



LUCERNE FESTIVAL

audite

HISTORIC
PERFORMANCES

Nathan Milstein

Mendelssohn Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64
Swiss Festival Orchestra | Igor Markevitch

Dvořák Violin Concerto in A minor, Op. 53
Swiss Festival Orchestra | Ernest Ansermet



Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)
Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64

- I. *Allegro molto appassionato* – 11:53
- II. *Andante* – 7:58
- III. *Allegretto non troppo – Allegro molto vivace* 7:02

Nathan Milstein

Swiss Festival Orchestra | Igor Markevitch

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)
Violin Concerto in A minor, Op. 53

- I. *Allegro, ma non troppo – Quasi moderato – attacca*: 10:19
- II. *Adagio, ma non troppo* 10:02
- III. *Finale. Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo* 9:59

Nathan Milstein

Swiss Festival Orchestra | Ernest Ansermet

recorded live at LUCERNE FESTIVAL
(Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern)

Previously unreleased

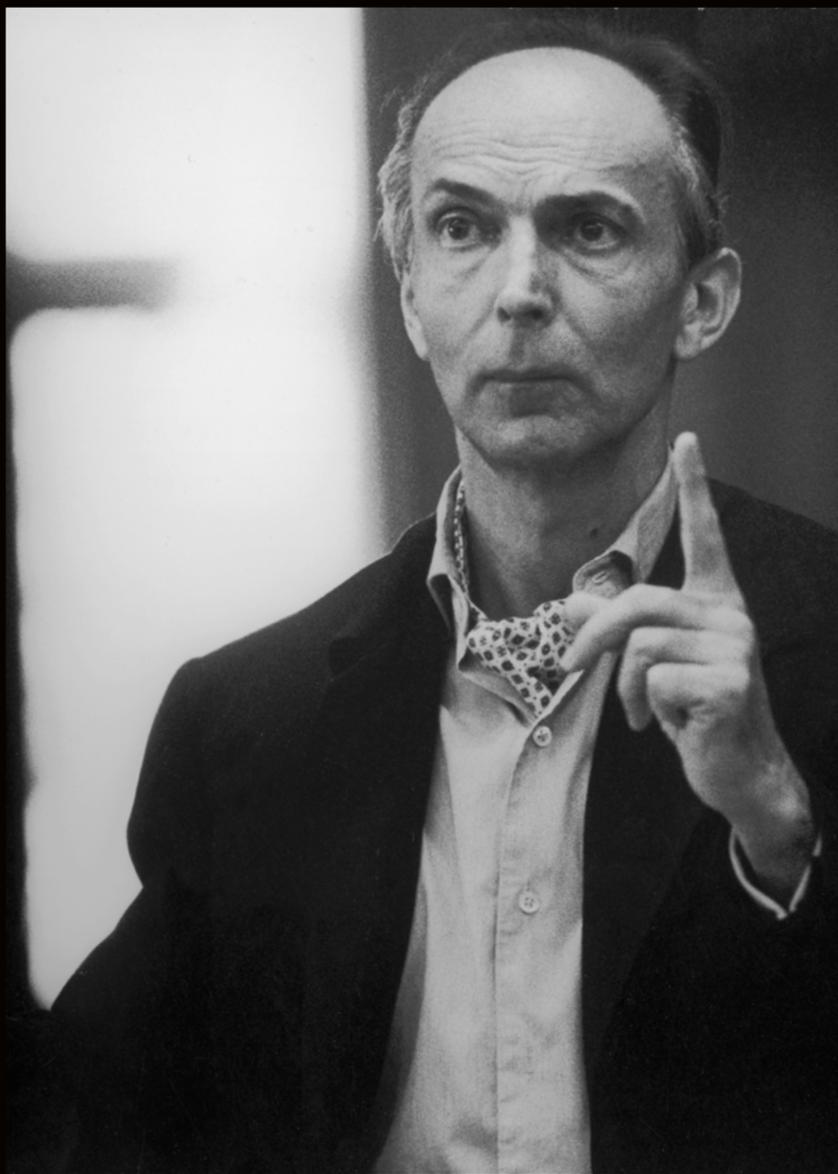


**“It is the music which takes a lifetime”
Nathan Milstein: Views of a Violinist**

There are historical recordings which seem historical not merely due to their sound quality. And there are others which, with a bit of imagination, could be current interpretations, which have not acquired either an aesthetic or a stylistic patina, but which appear astonishingly timeless. Listening to Nathan Milstein’s performance of the famous violin concerto in E minor by Felix Mendelssohn, recorded live on 12 August 1953 together with the Swiss Festival Orchestra under the baton of Igor Markevitch, one is in for a surprise. Was this violinist, whose style is so lean and svelte, truly a representative of the fabled Russian violin school that advocated a full tone, broad vibrato and a sense of passion? Milstein’s Mendelssohn features hardly any *portamento*, no sighs, and especially no sensuous indulgence in sickly-sweet sounds; instead, his playing is characterised by fast tempi, a sinewy tone and razor-sharp accuracy in the realisation of filigree figurations. All this seems positively modern.

But precisely for this reason Milstein, at the beginning of his career, met with discontentment from some of his contemporaries. When, in October 1929, the 25-year-old was invited to the USA for the first time, performing with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the press, although acknowledging that he was “capable of magical things upon a violin”, also considered his playing overly cool. Alongside established luminaries of the time such as Jascha Heifetz, Fritz Kreisler or Mischa Elman, it was initially not easy for him to hold his own in the New World; in Europe, on the other hand, Adolf Busch, Bronisław Huberman or Joseph Szigeti dominated the concert halls; and both in the US and in Europe, the prodigiously talented Yehudi Menuhin was increasingly talked about. Milstein, on the other hand, initially created a sensation as a chamber musician with a trio whose other members were pianist Vladimir Horowitz and cellist Gregor Piatigorsky who, like Milstein, had left their Ukrainian or Russian homes in the years after the October Revolution and found initial refuge in Berlin.

