

NATHAN MILSTEIN IN RECITAL

Monday Evening, October 7, 1946

The Coolidge Auditorium

The Library of Congress

1 Chaconne (9:55)

violin and piano

Tomaso Vitali

(1663-1745)

(attrib.)

Sonata in G minor, BWV 1001 (15:01)

solo violin

Johann Sebastian Bach

(1685-1750)

2 Adagio (4:28)

3 Fuga (Allegro) (4:42)

4 Siciliano (3:32)

5 Presto (2:17)

6 Paganiniana (Variations) (9:05)

on themes by Nicolò Paganini

solo violin

Nathan Milstein

(1904-1992)

Concerto in E minor, op. 64 (25:10)

violin and piano

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy

(1809-1847)

7 Allegro molto appassionato-Presto (11:40)

8 Andante (7:11)

9 Allegretto non troppo-Allegro molto vivace (6:12)

10 Nocturne in C-sharp minor (3:42)

violin and piano, arr. by Nathan Milstein

Fryderyk Chopin

(1810-1849)

11 Scherzo-Tarantelle (3:54)

violin and piano

Henryk Wieniawski

(1835-1880)

NATHAN MILSTEIN, violin

JOSEF BLATT, piano

Nathan Milstein's longevity alone would be sufficient to earn him a unique place in the annals of 20th-century violin playing. From 1920, when he made his official debut in Odessa, to 1986, when he played his last recital in Stockholm, Milstein's career spanned nearly seven decades, long enough for four generations of violinists to have the sound of his playing in their ears. Undoubtedly it was the very poise and restraint of his art that allowed him to endure for so long.

Milstein was born in 1904 in Odessa, where he began his studies with Pyotr Stolyarsky (who also taught David Oistrakh). In 1915 he went to St. Petersburg to study with with Leopold Auer, the legendary pedagogue who launched the careers of Heifetz and Elman. But it was not until 1921 that Milstein's career started in earnest. In that year he met Vladimir Horowitz, and the two began joint concert tours throughout the Soviet Union. Both left Russia for good in 1925, and in 1928 Milstein came to the United States. He made his American debut in 1929 and became an American citizen in 1942.

For the next forty years Milstein divided his time between frequent recital dates, rarer concerto appearances, and teaching. Although

Milstein never achieved the superstar status of Heifetz, his technique was certainly Heifetz's equal; only the daredevil streak was missing. Indeed, some would say that Milstein's playing possessed the warmth and humanity that Heifetz's sometimes business-like efficiency lacked.

What traits characterize the Milstein style? Although he had a flawless technique, he never concentrated on showy theatrics. Instead, he was a more intellectual performer, not in the sense of scholarship, but in the way that his refined taste tempered his virtuosity. Milstein's tone was pure and penetrating--the product of frequent changes of bow and an exceptionally rapid and narrow vibrato. His conception was essentially classical in its long line, clarity of structure, subtlety of emotion, and aristocratic elegance (although unmistakably romantic in its use of portamenti for expressive purposes.)

This recital, recorded at the Library of Congress in 1946, displays Milstein at the peak of his powers. Today it would be considered an old-fashioned program--with lighter "encore" pieces surrounding a Bach sonata and the Mendelssohn Concerto--but it was typical of Milstein's career. Although no violinist today would dream of playing a concerto

with piano accompaniment, it was once common practice. During the 1920s, for instance, Horowitz and Milstein frequently played violin concerti (such as the Glazunov) with the orchestral part in a piano reduction.

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Milstein opens his program with the famous *Chaconne* long attributed to Tomaso Vitali (1663-1745). (Recent research, however, suggests that Vitali may not have been the composer.) Originally written for violin and basso continuo, the *Chaconne* was made famous by the violinist Ferdinand David (1810-73), who published it in a souped-up, bowdlerized version for violin and piano that set the tone for subsequent interpretations.

Music that sounds more authentically Baroque to modern ears arrives with J.S. Bach's Sonata in G minor for solo violin (BWV 1001). In his memoir, *From Russia to the West* (1990), Milstein traced his long term relationship with Bach. It began with one of Milstein's first meetings with Auer, for whom he played the G-minor Sonata at breakneck speed. Milstein recalled scornfully: "Auer wasn't interested in listening to Bach.

