

THEODORE PRESSER

Before *The Etude*

Part III

By E. Douglas Bomberger

Editor's Note: This is the third of a three-part series examining the story of MTNA Founder Theodore Presser's colorful early career.

Founding *The Etude*

In the summer of 1883, Theodore Presser turned 35. We don't know whether this birthday caused him to take stock of his life in a systematic way, but if he did, he may have been ambivalent about the results thus far. After nearly ruining his health making cannonballs and saws, Presser was introduced to the music profession in C. C. Mellor's Store and determined to make it his life work. His late start in performance prevented him from developing his skills to a professional level, though, despite years of study. He moved through a series of teaching positions, working with enthusiasm and persistence but gaining little financial reward. He had been inspired by a series of mentors to value education highly, but he had seen first hand the low regard in which most American music teachers were held

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and the challenges they faced in improving their skills while earning a living. As he had done before, Presser struck out boldly on a new venture, and this time his idealism and his practicality found the perfect vehicle to make an enduring contribution to American musical life.

The story of his founding of *The Etude* music magazine is the stuff of legend, and it was possible only because he had acquired the habit of extreme frugality. With \$250 in savings from working at Hollins Institute, he resigned his position and moved to nearby Lynchburg, Virginia, to start the magazine, whose first issue appeared in October 1883. The startup costs depleted his savings, and his only source of income was a job as a church organist for \$150 a year. That fall he played for a series of revival meetings that he assumed were part of his regular duties. At the end of the revival, the ministers handed him a red velvet bag containing \$250. With this unexpected windfall he was able to move his enterprise to Philadelphia, where his magazine was printed.¹ For the next 40 years he worked incessantly to build the publishing empire that bore his name, but at the root of everything he did was *The Etude*.

On the title page of the first issue of the new journal was the first half of a Latin phrase from Horace, “Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci,” translated by Presser as “He who mingles the useful with the agreeable carries off the prize.” For the sake of brevity he omitted the second half of the aphorism, which makes the point specifically literary: “...lectorem delectando pariterque monendo” [by delighting and instructing the reader at the same time]. The goal of *The Etude* was to provide guidance, inspiration and instruction for piano teachers in their work. It combined how-to articles containing practical advice on every aspect of teaching and playing with enjoyable musical selections in each issue. It was aimed at neither the advanced musician nor the rank beginner, but rather at the vast population of music teachers of modest accomplishment and earnest desire to improve. It drew elements from *Mellor’s Musical Mirror*, *Brainard’s Musical World* and *Church’s Musical Visitor*, but it was not exactly like any of them. From the beginning it had its own inimitable tone and mission that only grew more clearly defined as the years went by.

The music critic James Huneker was one of the first writers to join Presser on the staff of the new magazine. In his 1920 autobiography, Huneker painted a vivid portrait of Presser at the start of his publishing career:

Then, Mr. Presser was a lean, hungry-looking man with his head full of half-crazy schemes; at least, they seemed so to me. He had started a musical monthly whose pulse, temperature, and respiration he watched as if it had been a chick in an incubator. And it was a chick of uncertain health.... Many nights we went to

the post-office there anxiously to open letters. What a hurrah of joy when a dollar bill was found for an annual subscription! Presser, who is the Henry Ford of Philadelphia sheet-music, saw further ahead than I. *The Etude* has a subscription list that must make envious even Mr. Bok [publisher of *Ladies’ Home Journal*]. Presser did it all with his canny Yankee patience and shrewdness. He knew that the daughter of the plumber, the daughter of the policeman, hankered after music, and he deliberately built a machine to cater to their needs. The curious part of it is that he really improved their taste.²

In the first few years, Presser ran the operation on a shoestring. He reported sleeping under the counter in his shop during his first months in Philadelphia, and there were many times in his early years when his heroic frugality made the difference between success and failure. Even after his business was flourishing and he was a very wealthy man, he was known to become extremely angry at lights that were left on unnecessarily or other careless actions.³

The first issue of *The Etude* listed the price for a single issue at 25 cents and the price for an annual subscription paid in advance at \$1.00. Within two years, though, the price was set at 15 cents per copy and \$1.50 for an annual subscription. Before long, teachers and students throughout the country responded positively, becoming loyal subscribers who swelled the circulation. By 1889 there were more than 5,000 subscribers, and by 1900 the subscribers exceeded 40,000. The peak subscription of nearly a quarter million copies per month was achieved in the late 1910s.⁴ By the time of his death in 1925, his company employed about 350 persons.