The fact that Nathan Milstein, born in Odessa on 13 January 1904 as a son of a Jewish family, became a musician at all was thanks to the efforts of his mother who had chosen the violin for her four-year-old. He admitted later that he did not like the violin and could not imagine a normal child deriving pleasure out of practising an instrument: “I liked football only”. According to Milstein, violin technique is not difficult – “the technique I acquired



when I was seven. It is the music which takes years, a lifetime, to master.” The seemingly prodigiously talented youngster played Alexander Glazunov’s violin concerto under the composer’s baton in Odessa, aged only ten.

Milstein certainly did not lack self-confidence, leading him to relativise his teachers’ influence. Pyotr Stolyarksy, who took the seven-year-old under his wing, apparently “used to eat an egg when we played for him in Odessa”, whilst the celebrated pedagogue Leopold Auer, with whom Milstein studied in St Petersburg, supposedly was no real teacher and only chose those students who did not need his help. And Eugène Ysaÿe, whom he visited in Brussels in 1926 in order to put the finishing touches to his playing, purportedly told Milstein that he could not teach him anything more. Nonetheless, Milstein never thought he had been perfect in his youth; on the contrary: “Certain works I now play, from a mechanical-technical point of view, even better than twenty-five years ago”, he commented at the age of seventy. “And interpretationally, there is no piece in my repertoire that I do not play better today than back then.”

When Nathan Milstein made his debut at the Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern, today’s LUCERNE FESTIVAL, performing Beethoven’s violin concerto on 20 August 1949, he was doubtless already at the height of his art. He may well have experienced this first festival appearance as a sort of homecoming as he had already travelled to Lake Lucerne several times in the 1930s, visiting his friend Sergei Rachmaninov in Hertenstein in order to assist him in the working out of the string parts of his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. And he had also been present at the festival’s birth on 25 August 1938 – Arturo Toscanini’s legendary gala concert at Tribtschen. In contrast to Germany where, on account of the crimes committed by the Nazis, Milstein would not perform until 1966, Switzerland was an unburdened territory for him. His successful festival debut resulted in an immediate re-invitation for the following year with a Bach programme, and another three years later, in 1953, when he performed the Mendelssohn concerto: his shining hour.

