

YEHUDI MENUHIN

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JANUARY 13 1986

When I first heard Yehudi Menuhin, I didn't feel that the concert was that of a "child prodigy". After even a few minutes he had led us to feel that we - the audience - and those on the stage were there together to share and enjoy a rich musical experience: he was sharing his music, not "performing" for us.

He was a prodigy. After his Queen's Hall debut in London (at age 13) his gifts were recognized immediately by the foremost musicians of the day, a group seen as jealous of its prestige and notorious for crackliness toward a newcomer: this group openly acknowledged Menuhin's talent and welcomed him as one of their select number. To his fellow-musicians, Yehudi Menuhin was not a child prodigy; he was a violinist of the first rank who happened to be in his early teens. On the Menuhin mantelpiece are two autographed pictures from his period: one of Enesco, dedicated to "my old young friend"; the other of Bruno Walter inscribed "To Yehudin Menuhin, the little boy with the great soul, from his friend forever".

Menuhin was in his 60's when I last heard him, and I felt warmed by him as a person. He was fully in charge, yet he gave forth a sense of humility along with a confidence that we were about to join in his musical pleasure. Having experienced this, I appreciated finding on the title page of Robin Daniel's book, Conversations with Menuhin, Menuhin's statement: "The performer's role is to inspire the audience to follow him in his devotion, his devotional act". This statement had been selected from those published conversations, from which I'll quote generously in the certainty that you will get the flavor of Menuhin better from his own statements than from my descriptions of interpretations or summaries of what has been meaningful to him. You'll also enjoy some of his wife's accounts of incidents in their lives.

Although I had been interested in what kind of life the young Yehudi had experienced, I had not kept up with his development and I knew almost nothing of his early or later family life. So I welcomed this opportunity to focus on what kind of person was this artist of such long and respected fame. Let me run through the biographical entry in Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 1980:

Menuhin - American family of musicians of Ukrainian origin.

Yehudi. b. 22 April, 1916, NYC.

Had his first lessons in SF from Sigmund Anker a few months after his 4th b.d. Continued his studies with Persinger, and his progress was so rapid that he appeared professionally in S.F. in 1924 and in N.Y. in 1926 with considerable success. He made a sensational debut in Paris in Feb 1927 and thereafter studied with Enesco. When he played the Beethoven Concerto under Fritz Busch in N.Y. in Nov. 1927, he became a world celebrity overnight... There followed tours throughout the USA and Europe, and he began making his first gramophone records in 1928. Studied further with Enesco and Adolf Busch, alternating with many enormously successful concert appearances.

The dominant characteristics of his playing during this period, apart from his remarkable technical ability, were the maturity and depth of his musical understanding. These qualities enabled the 12-year-old boy to play works of the stature of the Beethoven Concerto and Bach's Chaconne with absolute conviction, and Mozart's concertos with a completeness of identification that has seldom been equalled. One of the most notable events of his youth was the performance and gramophone recording, in 1932, of Elgar's Violin Concerto conducted by the composer, then aged 75.

Menuhin has rarely been absent for any length of time from the international concert platform. During WW II he gave over 500 concerts for American and Allied troops in many theatres of war. He was the 1st artist to appear in the reopened Paris Opera immediately after the German occupation, and the 1st Jewish artist to play with the Berlin PO under Furtwängler after the overthrow of the Nazi regime (an action for which he was much criticized, especially among Jewish communities, but which he defended with courage and conviction). On his reappearance under more normal conditions, it was noted that his playing, while it had maintained many of its old qualities and added thereto a further nobility and depth, had at times lost something in spontaneity and technical reliability. Menuhin has indeed made no secret of the fact he has gone through periods during which he had had to rethink the whole basis of his approach of his approach to violin techniques.

In 1959, he made his home in London. He had directed several musical festivals, notably the Bath Festival (1958-68), the Windsor Festival (1969-72) and the Gstaad Festival (from 1956). He had given many concerts playing with and conducting his own chamber orchestra, founded in 1958, doing tours throughout the world; and has also conducted many of the leading symphony orchestras in Europe and America, and encouraged and collaborated in the performance of Indian music in Western culture.

In 1962 he started a boarding school for musically talented children (7-17) at Stoke d'Abernon, near London.

Menuhin has achieved a remarkable position as a world citizen with diverse interests apart from music, and as a violinist the purity of style and depth of interpretation that he displays in his finest performances place them in the highest category. He has edited Bartok's Sonata for solo violin (London '47), one of the many works written for him.... Is a Commander of the Legion d'Honneur, a Knight of the Dutch Order of Orange Nassau, an Hon. CBE, and among his many honors and awards, he received the Nehru Award for International Understanding.

Yehudi grew up in a closely-knit, mutually supportive family, Replying to Robin Daniel's question about the strongest influences in his life, he said: I've been incredibly fortunate all through my life in knowing so many dedicated people. Nobody could have had more utterly dedicated parents (perhaps too dedicated?). They did everything possible for me and for my sisters.

