

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1312

The Great Violinists – Volume 19

JENŐ LÉNER [Szabadka 1894-New York 1948] studied under Jenő Hubay at the Academy of Music in Budapest. Joseph Smilowits and Sandor Roth were also pupils of Hubay; Imre Hartman was a 'cello student. Their studies concluded, they played in the orchestra of the Budapest Opera, but when the Austro-Hungarian empire collapsed in revolution in 1918 they left for a remote village to study chamber music. As the Léner Quartet they first appeared in Budapest in 1919, in Vienna in 1920 and in New York in 1929. In the years 1922 to 1929 the quartet played frequently in London, a number of times giving the complete Beethoven cycle. When the second world war started the quartet was in South America and looked set to remain in Mexico. Léner, however, intent on advancing his career, travelled to New York. He founded a new quartet, but many changes of personnel led to weakness, and failure to modernise the quartet's style led to loss of public interest. Léner's *Technique of String Quartet Playing* was published in 1935.

LOUIS [Lajos Philip] KENTNER [Karwin, Silesia 1905-London 1987] was of Hungarian descent. He studied at the Academy of Music in Budapest, piano with Szekely, Wiener and Arnold, and composition with Koessler and Kodály. A Chopin concerto as a student début was well received. His adult début in 1920 was followed by tours of Europe and the United States of America. At this time he was best known for performances of the music of Chopin and Liszt. In giving the first performance in Hungary of Bartok's second concerto in 1933, he became recognised as a champion of this composer; to be confirmed when he gave the first performance of the third concerto in London in 1946. However, training in Austro-Hungary was founded on the music of Bach and Mozart. Thus when Kentner settled in London in 1935 it came to him naturally to play the entire "48" and to give complete cycles of the Beethoven and Schubert sonatas. He branched out by playing many contemporary works, including, with his brother-in-law, Yehudi Menuhin, the première of Walton's sonata. His bravura technique fitted him to lead an English Liszt revival. He was also a fine chamber music player.

FRITZ KREISLER [Vienna 1875-New York 1962] His father was a doctor and keen amateur violinist. In 1882 he entered the Vienna Conservatoire. He studied with Joseph Hellmesberger, presumably the last member of the family to teach there, and was taught theory by Anton Bruckner. In 1885 he won a first prize for violin. He was also an excellent pianist, apparently self taught. Then, at the Paris Conservatoire he was taught by Lambert Massart, teacher of Wieniawski, and he studied theory and composition with Delibes. He won a first prize there also. An American tour with Moritz Rosenthal, a brilliant pupil of Liszt, was only coolly received. His father decided that a thorough education, general and for his own profession, was needed. This was followed by military service. It is said that in

these six years he scarcely touched a violin. This is hard to believe as it was a very musical family; his brother was a considerable cellist. True or not, at the end of this period he was unable to secure a post as second leader at the Vienna Hofoper. One wonders how the leader who rejected him felt when he reappeared as soloist in the Bruch Concerto two years later. Still his career showed no signs of success, perhaps unhelpt by his appetites for women and gambling. However in 1899 he appeared in Berlin and Ysaÿe's obvious approval initiated a long series of triumphs.

In 1902 he married Harriet Lies, a strong-willed American divorcee. Her domination substituted violin practice for Bohemian living. Her later claim to have "made" him is probably largely true. In 1910 Elgar dedicated his violin concerto to him, but he rarely played it after the first performances. In 1914 he was conscripted into the Austrian Army. His unaided hearing outclassed in accuracy the army's means of locating the opposing Russian fire, but his success was brief as he was shortly invalided out. He returned to the United States, but when that country entered the war he, with other Austrian and German artists, was unable to continue appearing. He passed the time composing an operetta entitled *Apple Blossoms*, which was a success on Broadway. After the war he was gradually able to resume his career. He was extremely nervous as to how he would be received, but everywhere the welcome was warm and he was increasingly adored wherever and whenever he appeared. It has been suggested that he accepted the rise of Fascism more readily than some. Even if this is true, by 1934 he was refusing to appear in Germany. In 1938 he became a French, and in 1943 a United States citizen. In 1941 he was seriously injured in a street accident, but the next year he was playing again. His first broadcast was delayed until 1944; it is said that he could not bear the notion that some people might treat music casually. His last concerts were in 1950. After that his sight and hearing and even his interest in the violin declined.