And this interpretation, which Milstein performed together with the conductor Igor Markevitch, a kindred spirit and fellow Ukrainian, even today appears unusual and unexpected. According to his friend Robert Schumann, Mendelssohn was “the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the brightest musician who grasped the contradictions of the time most clearly, reconciling them most promptly”. Accordingly, his violin concerto is generally regarded as a luminous, Apollonian piece, plunged into a cult of beauty by way of gracious, elegant playing. Milstein’s reading of this work, however, is entirely different: from

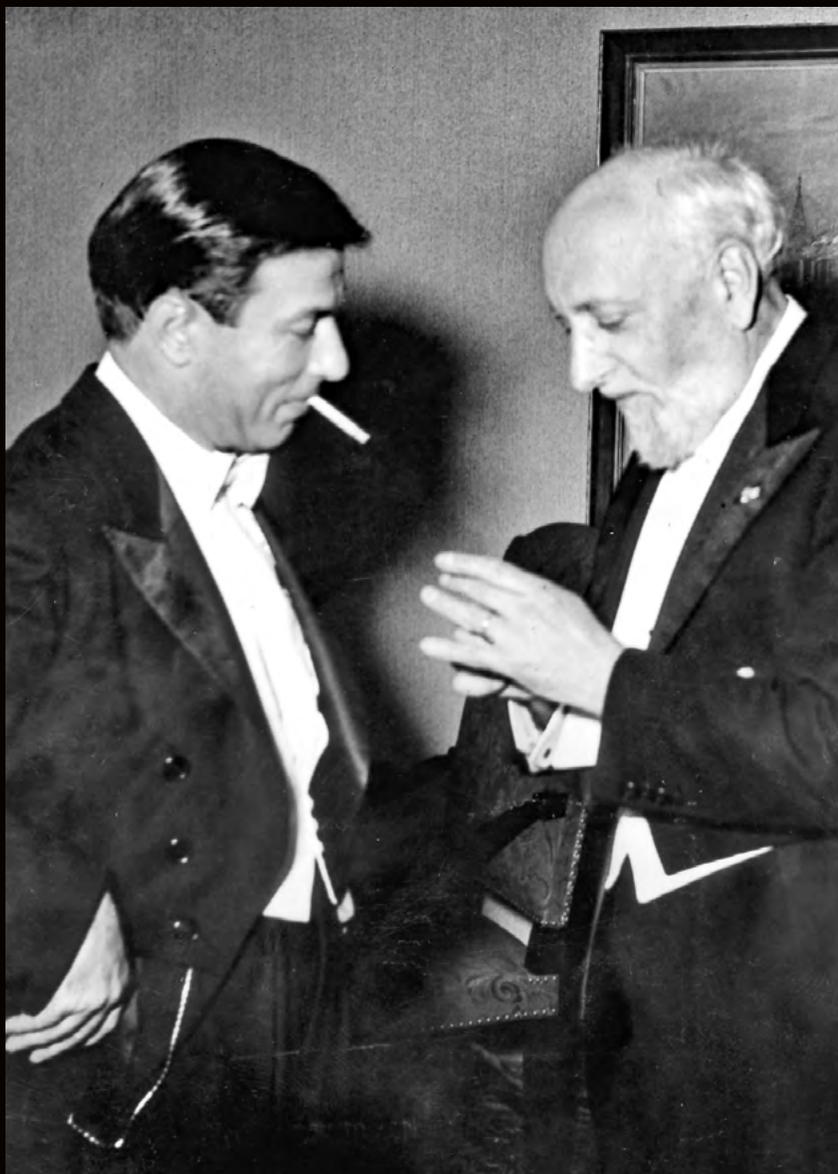


the outset, someone appears to be on the run. His tone is piercingly intensive, relentless, unsentimental and yet consumed with grief; no trace of kitsch. This is a Mendelssohn characterised by a sense of tragedy, and Milstein and Markevitch do not abandon this premise for one second – their performance remains taut throughout.

