



Isaac Stern plays Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto, Op. 35 and Bartók: Violin Concerto No. 2, Sz. 112

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Isaac Stern was a violinist with more than one string to his bow – if you'll excuse the pun. He was a multi-talented musician who forged a career as a soloist, chamber musician and teacher, and excelled in all three. Never one to be confined by limiting boundaries, his talents over-spilled into other areas. He sponsored and mentored young violinists, including the likes of Perlman and Zukerman. In 1960, he spearheaded a campaign, together with the philanthropist Jacob Kaplan to save New York's Carnegie Hall from demolition. Here he demonstrated his great organisational ability, highlighted by his shrewd networking and communication skills. As a friend of politicians and leaders, he was an inspiration behind the America-Israel Foundation which, to this day, provides scholarships for young musicians.

Born in the Ukraine in 1920, his family moved shortly after to the USA, where they settled in San Francisco. Of all his teachers, he credited Naoum Blinder as his most important influence. Whilst Stern specialised in the Classical and Romantic repertoire, he also had an interest in contemporary music, giving premieres of works by William Schuman, Peter Maxwell Davies and Penderecki. As a chamber musician, he established an enduring duo partnership with the pianist Alexander Zakin. He also formed a piano trio with Eugene Istomin (piano) and Leonard Rose (cello). They produced some very fine recordings of works by Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn and Brahms.

The Audite label has just celebrated its fortieth birthday and coinciding with this is releasing, in collaboration with the Swiss Festival authorities, a series of live broadcast recordings from the Lucerne Festival. The aim is to make available some of their vast archive, selecting performances of artistic merit by great concert artists. Most of these are seeing the light of day on CD for the first time. Many will be overjoyed to have these two Stern events, as live representations of the violinist are very sparse in his discography. Also, it is good to hear Stern at his zenith, when he was technically on top form. In later life, his instrumental facility became somewhat hampered by lack of practice due to his multitude of other interests.

He was a regular guest at the Lucerne Festival and appeared ten times between 1948 and 1988, both as soloist and as chamber musician. What we hear on this CD dates from the 1950s; the Bartók from 1956, conducted by Ansermet, and the Tchaikovsky from two years later with the young Maazel, who was making his Lucerne debut at this very concert.

Stern had a particular affinity for the Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky concertos. Indeed the latter he recorded three times. For my money his 1958 studio recording with Ormandy and the Philadelphia is the most rewarding. The instance featured here is strongly argued and virile, at times gripping and highly charged. Stern is all

passion and burnished intensity. The second movement is ravishingly played, with the melancholic and reflective qualities emphasised. In the third movement, he ratchets up the energy, with scintillating élan, rhythmic drive and technical brilliance. Maazel provides admirable support.

The Bartók second was a relative novelty in the 1950s. Composed in 1937-38, and dedicated to the Hungarian violinist Zoltán Székely, it was premiered in Amsterdam the following year with Székely and the Concertgebouw conducted by Mengelberg. Prior to this Stern concert, the Swiss Festival Orchestra had played the concerto with Menuhin in 1947. Again, the conductor was Ansermet. Their relative unfamiliarity with the score manifests itself in some intonation problems with the orchestra, and a premature entry of the harp at the beginning of the second movement. Apparently, Stern's E string broke at the end of the first movement, but in no way did this throw him off course. This is extremely compelling and satisfying playing.

Stern's robust and muscular tone is ideal for this concerto. His impulse-type vibrato allows him a range of tonal colour well-suited to a canvas such as this. Similarly, his bow arm enables a powerful sonority. What we hear is idiomatic, stylistically nuanced and technically secure. Like Menuhin, who has championed this concerto, with several recordings under his belt, Stern's eloquent, expressive phrasing emphasises the rhapsodic nature of the work. All of these elements are more evident and to the fore than in his studio recording with Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic from 1958, which is in less than ideal sound and balance.

Considering that these performances originate from the mid-1950s, they are in remarkably good sound and form very welcome additions to the violinist's discography. Norbert Hornig has provided some very enlightening and informative liner-notes. I eagerly await other treasures emanating from this source.