My mother and father protected me from publicity and the curiosity of the press: for a long time, I never met a reporter and never read reviews of my concerts - and that was good for me. Family life was maintained despite my many concerts. We never spoke about money. We never touched on subjects that would deflect our sense of direction. Our life revolved around music, family and friends.

As I look back, I can see that my first marriage was a kind of rebellion against being surrounded by people who were so dedicated. My choice fell upon a person who was lighthearted, and exuberant, with hardly a care in the world and no great weight of purpose in life. Inevitably, our relationship broke down. Apart from that almost deliberate disintegration of a given lifestyle, I have been surrounded from my first waking moment by people of like mind and singleness of purpose: my parents, with their complete devotion to all three children; my three great teachers, Enrico Persinger and Adolf Busch; Diana; and my many loyal friends and colleagues in the musical world, in every continent. People without the attitude of serving to the best of their ability, of wanting to create the best possible atmosphere for the benefit of all, have dropped out of existence.

Perhaps this constant strand in my life -- of dedication and of dedicated people -- owes something to my father's rabbinical ancestry. My work, and the work of those around me, is not dedicated to victory over anyone; but if there is going to be a fight, I side with Polonius when he told Laertes, who was about to return to France: "Beware of entrance to a quarrel, but being in, bear 't that the opposed may beware of thee."

Menuhin says: "When I first saw Diane I realized she was the person I had been looking for all my life. She has devoted so much of herself to me and to my work; I hope she will yet have the time and opportunity to give free scope to her knowledge of prose and poetry, and to her enormous creative capacity. In whatever she does, Diane behaves with absolute appropriateness. In the face of adversity, she acts with indomitable courage and valour. She is at her best in a crisis: the greater the pressure, the greater is her clarity and control. I always marvel at that, because I am the other way round. When I am really under pressure, I tend to lose my self-control. Perhaps that is why, all through my life, I have channelled my emotions and passions into music, and done everything possible to cultivate equanimity.

Diane, on the other hand, has such potential that she is at her best when geared to a seemingly impossible task, like a racing car which relaxes into a speed of 150 miles an hour and complains when it is doing less; it feels frustrated when its full power is not being used, and purrs quietly and contentedly as soon as it reaches the speed for which it was designed.

Whereas I try to reserve my energies -- for a concert or a lecture -- she cannot do that. She spends all her waking hours doing something, improving something: whatever I write, I submit to her, and inevitable it comes back transformed. Diane gives extravagantly of herself -- in energy, dedication, and strength of will -- for the good of others. I doubt if she knows the meaning of self-preservation. She is an extraordinary wife and an extraordinary mother, having to divide her life between my travelling and looking after our children. I

couldn't possible owe anybody else more than I owe her."

Having set out to write about her life with Yehudi (Fiddler's Moll)

Diana asks "How does one attempt to write about a life so clotted with work duties, marriage, motherhood, step-motherhood, courier-en-chef, amanuensis and a hundred other indefinite roles - all undertaken at a cracking pace, all to be managed on the move, including one's entire equipage from adults to small children to suitable clothes, from staff to school...?"

Entering into Yehudi's life, she says, "I wanted to hack away the jungle that those years of war and personal unhappiness had allowed to grow across the tracks of Yehudi's life so he should be freed to run smoothly along them again." But she hadn't foreseen the speed with which he was to run. She felt like a "caboose loosely tied to the tail of a comet",

Speaking of the long and painful struggle Yehudi was having at the time his first marriage was under such strain, Diana said "Yehudi slowly began to talk because I never risked asking any question, only sensed that he was as shocked and sad as a child who has misunderstood something of great value and importance, and who cannot find the way out. I began to realize that Yehudi was one of those rarest of creatures, driven by aspirations, never ambitions, - and such are in mortal danger of falling like Icarus, losing focus and balance, perceiving no lee from the changing wind that is so mysteriously blowing them off course. The wind that was blowing Yehudi off course was the fragmentation of his marriage, and it was this private side of his life he could not deal with. He was unwilling to face its dissolution, unable to abandon a single one of the myths he had dreamed, had in fact been encouraged to believe within the closed circuit of his family life. Yehudi is a man who cannot believe in evil, and such a man cannot fight for himself."

Finding some resolution to his conflicts took many months. After about

two years in limbo, but during which Yehudi was on many concert tours, he and Diane Gould were married on October 19, 1947.

In analyzing the long time in limbo, Menuhin says, "Sometimes I am tempted to delay making a decision, until I feel more convinced one way or the other. Sometimes I don't trust my intuition enough: I am thinking particularly of the years of uncertainty towards the end of my first marriage. If I had taken the initiative when I could and should have done, I would have been able to marry Diana earlier."