Milstein's excellent technique was, of course, a precondition for this. His intonation is completely flawless, the interaction between left and right hand perfect, the transitions between up-bow and down-bow so seamless that they are barely noticeable. This is matched by the refined phrasing and astonishing precision with which Milstein presents high-speed passages, precarious leaps and challenging double or triple stops. It beggars belief that he did not practise these virtuosic skills, which he mastered even in old age, daily. "Sometimes I don't play for days", he admitted. "But then I devote myself to music mentally – also on a technical basis. [...] Technique is achieved via mental processes. The mechanics have to be mastered when one is young." The surviving video footage of his performances reflects Milstein's aplomb: a gentleman enters the ring, exuding dignity and sophistication, entirely devoid of any antics and completely focused. One can hardly imagine him contorting his facial expression to reflect his emotions, or that he might act like a Zampano during stout, folk-like passages.

Even his sound recordings convey Milstein's stage presence to a degree, such as the live recording of the A minor concerto by Antonín Dvořák which he performed in Lucerne on 6 August 1955 alongside the Swiss Festival Orchestra and Ernest Ansermet. When the solo violin enters in the fifth bar, Milstein is immediately "there", filling the hall with his glowing tone. The fact that he, by his own admission, suffered stage fright before each concert, is not audible: "I have terrible anxiety before a concert", he once confessed. "On a concert day I always stay in my room [...] and I cannot even entertain the idea of going for lunch with friends. As long as my violin is in its case before a concert, I am nervous." But then, on stage, everything suddenly changes: "When I play I feel that I am alive, that I function as a human being – physically and mentally. I really like that. And then I concentrate so hard that I sometimes don't notice what is happening around me. Someone could poke a pin into my back and I wouldn't feel it."

The sense of obsession and latent demonic possession, the protest and rebellion characterising his Dvořák interpretation, confirm this self-portrayal. Milstein's playing is ablaze – there is no difference between soulful cantilenas and virtuosic passagework: everything is highly charged. The fact that the central movement relies perhaps too heavily on a full



sound, instead of highlighting the fragile moments in the music, may be due to this point of departure. Another factor may be the conductor Ernest Ansermet, a renowned expert in French repertoire, for whom Dvořák represented new territory – it is therefore no coincidence that this violin concerto under his baton has not been available on disc until now (as, for that matter, the Mendelssohn concerto with Igor Markevitch). At any rate, Ansermet favours a very compact orchestral sound for this piece. Finally, it is also possible that the Swiss Festival Orchestra, having not performed in the summer of 1954 following contractual disputes with the festival management, needed to find a new balance as an ensemble.

Ansermet's role in Milstein's Dvořák interpretation, however, should not be overestimated. For a start, the Czech composer's violin concerto was a favourite of Milstein's from an early age; between 1951 and 1966 he recorded it three times, twice with William Steinberg and once with Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos. (The early Steinberg recording had to be called upon for the restoration of this recording in order to cover two short missing passages in the original tapes during the second and third movements, from 7'14" to 7'57" and from 7'27" to 7'29", respectively.) In Lucerne he played it twice; four years after the 1955 performance he was to return to it, this time under the baton of Carlo Maria Giulini. Championing this piece at that time was unusual: Dvořák's concerto was still overshadowed by the masterpieces of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky and Brahms. On the other hand, Nathan Milstein's relationships with conductors tended to be somewhat distanced. In his memoirs, he commented derisively that the audience regarded a conductor as a sort of supreme commander and that in England even mediocre conductors of second-rate orchestras were knighted; indeed in most countries, according to him, government officials marvelled at the fact that a conductor commands an entire troop of musicians. Milstein felt that a good musician knows how to play and how the sound should be, without outside involvement. He did concede, however, that an interpretation needed to be worked out together, during rehearsals. But, come the concert, it should be possible to perform without the conductor, in the same way that theatre directors are not on stage during the performance. It remains to be asked how Karajan, Barbirolli, Jochum, Abbado and all the others with whom Milstein worked throughout his career would have reacted to such a suggestion.

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 LUCERNE FESTIVAL

recording: live recording at LUCERNE FESTIVAL (Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern)



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recording date: August 12, 1953 (Mendelssohn) | August 6, 1955 (Dvořák)

recording location: Kunsthaus, Lucerne

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p. 3: Nathan Milstein in concert

p. 5: Nathan Milstein in conversation

p. 6: Nathan Milstein and Ernest Ansermet

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