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The GREAT VIOLINISTS Vol. XVII

ANJA IGNATIUS & EMIL TELMÁNYI

Each of the two greatest Nordic violin concertos of the twentieth century had an awkward start in life, each had to wait until the 1940s for a definitive recording, and each of these performances, which are reproduced here, gains in historical importance from having a family connection with its composer.

Jean Sibelius wrote his D minor Concerto in 1903 with the German soloist Willy Burmester in mind, but, owing to the composer's impatience, it had only a half-hearted première with Viktor Novacek as soloist in Helsinki early in 1904. Sibelius then revised it, and a second première took place in Berlin in 1905 with another Czech, Karel Halir, playing the solo part. It still did not make headway, and eventually Sibelius dedicated it to the Hungarian virtuoso Franz von Vecsey. Not until the 19-year-old Anja Ignatius played it in Helsinki in 1930, to acclaim, did it find a Finnish champion. She was her country's first great violinist but, owing to the second world war and the demands of family life, she never achieved the international fame which was her due.

Ignatius was born into a musical family at Tampere on 2nd July 1911. At three years of age she was found to have perfect pitch. She loved sitting under the piano while her elder brother Lassi had his lessons, but she enjoyed his violin lessons even more and badgered her parents to let her have lessons too. She began playing the violin at five, being taught first by Ilmari Weneskoski and then by Gennaro Romano, who felt that French training was essential for her. Accordingly she studied at the Paris Conservatoire under Édouard Nadaud from 1925 to 1927, and then with Otakar Ševcik at his Pisek school from 1927 to 1929. She make her début at Helsinki in 1926, whilst still a student. In the autumn of 1929 Bruno Walter was conducting in Stockholm and she travelled there to seek his advice. Should she study with Adolf Busch, who with his duo partner Rudolf Serkin had been a guest in the Ignatius home in 1923? When she played the Bach "Chaconne" to Walter, he suggested she go instead to Carl Flesch in Berlin and before the year was out she followed this advice. The connection was severed in 1931 when she announced that she was marrying a man 20 years her senior. Flesch became angry, accusing her of not being serious about her playing, and lessons ceased. However, the marriage prospered and Ignatius embarked on the career of a touring virtuoso. Later, she visited Flesch in London and she found he had forgiven her.

Ignatius played all Sibelius's music for violin, and recorded two of his short pieces in magical performances. "My mother was often a guest at Ainola and received from the composer some valuable performance suggestions concerning the Violin Concerto, as well as the two Serenades, which she later performed in many places." says her daughter Eeva Hirvensalo, "When performing the Serenades with Sir Thomas Beecham, my mother drew attention to the tempi of the pieces as Sibelius had indicated them to her. Beecham regarded her from a very superior position and smilingly said: "Madam, he is mad! I know better what he wants."

Ignatius toured the United States in 1938 and 1939, playing the Sibelius Concerto

with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Koussevitzky, and should have returned the next season; but, in common with many another artist, her international career was cut short by the war. In her case her family, she had four children, also took up much of her time. However, from 1953 to 1961 she led the Helsinki Quartet, which toured a fair amount, until the violist's ill health caused its disbandment.

Her husband's death in 1955 might have brought financial hardship, but fortunately she was appointed professor of violin at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki. She still appeared as a soloist. In June 1957 she played the Sibelius Concerto at the festival devoted to the composer in Helsinki and in 1958 she gave the Finnish première of the Berg Concerto. In 1961 she and her quartet cellist, Pentti Rautawaara, formed a trio with the Danish-born pianist France Ellegaard, but that ensemble was ended by Rautawaara's death in 1965. Until her retirement in 1978 Ignatius was in demand for jury work in competitions, but after 1972 she always refused, finding it difficult to rank fellow artists in that way. She died on 10th April 1995.