Presser’s Personal Life

If Theodore Presser had romantic attachments during his years of teaching, there is no surviving evidence. In 1890, at age 42, Presser married Helen Louise Curran, the daughter of a wealthy Philadelphia businessman, John C. Curran. James Francis Cooke recounted what Presser told him about the Curran family:

Music was thought to be of such little consequence that few could imagine that publishing and music dealing could be of any significance. Accordingly, when Mr. Presser married Miss Helen Louise Curran in 1890, member of a wealthy Philadelphia family, her brother approached Mr. Presser to find out whether his charming sister was marrying a man whose means could sustain her social position. The brother was dumbfounded to learn that Mr. Presser’s income was notably larger than that of his skeptical investigator.⁵

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Presser's niece Edith, who had frequent contact with Presser in his later years, recalled vividly the relationship between the two in her memoir: "The true love that Uncle Theodore bore for his first wife, Helen Louise Curran, was the most beautiful emotion in the life of this great man, for in his love for her, he found the purity and goodness, that makes life here on earth worth living."⁶ After a decade and a half of marriage, Presser lost his wife and his mother-in-law within two days in March 1906. Edith wrote poignantly of his loneliness and devastation at the loss, describing it as "a dark cloud hovering over him."⁷ Presser remarried in 1908, to Elise Houston Ferrell, a widow who had been a friend of Helen. He purchased her home, adjoining his own at 121 W. Johnson Street in Germantown, eventually tearing it down to make way for the Presser Home for Retired Music Teachers. His second wife died on November 7, 1922.

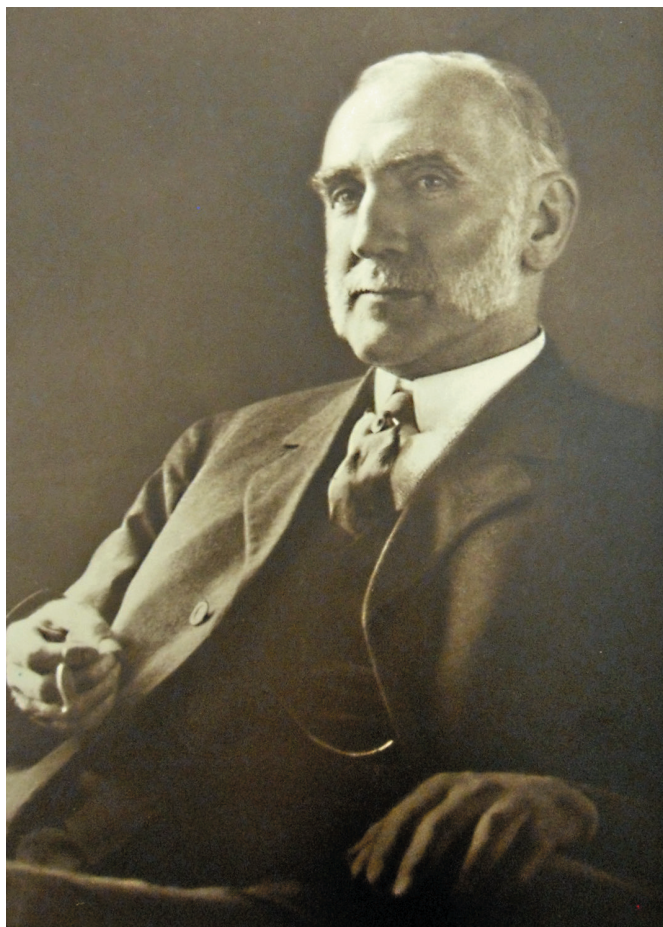


Figure 1: Theodore Presser in later life. Source: Theodore Presser Foundation.

Presser As A Publisher

The growing popularity of *The Etude* magazine opened the door for Presser to establish a music-publishing firm. His initial goal was to supply subscribers to the magazine with access to music for their students. Since many of them lived in isolated areas far from a music store, this was a brilliant innovation. He pioneered mail-order sales of music, and he invented a system of supplying teachers with stocks of music on approval that they could sell to their students. He also had the foresight to publish a new category of music books that would come to dominate the 20th-century music education market—the graded piano method.

