

Sonata in F major, Op. 24 (22:25)

(violin and piano)

- 1 Allegro (9:09)
- 2 Adagio molto espressivo (6:04)
- 3 Scherzo (Allegro molto) (1:08)
- 4 Rondo (Allegro ma non troppo) (5:55)

Partita in D minor, BWV 1004 (22:46)

(solo violin)

- 5 Allemande (2:01)
- 6 Courante (1:40)
- 7 Sarabande (2:56)
- 8 Gigue (1:51)
- 9 Chaconne (14:18)

Sonata No. 3 in D minor, Op. 108 (21:34)

(violin and piano)

- 10 Allegro (7:52)
- 11 Adagio (5:07)
- 12 Un poco presto e con sentimento (2:56)
- 13 Presto agitato (5:34)

NATHAN MILSTEIN, violin ARTUR BALSAM, piano

Ludwig van Beethoven

(1770-1827)

Johann Sebastian Bach

(1685-1750)

Johannes Brahms

(1833-1897)

This concert recording documents a long and fruitful association between violinist Nathan Milstein (1904-1992) and pianist Artur Balsam (1906-1994). Billed as "A Program of Chamber Music", their March 13, 1953 Library of Congress recital found the distinguished duo in uncommonly fine form.

The two began collaborating in 1938. Balsam had already made his mark as assisting artist for Yehudi Menuhin, then at the crest of his popularity, and about to make the difficult transition from *Wunderkind* to thoughtful, mature interpreter. Milstein, firmly ensconced in America's musical firmament, was instrumental in helping Balsam and his wife escape the Nazi peril that was menacing Europe and the world. They were caught in Paris when Hitler's forces invaded Poland. Thanks to the help of Milstein and Mrs. Rosalie Leventritt, passage was booked for January 1, 1940 on the *Rex*--the last crossing open to civilian passengers (all subsequent trips were restricted to military needs). Since the English channel was being mined, departure had to be from Italy. Balsam, being of military age, would have had little hope of escaping to the New World if the exiled Polish government in Paris had not granted him permission "pour faire la propagande artistique." The Balsams' departure was not a moment too soon: immediately thereafter, the newly installed Vichy government began inspecting the passports of all embarking emigrants (which would undoubtedly have doomed the chances of escape for Polish Jews).

When Balsam arrived in New York, he had literally not been able to touch a piano for six months. None of his friends in France owned instruments, and given the political climate, the pianist certainly did not wish to advertise his presence. Therefore, the first Milstein/Balsam concert of the 1939-40 season, an Albany appearance only three days after the pianist's arrival, was given with no rehearsal whatsoever. That it nevertheless proved an artistic success gives some idea of Balsam's natural gifts as a pianist and the almost clairvoyant bond he shared with Milstein.

It has often been said that Milstein, like Fritz Kreisler, preferred playing to rehearsing. Because of that predilection, Balsam relates, he often found himself spending time allotted for preparing their concerts at the movie theater. Balsam had a true passion for the cinema, a taste he had acquired in his youth as a performer of background music for silent films.

Anyone hearing the performances of Beethoven's "Spring" Sonata and Brahms' D-minor Sonata captured on this recording would logically assume that each and every consummate detail had been worked out with minuscule thoroughness. The Beethoven is notable for its immense vitality. It sweeps along with a refreshingly brusque continuity of phrase and accent. The two outer movements are wonderfully decisive, the expansive *Adagio molto espressivo* has both breadth and motion; and the duo's ensemble in the whirlwind Trio section

of the Scherzo is awe-inspiring. These artists had made a commercial recording of the "Spring" Sonata in December 1947, but the results of that session were never approved for release. Several years after this 1953 concert performance, Milstein re-recorded the sonata for Capitol Records (his pianist on that LP was Rudolf Firkusny).

The Milstein/Balsam Brahms D-minor Sonata performance provides a fascinating alternative to the RCA Victor studio version which the violinist made with Vladimir Horowitz in 1950. Although one can certainly find merit in Horowitz's treatment of the difficult piano part, it seems to this writer that Balsam's affinity for the Brahmsian idiom is more unstintingly generous temperamentally, and even more natural pianistically. While it is true that Milstein characteristically urged the music onward on both occasions (as was his wont in all of the many readings I heard him give of this sonata in concert), Balsam's cushioned, relaxed sonorities and his expansive phrase shapings--not to mention a more copious use of the sustaining pedal--produced an idiomatic repose and spaciousness appropriate to the music. Details, rather than being lovingly dwelled upon, are allowed to fall into place with unselfconscious inevitability.

Milstein's official discography includes three versions of the Bach D-minor Partita--a performance on Columbia 78 r.p.m. discs; and those contained in the integral sets of all the Sonatas and Partitas he made, respectively, for

Capitol in the 1950s and for Deutsche Grammophon in the 1970s. No two Milstein performances of any composition are exactly alike: for all his astonishing finish and discipline, this player--a jewel in the crown of the masterful and influential Auer tradition--was a remarkably flexible soul, who would often improvise new bowings and fingerings on the spot. The account of the Bach heard at this 1953 Library concert most closely resembles Milstein's first LP recording, with perhaps even an extra dollop of violinistic voltage. It offers additional evidence (if any were needed) that Milstein's dexterity, concentration and superb musicianship were as fully impressive as those of another fabled Auer disciple, Jascha Heifetz.

-Harris Goldsmith

Harris Goldsmith is a pianist, author, critic, and musicologist. He currently teaches at the Mannes College of Music.

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Annotator: Harris Goldsmith

Design: Rick Neilson and Digital Chameleon

Production Research: Norman Middleton

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Booklet photograph of Nathan Milstein and Artur Balsam courtesy of

Mrs. Ruth Balsam and The Artur Balsam Foundation for Chamber Music

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