Like Guila Bustabo before her, Anja Ignatius recorded the Sibelius Concerto in wartime Berlin with the Städtisches Orchester. Both performances benefit from an excellent solo violist, probably Karl Reitz, who was killed by Allied bombing. Her conductor was the composer Armas Järnefelt (1869-1958), Sibelius's brother-in-law and the leading Finnish conductor, although since 1910 a Swedish citizen. Their performance may well come closest to Sibelius's own vision. It is a genuinely romantic view, the violin playing is elastic, and the structure of the Concerto is reflected in subtle tempo changes. Ignatius and Järnefelt seem wholly in sympathy with the music and have keen ears for detail, so that every strand of the score is audible. They clearly identify with the music as much as anyone, but take a long view rather than living for the moment. Their interpretation also has a sort of Nordic glow missing from those of most competitors. Ignatius plays the opening of the Concerto more atmospherically than anyone else and almost throughout maintains a luminously pure tone. Throughout the Allegro moderato she finds space to be more thoughtful than the average soloist. In the slow movement she creates a real feeling of "inwardness", partly because she does not slither about as much as some, although, when appropriate, she is capable of marvellously expressive portamenti. She and Järnefelt make more of the finale than usual, evoking a sense of foreboding in places; the violin dances, but not merrily.

Carl Nielsen began writing his Concerto in the summer of 1911, in Grieg's lake-side hut at Troldhaugen. The première was in 1912 by its intended soloist, Peder Møller, with Nielsen conducting and the two gave it a number of performances elsewhere. It did not achieve popularity, however, even when Nielsen's son-in-law, Emil Telmányi took it up. Indeed, there was particular embarrassment during the 1920 Mahler Feest in Amsterdam, when Telmányi and Julius Röntgen played it in Nielsen's presence before an assembly of musicians. None of them was interested, the intended target, Adolf Busch, least of all. But Telmányi was undaunted, and through his efforts the work eventually entered the repertoire.

Emil Telmányi was born in Arad, now Oradea, Romania on 22nd June 1892. At six he was taken to a Jan Kubelik recital and was so excited by Paganini's *Le Streghe* that he begged his parents for a violin. They consulted Moritz Unger, an Austrian, but he took one look at the child's fingers and remarked, "With these little sausages you could never play the violin!" Emil wept so bitterly that Unger softened and offered to try to teach him.

In one year the boy advanced amazingly on both violin and piano. His father died when Emil was only eight, but his mother continued to encouraged his musical progress without pushing him. At ten he made a modest début and at 13 he played *Le Streghe* at a charity concert. A family friend took him to Jenö Hubay in Budapest, but that teacher, who took pupils at a younger age, was dismissive. However, after reluctantly hearing Emil play he changed his tune and they developed such a rapport that Telmányi played, and recorded, more of the master's music than any other Hubay alumnus. That year, 1905, the family moved to Budapest and Emil entered the Ferenc Liszt Academy. In addition to his studies with Hubay, which earned him the Remenyi Prize in 1907, he worked on chamber music with David Popper and theory with Viktor Herzfeld. He also continued with the piano and after a year entered the composition class of Hans Koessler, who had taught Dohnányi, Bartók and Kodaly. These were heady days in Budapest musical circles with the nationalist school emerging. At that time Telmányi was aligned more with the older generation of Hubay and Dohnányi, though later he did take up Bartók's music, and in the 1920s gave recitals with him.

In 1911 Telmányi graduated and moved with his mother to Berlin. His début was at a concert of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Ernst Kunwald, where his playing of Elgar's new Concerto was acclaimed by the critics. He acquired a name as a Bach player, but retained his love of Paganini and was among the first to present solo recitals of the two together. "He had a reputation as a serious musician and was the favourite violinist of Ernst von Dohnányi." said Zoltán Székely, "They frequently played sonatas together. Once I heard Telmányi play a solo recital which included Wieniawski's *Valse Caprice* and I was amazed that he played with such virtuosity. In 1917 I heard Telmányi play the world première of Dohnányi's Violin Concerto in Budapest with the Philharmonic." Antal Doráti recalled that the Telmányi-Dohnányi recitals "were always sold out."

After a recital with Ignacy Friedman in Stockholm, the Polish pianist suggested Telmányi should try his luck in Copenhagen. There he made the contact with Nielsen which was to change his life. The first fruit was a performance of Nielsen's First Sonata in Copenhagen on 22nd November 1916. That year Telmányi had teamed up with his compatriot, the pianist Sándor Vas. In 1917 they devised three Bach programmes which caused a stir in Budapest, Vienna, Berlin and (three years later) Copenhagen, especially the unaccompanied works. "At the recitals I demonstrated the ability to make a sustained three-part chord sound at once." Telmányi recalled, "The technique was to depress the middle string with the bow so far that the neighbouring strings also would be brushed, so that a brisk, powerful and even stroke activated all three strings."

