



Nathan Milstein plays Mendelssohn & Dvorak

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[Fanfare](#) (Jerry Dubins - 01.12.2018)

This is Volume 8 in Audite's Lucerne Festival Collection and it documents appearances by Nathan Milstein in 1953 and again in 1955 at the Swiss festival, performing the Mendelssohn Concerto with Igor Markevitch and the Dvořák Concerto with Ernest Ansermet, both conductors leading the Swiss Festival Orchestra. This is not the first time that this Milstein/Mendelssohn has been released on CD. In 33:6, Robert Maxham reviewed an Archipel album containing this performance, but it was coupled with a Milstein performance of the Brahms Concerto with the New York Philharmonic, led by Victor de Sabata. The 1955 Milstein/Dvořák with Ansermet on this Audite release, however, may be another story. I can't swear that it has never been available on CD before, but this is the only version of it I've found. In 21:1, Maxham reviewed a four-disc Music & Arts set that contained a Milstein/Dvořák, but that one was from a year later, 1956, with Paul Kletzki conducting the Cologne Gürzenich Orchestra.

No violinist I'm aware of was more closely associated with the Dvořák Concerto than Milstein. It was a staple of his repertoire, and he was recorded playing it, in concert and in studio, a total of six of times that I've been able to document. Here they are:

October 26, 1947 Leopold Stokowski New York Philharmonic

March 4, 1951 Antal Doráti Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra

August 6, 1955 Ernest Ansermet Swiss Festival Orchestra

September 14, 1956 Paul Kletzki Cologne Gürzenich Orchestra

April 16–17, 1957 William Steinberg Pittsburg Symphony Orchestra

June 9–11, 1966 Frühbeck de Burgos New Philharmonia

Some of these may be harder to track down than others, but they have all been issued on CD, including the earliest, with Stokowski and the NY Philharmonic, which was remastered by Pristine and reviewed in three consecutive issues 41:1, 41:2, and 41:3.

The last two listed, with Steinberg and Frühbeck de Burgos, are both studio efforts and the most widely circulated and readily available among the lot. The one with Steinberg, in the opinion of some, including me, may be Milstein's definitive recording of the piece, though I haven't heard all of them, and this is my first time hearing the Ansermet version, which may be the first time anyone has heard it, since, as noted above, I haven't been able to find a previous release of it.

The first thing that struck me about this performance was how little it differs interpretively from the Steinberg of 20 months later. Milstein's readings of a given work had a tendency to speed up with time instead of slowing down, and that can be observed here with Ansermet in 1955, when he took 10:20 to navigate the first movement. By four months short of two years later, with Steinberg, Milstein had sped up, admittedly almost imperceptibly, but by 15 seconds to 10:05. Nine years later, with Frühbeck de Burgos, the speedup is shocking: 8:59. The thing is, though, that Milstein was an obsessive technical perfectionist who seldom, if ever, used his consummate technique to project a flashy, virtuosic personality. As a result—his last Dvořák recording, with Frühbeck de Burgos, being an example—Milstein could convey an impression of a player who was aloof and even almost indifferent.

That is not the impression I get from either his performance with Steinberg or this one with Ansermet. Both give fully characterful representations of the music's Czech core, but in ways that are nuanced and refined. Dvořák's peasants live for the moment as princes. Frankly, the main difference I find between the Steinberg and this Ansermet performance is in the orchestral playing. The Ansermet was taped "live," and the Swiss Festival players are not quite as disciplined as are the Pittsburgh players for Steinberg under studio conditions. The "live" Swiss recording is also a bit blowsy and congested sounding in heavily dynamic passages.

Milstein's readings of the Dvořák Concerto may be more interpretively divergent in his earlier recordings with Stokowski and Doráti; I can't say since I haven't heard them. But interpretively and performance-wise, this Ansermet version is so close to the Steinberg that I would stick with the latter, especially since the orchestral playing and recording are superior. On the other hand, if you're a Milstein devotee, you will probably want all of his above-listed recordings of the Dvořák so you can compare their differences, subtle or otherwise, to your heart's content.

If six Milstein versions of the Dvořák Concerto are a bit much for you, the violinist's recordings of the Mendelssohn Concerto are of a dizzying number to make your head spin. From March 20, 1936, there are fragments from the second and third movements captured on record with Milstein and the New York Philharmonic under Toscanini, the only time, we're told, that the violinist and conductor ever collaborated. From there, we move on to no fewer than seven recordings of the complete concerto, if you don't count a couple of questionable ones noted below.

According to Youngrok Lee's discography (lee.classite.com/music/Milstein/discography-milstein.htm#Mendelssohn), there is a recording from the 1940s with Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, transferred from 78s to a Pearl CD. He even lists a Pearl catalog number of GEMM 9259, but I have searched high and low and everywhere in between, and I cannot find a Pearl CD with that number or any other reference to a Milstein/Ormandy/Philadelphia recording, so I'm not counting that one in the total number, or the next one he lists either, which he dates from February 22, 1942, with the Cleveland Orchestra. He names no conductor, however, and indicates that Columbia never released the recording.

So, now, we get into the documentable versions that do exist and several of which have been previously covered here, including this one on the aforementioned Archipel disc, reviewed by Maxham.

March 16, 1945 Bruno Walter New York Philharmonic

August 12, 1953 Igor Markevitch Swiss Festival Orchestra

November 28, 1953 William Steinberg Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

August 9, 1957 George Szell Berlin Philharmonic

October 1–3, 1959 Leon Barzin Philharmonia Orchestra

March 4, 1962 Walter Hendl Chicago Symphony Orchestra

March 12–13, 1973 Claudio Abbado Vienna Philharmonic Live performance at the Salzburg Festival Released only on DVD, as far as I know

Nearly a 30-year span is covered by these seven recordings, all of which have been transferred to and released on digital media. Before becoming acquainted with this Markevitch performance, I was familiar with all but the Szell/Berlin and Hendl/Chicago versions. I was able, however, to view and listen to the Hendl recording on YouTube, so that left only the Szell that I haven't heard. The amazing thing to me about the Hendl video is being able to watch Milstein up close and personal. He is one cool cucumber, his unchanging expression totally impassive. Yet, close your eyes and listen, and you don't get the impression that his playing is emotionally cold or distant.

How does this "live" Markevitch performance compare to the others I was previously familiar with? I think I can pretty much say the same thing about it I said about the Dvořák on this release with Ansermet. Milstein's execution, as always, is impeccably clean and precise, his silvery tone glinting brightly off the orchestra. Interpretively, I'm stuck by how consistent the violinist's readings of a given work remain over time. It's as if once he has settled on the way he wants to do it, subsequent performances vary by only minor degrees based on his adapting to the conductors and orchestras he's playing with. I know I'll get flack for saying, "If you've heard one, you've heard them all," but in the case of these Milstein Mendelssohns, I'd say that they're really close enough to each other that one could base one's choice on the orchestral contribution and quality of the recording rather than on the violinist.

Some swear by the 1945 recording with Walter and the New York Philharmonic, but my personal choice would be for the Abbado with the Vienna Philharmonic. It's the most recent and best-sounding recording, the Vienna Philharmonic is well, the Vienna Philharmonic, and Abbado and Milstein seem to have a real rapport with each other. I'm not saying that Milstein is my preferred violinist in the Mendelssohn Concerto—he's not. I find all his readings of the piece too fast and facile. I'm just saying that of his several recordings of the Mendelssohn, the one with Abbado would be my first choice.