In 1889, Presser published an innovative piano method entitled *Touch and Technic* by William Mason.⁸ The son of Lowell Mason, America's foremost music educator, William Mason had studied in Germany like Presser, had shown promise as a performer, but ultimately devoted his best energies to teaching. *Touch and Technic* was a four-volume compendium of technical approaches to the piano that was among the most important factors in codifying modern approaches to virtuoso piano technique.⁹ To prepare students for the advanced exercises in Mason's method, Presser worked with collaborator W. S. B. Mathews to produce a 10-volume *Standard graded course of studies for the piano-forte*.¹⁰ The now-familiar format of progressively more difficult pieces with explanatory notes on how to master each piece was a new approach in the 1890s that soon became standard in piano teaching. This basic format was adopted by virtually every publishing company from that time forward. Presser's years of teaching piano in isolated settings to students of different levels of advancement had shown him what teachers needed to be successful in their work, and he tapped a market that would be lucrative for the entire publishing industry in the 20th century. Years later, Presser published his own modest three-volume graded piano course with himself as sole author, but it is clear that he was the driving force behind Mathews's 1892 publication as well.¹¹

Presser never returned to teaching, but his work in business was devoted to the support of music teachers and students. In 1908, he was invited to return to Mount Union College to receive an honorary degree and deliver a speech; his refusal to accept this honor says much about his career, his modesty and the gratitude he held for his mentors:

Your esteemed letter of April 8th is at hand and I appreciate it very much more than I can state to you in a letter. A degree of any kind, however, conferred upon me would not be acceptable. I am a business

man and for the past 25 years have been drifting entirely into commercial lines. It would give me the greatest pleasure to visit the old college once more but I fear that I will have to forego that pleasure as I do not expect to be here at that time, June 16th. There is an old student of Mt. Union College who has done a great work in education. I do not know whether he has ever been called upon on occasions of this kind, but he is a most excellent speaker. His name is H. S. Lehr. He is still in the work and I am sure has been an honor to the institution.¹²

Theodore Presser As A Philanthropist

Presser's success as a businessman did not cause him to lose touch with music teachers and students; in fact, it deepened his empathy for them. The last decades of his life were dedicated increasingly to philanthropy, as he sought ways to give his wealth back to the music teachers who had been his loyal customers. Frances Elliott Clark, a fellow member of the Philadelphia Music Teachers Association (which he had founded in 1891), highlighted this aspect of his work in a eulogy delivered shortly after his death. Not to be confused with the renowned piano pedagogue Frances Clark (1905–1998), Frances Elliott Clark (1860–1958) was a founding member of the Music Educators National Conference, and from 1911 she was the director of the Education Department of the Victor Talking Machine Company, where she promoted the use of the phonograph in music education. Clark recalled:

His major purpose in life was the improving, developing, culturing, and finally nurturing, [of] the music teacher. His life-long devotion to this single idea is unique in music annals. He amassed a great fortune, not for the sake of self-indulgence or enjoyment, but only to pour it out in the service of his ideals. Yachts, private cars, regional residences, collections of art, pottery, antiquities, etc.—all were within his reach but no, the one general idea was ever uppermost. He toiled like a very slave to the inner drive of it as if it were a holy order and he the one High Priest of abnegation and sacrifice.¹³

Presser's heroic philanthropy, described so eloquently by Clark, was focused on three primary objectives.

Inspired by a visit to Verdi's *Casa di Riposo per Musicisti* (Musicians' Rest Home) in Milan, Italy, Presser purchased a building in Philadelphia in September 1906 to serve as a home for retired music teachers. He knew that music teaching was not lucrative, leaving many of his former col-

leagues without a retirement fund or a means to provide themselves with a dignified retirement, and his goal was to provide a pleasant place for music teachers to spend their retirement years with like-minded individuals. The concept was a new one in the United States, and as he had often done in his business career, Presser found creative solutions to promoting it. Initial response to invitations for applications to the "Presser Home for Aged Musicians" was lackluster, but when Presser realized that the name was off-putting, he changed it to the "Presser Home for *Retired* Music Teachers" and saw the applications swell. In 1914, a spacious building complex was built on the property next to Presser's private residence in Germantown, Pennsylvania, that became the permanent site of the Presser Home for Retired Music Teachers. For the rest of his life, Presser spent much of his free time visiting teachers at the home, with whom he felt a special connection.

In addition to his empathy for retired music teachers, Presser understood the struggles of music students who worked as hard as any others in college but could not look forward to a lucrative career. A letter in the archives of Hollins College gives witness to the birth of one of Presser's most enduring initiatives. On May 6, 1912, Presser wrote to Matty Cocke informing her of his plans for "experimenting with a few institutions in the matter of a free scholarship in music and other studies." The stipulations for this experimental program, later expanded to form one of the major benefactions of the Presser Foundation, are similar to those used today: the selection of the candidate was made by the president and the head of the music department rather than the trustees; the pupil was to be enrolled at least one-quarter time in studies other than music, and the student had to exhibit financial need. He added, "This is merely an experiment and may lead to something more extended in the future."¹⁴ This was surely the understatement of his career, as the scholarship program became a linchpin of the Presser Foundation's philanthropic mission and has given millions of dollars in support of music students over the past century. Today, music departments around the country are selected to give their top undergraduate student a generous Presser Scholarship to support the final year of his or her college education.