In 1918 Telmányi married Nielsen's daughter, Anne Marie, a painter, and in 1919 he settled in Copenhagen, also making his conducting début. He and his pupil Henry Holst formed a group to play Nielsen's E*b* and F major Quartets. In Göteborg, Sweden, Telmányi and the composer gave the first of their five renderings of Nielsen's Concerto. Telmányi introduced the work to Berlin, Vienna and Budapest in 1922, and to London the following year, and up to 1967 he gave 70 performances of it. In 1923 Nielsen wrote the *Prelude and Theme with Variations* for his solo violin recitals, and he gave the première in London. A *Prelude and Presto*, also for solo violin, followed in 1928. Meanwhile, in 1925, Telmányi had begun to conduct Nielsen's orchestral works, with a performance in Göteborg of the First Symphony. He conducted a dozen of his father-in-law's works, including two further symphonies. No wonder Nielsen wrote to him in 1925, "Yes! We two understand each other, my friend, and when I die I will place my spirit in your hands

and ask only you to be the authentic judge of my works. Well, we must not be too solemn, and yet ... I mean this with all my heart." Nielsen's death in 1931 by no means sundered the bond; it survived even Telmányi's separation from Anne Marie in 1933 and their divorce in 1936.

Telmányi was not simply a Nielsen specialist. He performed Busoni's Second Sonata and Violin Concerto with the composer, and was a doughty interpreter of the Sibelius Concerto, playing it at the London Sibelius festivals in 1937 and 1938 under Wood and Beecham. Sibelius himself commended Telmányi's interpretation, especially the tempo of the second movement. Having started his career with Elgar, Telmányi played other British music, including, in 1929, the première of Arnold Bax's Third Sonata, which is dedicated to him, with the composer at the piano. That year he formed a chamber orchestra with which he toured Scandinavia and Germany.

Although Telmányi toured America in the 1920s and again in 1950, he was essentially a European artist. In 1939 he became a Danish citizen and began almost 40 years of teaching at Aarhus Conservatory. During the German Occupation he played at least once in Berlin, but that seems to have been forgiven. He also re-thought his unaccompanied Bach, inspired by Albert Schweitzer's writings about the correct way to play the implied polyphony, and both performed and recorded the Sonatas and Partitas with a "round bow". In 1936 he had married Annette Schiøler, a pianist, like her cousin Victor. She not only accompanied him in many recitals, but provided him with three daughters who became professional string players. In the twilight of his career as a violinist, Telmányi gave concerts and made records with a family string quintet, Annette playing second viola. He remained active as a conductor into his nineties, memorising his scores because of his poor eyesight. In 1983 he suffered a fall from which he never recovered, and his last years were blighted by blindness and increasing immobility, but he was surrounded by a loving family and many friends. He died at his home in Holte on 12th June 1988.

The Telmányi tone was warm and produced without apparent effort. Like all Hubay pupils, he had a wide vibrato which sometimes caused a flutter, not entirely displeasing, in the sound. He recorded prolifically, the major items being the Mendelssohn, Nielsen and Sibelius Concerti. There are also 1934 and 1951 radio recordings of the Nielsen Concerto with Hans Rosbaud and Fritz Busch respectively. Telmányi's interpretation is perfection itself; only Menuhin, who recorded it in 1952 and then forgot it, and Telmányi's compatriot Tibor Varga, who made a fine stereo recording, have challenged his mastery of this work. In this performance Telmányi is at his peak as both violinist and interpreter. On the podium was the Italian maestro Egisto Tango (1873-1951), who had given important Bartók premières and had been at the Royal Opera in Copenhagen since 1927. He was as well versed in the Nielsen idiom as his soloist and their joint interpretation of the Concerto was seen as definitive from the moment it was issued. Time has only reinforced that judgment.

Tully Potter

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