Kreisler had an uncommonly fine technique, but was not a technical wizard. He was also an uncommonly fine musician, but his greatness to the listener lay in two areas: his personal and very beautiful sound, and his ability to make each listener feel that he was making music for that particular listener. Perhaps it was the latter feature that made him the only violinist in no respect put into the shade by the arrival of Heifetz in 1917. His compositions fall largely into two categories. Early in his career a number of pieces appeared bearing the names of early composers. Much later on he admitted to their authorship. Many were amused, but a few were not, though whether they objected more to the offence against scholarship or to the hoax against critics is unclear. In his own name he published a large number of short violin pieces. Amongst the writings of great violinists these achieved enormous popularity though some much prefer those of Paganini or Sarasate. Like many a violinist he published his own editions of standard classics and, a habit now out of favour, piano accompaniments for solo works of Bach and Paganini. His cadenzas for the Beethoven and Brahms concerti have rivalled and surpassed in public esteem those of Joachim; his cadenza for Tartini's 'Devil's Trill' Sonata may make purists shudder, but those who can play it do.

SERGEI RACHMANINOV [Oneg, Novgorod District 1873-Beverly Hills, California 1943] His family was of the wealthy, land-owning class, and his parents were both good amateur musicians. He was first taught by his mother, in 1882 he entered St. Petersburg Conservatory, and in 1885 he moved to Moscow Conservatory. His abilities as a pianist of prodigious talent were already manifest; now his powers of composition began to emerge. His first piano concerto was completed in 1891 and, as a graduation piece, his opera *Aleko* followed in 1892. His work was greatly admired by Tchaikovsky, nevertheless in 1897 his first symphony was a total failure. A breakdown followed and for a while he turned away from composition to conducting opera. In 1900 he underwent psychiatric treatment and this restored his interest in composition. The following years were probably the most fulfilling he was to experience; for in 1902 he married his cousin, which gave him financial independence, thus to the threefold professional activities of composition, playing and conducting was added a happy family life.

From 1911 to 1914 he conducted the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra in a wide range of works by Berlioz, Brahms, Debussy, Elgar, Franck, Glinka, Grieg, Liszt and Russian composers, and in 1915 he gave a series of memorial concerts for Scriabin.

With the revolution came the end of Rachmaninov's social milieu. He was fortunate enough to be able to leave with his family, but, whilst no doubt grateful to his new country for the welcome he received, he remained deeply a Russian in a strange land. Composition was always more significant to him than playing, but after 1917 performing became an economic necessity and he wrote relatively little.

In America Josef Hofmann and Rachmaninov, close friends since the '90s, were seen as rivals, argued over by public and critics. Rachmaninov was at first expected to play the great classics, but later demand for his own music grew. His interpretations could be individual, but the insights of a great composer conquered.

Rachmaninov's arrival in the United States coincided with improvements to the gramophone making possible adequate recording of the piano. Thus Elgar, Strauss and Rachmaninov are the three essentially 19th century composers to have left significant portions of their oeuvre in their own performances. Whilst Elgar's records are entirely of his own music, and opinions of Strauss's recordings of Mozart and Beethoven are divided, Rachmaninov's performances of major works of Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin and Schumann (and many shorter pieces by various composers) are held in the highest esteem.

An interviewer once asked Arthur Rubinstein, "You must have heard every great pianist this century; who do you think was the greatest?". The reply, without a moment's hesitation, was, "Rachmaninov".

ADILA FACHIRI née d'Arányi [Budapest 1886-Florence 1962] studied with Hubay at the Academy of Music in Budapest and then with her uncle, Joseph Joachim, of whom she was a favourite pupil and whose Stradivarius of 1715 she inherited. She and her sister Jelly d'Arányi [Budapest 1895-Florence 1966] likewise a student of Hubay and Joachim, first came to London in 1909. They were helped and coached by Tovey and stood in great awe of him. In 1913 they moved to London on Adila's marriage to Alexandre Fachiri, a noted lawyer. They played together very frequently in works ranging from Bach's double concerto to Holst's, of which they were the dedicatees in 1930.