He didn't know what to say, and so he said practically nothing. Of course, pieces like Dvořák's *Humoresque* and *Meditation* from Massenet's *Thais* were another thing entirely." Subsequently, Milstein explored Bach on his own. "I tried to learn as much of his music as possible. I even tried to go through *The Well-Tempered Clavier* on the violin.... Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin give the performer an opportunity to bask in the most glamorous light. For a long time this was hardly obvious."

The centrality of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas to today's violin repertory is due in no small part to Milstein's lifelong championship of them. Milstein recorded the complete set twice in the studio, once for Capitol (1954-56, released 1957) and much later for Deutsche Grammophon (1975). He claimed to prefer the second, which he described as "more improvisational," and certainly it is a phenomenal achievement for a seventy-one-year-old violinist. But I have always preferred the earlier set, which is more rapid in tempo and more visceral in its propulsive drive.

Milstein never liked to repeat himself on stage and often spontaneously changed fingerings and bowings; this is especially true of

his Bach, which varies greatly in detail. But in overall conception this recital is close in spirit to the 1954 recording, although it is even faster and more urgent. Both performances are rigorously unsentimental, preferring forward momentum to throbbing lyricism. The crisply-articulated fugue, for instance, is taken at a blistering pace that would be the envy of any present-day early-music specialist.

Milstein's own *Paganiniana*, a solo transcription of themes from various Paganini works, follows the Bach. Music from several of Paganini's caprices, as well as his *First Violin Concerto*, is tossed together with fiendish virtuosity, if little regard for the integrity of the sources. "In a transcription the result is what counts, not the original material," Milstein wrote. And he went on to grumble: "In their day many violinists did transcriptions.... Now young violinists don't bother to do anything. They just want to get in front of an orchestra and conduct because that seems the easiest thing to do."

In Milstein's memoirs, he gives good advice to anyone who would play the Mendelssohn Concerto. "To my taste, the Mendelssohn Concerto is the most perfect of the violin concerti. It may not be as profound as

Beethoven's, but one does not necessarily have to be 'deep.' The Mendelssohn is three-quarters classical and one-quarter romantic. It's harder to play than the Beethoven Concerto--you can't drag it out or abuse the *ritenuti*--but if you limit yourself to delivering 'just the notes,' you get bilberry *kvass**, as they say in Russian."

Milstein's takes his own advice in this reading, finding a balance between classical restraint and romantic expressivity. At the beginning he seems a bit reserved, although he grows more involved as the first movement progresses. Still, his interpretation leans toward the classical end of the spectrum; it avoids intrusive gestures and exaggerated distortions of phrase. As a result the radiance of Mendelssohn shines through, uncluttered by excessive mannerism.

The Mendelssohn Concerto closes the formal recital program, but it is followed by two encores: Chopin's *Nocturne No. 20* in C-sharp minor (in Milstein's arrangement for violin and piano) and Wieniawski's *Scherzo-Tarantelle*. Milstein's transcription of the *Nocturne* gives the

*humble alcoholic drink made from barley, malt, rye, or stale bread

piano's poignant right-hand melody to the violin, but his only substantial addition is the brief violin cadenza interpolated before the return of the opening theme. As for Wieniawski, Milstein had a direct link to him through Auer; in fact, Milstein recalled that Auer used to tell him "in particular how marvelous Henryk Wieniawski had been."

Nathan Milstein died in 1992. A man of great cultivation, he was deeply interested in painting, politics, philosophy, and literature. This document of Milstein's concert work further enhances his legacy of artistic excellence.

--K. Robert Schwarz

K. Robert Schwarz contributes regularly to The New York Times, Stagebill, Opera News and OUT.

Josef Blatt (b. 1906) attended the Music Academy in his native Vienna, gave numerous concerts as a pianist, and conducted opera in Austria and Czechoslovakia. After his arrival in the US in 1937, he concertized, served as Music Director of WABF-FM in New York, and conducted for the New Opera Company. Blatt also conducted the New Friends of Music in a performance of his own Violin Concerto, and led the New York Philharmonic on several occasions. In 1950 Josef Blatt was appointed Assistant Conductor at the Metropolitan Opera, later becoming Music Director of the Arkansas State Symphony.

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THE GERTRUDE CLARKE WHITTALL FOUNDATION

A Violin Recital

by

NATHAN MILSTEIN

JOSEF BLATT *at the piano*

This concert is presented on the occasion of a special exhibit of autograph letters and manuscripts of FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY

THE COOLIDGE AUDITORIUM

MONDAY EVENING, OCTOBER 7, 1946

At 8:30 o'clock