A third goal of his philanthropy was to aid college music departments in improving their facilities. Few disciplines have such specific needs as music, which requires rehearsal and performance spaces, practice rooms, and soundproofed teaching studios. Retrofitting an older building to serve a music department is seldom satisfactory, as neither the

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spaces nor the soundproofing can meet the needs of a thriving music department. Beginning in 1925, the Presser Foundation dedicated significant amounts of money to supporting the construction of new music buildings for schools around the country. As noted, the first recipient was Hollins College, whose Presser Hall—complete with a bust of the benefactor—is still in use today. Ten schools were awarded construction grants before the Great Depression curtailed the program. In every case, the Foundation provided the primary funding but required the institution to raise matching funds as a way of ensuring institutional support.

Despite his lavish generosity to causes that he cared about, Presser did not like being importuned for money. His early donations were often arranged through an intermediary like his editor and friend Cooke. By 1916, though, his philanthropic endeavors had grown to the point where it became more practical to establish a foundation to carry out the work. This foundation managed the Presser Home as well as the programs supporting music schools and students.¹⁵ The Presser Foundation was the principal beneficiary of his estate and was incorporated in 1939. Today it is one of the few private foundations in the United States dedicated solely to music education and music philanthropy.

Conclusion

Theodore Presser's life story verifies the assessment of his niece Edith Shaffer: "My uncle was a very unusual man, by that I mean that he was a combination of tyrant, romancer, and philosopher, with just enough human interest to lend a pleasant contrast."¹⁶ This characterization corresponds with the recollections of his closest associate, Cooke, who in a 12-part article written in 1948 described the many contradictory aspects of his personality but ended by saying: "Mr. Presser was always essentially a dreamer. He did not dream of power, wealth, or success. When success came to him he accepted it and hustled about to find some practical means of employing it for the benefit of others."¹⁷ The unique combination of skills and personality traits that made him so successful—diligence, perfectionism, frugality, humility, loyalty, generosity and an unwavering commitment to the needs of the average musician—may be traced to the experiences of his early years. Like Thomas Edison, he learned from his mistakes and built on his successes to create a lasting contribution to American life. Nearly a century after his death, Theodore Presser's legacy continues to support music education in the United States.



Notes

1. Cooke, "Theodore Presser (1848–1925): A Centenary Biography Part Five," *The Etude* 66/11 (November 1948): 659.
2. James Huneker, *Steeplejack* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), vol. I, pp. 201–2.
3. Edith M. Shaffer, "Memoirs of Theodore Presser," unpublished typescript dated 1936 in the files of the Presser Foundation, 104–6.
4. For a graph of the circulation of *The Etude* from 1883 to 1957, see Travis Suttle Rivers, "The Etude Magazine: A Mirror of the Genteel Tradition in American Music" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1974), p. 108.
5. Cooke, "Theodore Presser (1848–1925): A Centenary Biography Part Six," *The Etude* 66/12 (December 1948): 728.
6. Shaffer, "Memoirs," p. 75.
7. Shaffer, "Memoirs," p. 76.
8. William Mason, *Touch and technic: for artistic piano playing. By means of a new combination of exercise forms and method of practice, conducing rapidly to equality of finger power, facility and expressive quality of tone*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: Theodore Presser, 1889–1892).
9. Mason's ideas are discussed in Reginald Gerig, *Famous Pianists and their Technique*, new edition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 236–47.
10. W. S. B. Mathews, *Standard graded course of studies for the pianoforte: in ten grades* (Philadelphia: Theodore Presser, 1892–).
11. Theodore Presser, *School for the pianoforte* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Press, 1912).
12. Letter, Theodore Presser to A. B. Riker, April 14, 1908, University of Mount Union archives.
13. Frances Elliott Clark, "Theodore Presser has gone," undated typescript in the Frances Elliott Clark Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries, Series I.2 Box 3 Folder 10. The document is in a folder labeled "Undated addresses to unknown audiences," but references within the document indicate that it was read to the Philadelphia Music Teachers Association.
14. Letter, Theodore Presser to Matty L. Cocke, May 6, 1912, Hollins University Archives, Letter file: Presser.
15. Cooke, "Theodore Presser—Biography, Part Seven," *The Etude* 67/1 (January 1949): 13.
16. Shaffer, "Memoirs," p. 1.
17. Cooke, "Theodore Presser—Biography, Part Twelve," *The Etude* 67/6 (June 1949): 388.

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