DONALD TOVEY [Eton 1875-London 1940] Although the son of a master at Eton, he was educated privately until he was 19, generally and in music by Sophie Weisse, who also taught him piano and taught him to practice. (Later he had advice from Deppe.) It was a fortunate conjunction, for she was an excellent teacher able to cultivate his exceptional talent, but the limited contact with others of his age left him awkward and sometimes wanting in judgement. At eight he was writing in sonata form, shortly after he was learning counterpoint. At twelve he read scores as others do adventure books and in his teens he was a finished player with a large repertoire, performing major works of Bach without a score. In 1894 he gave a concert at Windsor with Joachim, whose was deeply impressed and whose tempered judgement in the following years was most beneficial. Later that year he went up to Oxford on a scholarship. It was a tussle between music and other subjects; he was good on philosophy, but lagging in history. Nevertheless, he graduated in classical honours in 1898. His début in 1900 marked his decision to be a musician. *The Times* noted his “deep poetical insight and fine tone gradation.” A typical concert would end with Book I of Brahms’ ‘Paganini’ Variations; then, as an encore, Book II. In 1901 and 1902 he gave concerts in Berlin and Vienna. In 1903 he played his own piano concerto under Henry Wood. From 1905 to 1909 Tovey contributed a series of major articles on music to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. In 1909 he first performed with the d’Aranyi sisters and with Casals, who took the place of Joachim who died in 1907. Just as an international career was unfolding for him, he was appointed Reid Professor of Music at Edinburgh. This worked out well for him as the year was 1914. He soon established and conducted the Reid Orchestral Concerts. However, not everyone found his lectures easy to follow as he alternately extemporised and stared into a far corner whilst marshalling his thoughts. He dedicated his ‘cello concerto to Casals, and together they gave the first performance in 1934 (Symposium CD 1115). His researches into *Die Kunst der Fuge* led him to write a *Conjectural Finish*. He claimed to be an absolute purist in *not* confining himself strictly to Mozart’s written text. His scholarship is demonstrated in his multi-volume *Essays in Musical Analysis*. His memory was formidable; Henry Wood described Tovey’s knowledge as encyclopaedic, but he sometimes conducted with a score in front of him as he disliked seeming boastful. His compositions are, according to Grove (1926), “works which musicians respect, but the public is apt to ignore to its own loss.”

For Casals, “Tovey was one of the greatest musicians of all time.” and his student and biographer, Mary Grierson describes him as, “not only a learned professor, but also a pianist with great technical equipment, profound intellectual grasp, and a rare and sensitive poetic imagination.” There was also close friendship with Albert Schweitzer. Elgar, as master of the King’s Musick, recommended Tovey for a knighthood. This was bestowed in 1935.

His marriage was clouded by his wife’s mental state, which led to a divorce, but later on he married again more happily. He was impractical and absent minded; throughout his life Sophie Weiss organised his affairs for him, but the relationship was at times strained. In the early ‘30s his health, never good, began to deteriorate, and in his last years arthritis made playing increasingly difficult.

This sonata, the only extended work recorded by Tovey as a pianist, was issued by the National Gramophononic Society, which used Vocalion, later Columbia, as service companies. It is believed that to minimise costs duplicate

takes were seldom made. Thus safety may account for rather low levels of recording. Nevertheless, the Society's notes indicate that this set was remade; possibly the move from Vocalion to Columbia, which had a superior recording system and "Silent Surface" pressings, warranted the extra outlay. Likewise, though by no means unusual in the 78 era, the first movement repeat was omitted. However, in this case when the repeat is due Tovey calls out that the record should be started again. With modern editing facilities repeats can be built in easily, as has been done in this instance. For the curious, however, this probably unique instruction has been preserved as an appendix.

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