en dehors

en dehors

p

3

dim.

3

p

3

3

poco cresc.

p

3

3

pp

3

3

p

p

3

3

p

poco

poco sf

pp