Perhaps what he is saying is that he is one who can see many facets to a complex problem, or perhaps many complexities in what at first seems to be simple. He said, "Being able to see both sides can be very weakening. It is possible to have too much understanding; but I constantly try to find a balance... For instance, I was invited by the Debating Society at Cambridge to take part in an evening when the motion was, "Art is elitist". The supporters of both sides wanted me! The pyramids are unquestionably elitist, but the cathedral in Chartres is less so; and folk music belongs entirely to the people. Some of the greatest works of art could never have been attempted without an aristocracy that had the capital to encourage creativity, and the leisure to enjoy its results. Therefore, I felt I couldn't defend one argument or the other exclusively, but would take part provided we sought a consensus of all the valid points of view inherent in the question. For the participants to remain each on his own side at the end of the discussion, as if nothing had happened, seemed to me a waste of time. I wanted us to construct - from our diversity - a coherent understanding and attitude."

In 1962, Menuhin's school for talented children was established (near London). It sounds exciting: "structured activities sometimes last from seven in the morning until seven at night, but the children thrive. Their exhaustion at the end of a long day is tiredness of fulfilment, not the tiredness of frustration. The reason for this can be summed up in one word: balance."

Yehudi Menuhin's school is the epitome of balance: "music alternating with academic studies; private practice followed by public performance; rest, storing energy for recreation; balance in diet; imagination and analytical skills given equal importance. Each day is dedicated to individual nurturing and group harmony. Crucial also is the partnership between teacher and student. To Menuhin, balance is all-important: balance of mind and body, of giving and receiving, seriousness and humour, public life and private life, culture eastern and western."

Asked how much imagery Persinger and Enesco used in Menuhin's lessons, Menuhin gave an incisive example for each. "In the dolce passage in which the violin is accompanied by pizzicato strings at the very end of the first movement of the Beethoven concerto, after the cadenza, Persinger wrote 'Worship' - just that. All my teachers had a deep reverence for music, a sense of service. The great conductors I have worked with, such as Walter and Toscanini, conveyed that same feeling; and so do the staff and children at my school. But I rarely find this quality today among the confident young technicians I hear in music competitions.

"Enesco used imagery occasionally: not often about technical matters; more usually about moods and emotions. On my violin part of the Beethoven, where the violin plays very softly as it rises higher and higher, Enesco wrote 'Contained dignity'. Those two words implied such a lot to me: I took them to mean an atmosphere of serenity, independent of anything else in the world, continuing in a quiet, gentle, unhurried way."

Menuhin responded to the question, "What are your feelings about pop music?" by giving a rather full answer: "Pop music, when it originates spontaneously in the streets of Liverpool, as with the Beatles, or on the wrong side of the tracks in a city in California - this I am all for."

"Pop music degenerates when it becomes heavily commercialized, has little

musical content, and appeals only in a compulsive, hypnotic way, feeding the desires of a large group of people to blot out everyday thoughts and cares. The senses are then horribly battered, and for a time the audience are no longer balanced, moderate human beings. That is what I fear and that is what frightened me when I went to hear a world-famous pop group.

"One day I received a letter from their manager, saying he would like to give me 100 tickets - for the opening performance of a new London season - to sell for the benefit of my school. This sounded like a most generous offer, and so my secretary... who has great initiative, put a small advertisement in a newspaper, giving the telephone number of a friend of hers who soon received dozens of calls. We sold the tickets at colossal prices and made a lot of money for the school.

"I felt I had a certain obligation to go and hear the group, and their manager invited me to join him. He turned out to be a very distinguished man from a West-European aristocratic family of high lineage. He has done much to improve the group's financial affairs. He loathes their music - but not the money it generates!

"I was appalled. The music, if it can be called that, was a kind of torture, calculated to dominate the senses. I was determined to resist, in order to remain true to myself. The only other course would have been to say 'All right, I give in'. The sheer volume of sound was overwhelming and it was no consolation to learn afterwards that the amplification system had been faulty. I left before the end because I was feeling ill at ease.

"I don't like to surrender my self-composure. I like to feel that I am in possession of myself and all my faculties. On the other hand, I surrender willingly to Bach, Beethoven or Schubert. I will prostrate myself in front of them or any great work of art or a temple or a tree or a person I love - because, in so doing, I become more myself.

"But I couldn't in any way participate in this cheap, noisy, contrived, depersonalizing entertainment, so-called. Thousands of pounds had been spent on the lighting, the sets, the presentation; the group wore clothes covered with sequins and rhinestones which reflected the bright light. From my point of view, the musical content was virtually non-existent.

"I looked at some of the young people in the audience. If I had told them what I was feeling, they might have castigated me and said I didn't understand their pleasure, their needs, their identification with the music and the pop group. What they might not have realized was that they were in a condition in which they could be led.

"When I left, the mood of the audience was on the verge of hysteria. Having lived during the time of the Nuremberg rallies, I have a horror of mobs. I was disturbed by this enormous audience of young people, imitating every gesture of the group on stage, their senses and emotions being abused and taunted to produce commercial gain. I feared that, having lost all sense of proportion, the audience could be dominated, coerced. What terrified me was the compulsion toward unanimity.

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 "We know how easily and how fatally the borderline to unconscious forces can be crossed. I felt the proximity of the borderline, and I loathed and feared it.

"I am not condemning; I am warning."

As a respite from this intensity, I'd like to play some of the tape of Menuhin's "Autobiography in Music".

And I'd also like to read some episodes from Diana's Fiddler's Moll.