

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

October 25th, 1950

Description: In this segment, ER interviews concert violinist Yehudi Menuhin.

Participants: ER, Yehudi Menuhin

[ER:] In my living room with me this afternoon is one of the very great musicians of the twentieth century. His playing of the violin has been shared by people all over the world, and therefore he can truly be called a citizen of the world. I'm happy to have the opportunity to see you again and to -- it reminds me of our last meeting. I'm glad to introduce you to-- Mr. Mehu--Yehudi Menuhin.

[Yehudi Menuhin:] Our last meeting was a most enjoyable occasion. I remember it so well. It was your birthday, I believe, yes?

[ER:] It was. And you came at David Gurewitsch's [Yehudi Menuhin: Yes.] and Mrs. Gurewitsch's invitation, and played for me.

[Yehudi Menuhin:] Yes, I remember very well. I enjoyed that evening.

[ER:] Well, I enjoyed it more than I can say. And since that time, I know then you were starting to go um, oh, right across the United States. But since that time, you've done a great deal more than that. Would you tell us a little bit about your travels?

[Yehudi Menuhin:] Well, the mere distance covered would be already quite an account, in that I've traveled twice to the Southern Hemisphere from Europe each time, both to South Africa and South America. I've traveled extensively in Europe and uh went as far as Israel, which I visited for the first time last March. Uh --

[ER:] Everyone tells me that when they go to Israel, it's a real musical experience.

[Yehudi Menuhin:] Undoubtedly. The audiences there are quite exceptional. They have, of course, brought with them a tradition of music that has been in force in Europe for many hundreds of years. And they have not abandoned that tradition despite the rigors and the work which they've had to face in the new country. In fact, it is quite a wonderful thing to see how attached they are and how insistent they are on maintaining the intellectual, the cultural, and the artistic life amid circumstances which we could only call pioneer. (2:23)

[ER:] I've heard that. I've heard it from many people, and I think it must be a very extraordinary feeling to be in that country. But I think there must be a great many countries where you have been where you -- because music is a universal language -- where you could get a feel of what had happened to people where most of us wouldn't have any sense of what was going on at all.

[Yehudi Menuhin:] Yes. It is a way of getting close to people and close to what they feel and close even to what they think, because very often people are unable to express all they think in words. And music is a language. Perhaps it's-it's all the more a language for not being a spoken one. It is an instinctive way of sounding like a-sounding board, of finding out the reactions of people. And they seemed to have become much more attached to music as the difficulties of their lives increase. It is a fact that during the

occupation of the-of France and Belgium and Holland, the people privately engaged in many more musical evenings, and attended small restricted receptions, because of course they could not or they did not wish to forgather in the public halls, in the opera houses, and so on. But the music that was prohibited was played behind closed doors and drawn curtains. [ER: That's very interesting.] And in fact, they intensified this as the one beacon, as the one uh signpost towards the kind of life and the values which they were devoted to. And since the war, of course, music has resumed in the open; all that it had stood for in secret during those days.

[ER:] That's very interesting to me. I noticed yesterday at a luncheon, where we had the heads of various delegations, and among them Mr. [Andrey] Vyshinsky. And there happened to be a just um [ER coughs] a small orchestra of three stringed instruments, and um [ER coughs] they played the different songs from different countries around the table. And I didn't expect Mr. Vyshinsky to show very much pleasure. But when they played for him, he got up and took his champagne glass at the end of the piece and toasted them. But I had never seen him melt in quite that way before, so I began to feel that perhaps one of the ways to reach even our Russian friends was through music. (5:24)

[Yehudi Menuhin:] Undoubtedly it does make people unbend. For one thing, you do not present them with opinions which they are-uh feel obliged to counter. You do not present them with any frozen prejudices, or frozen uh conceptions of things which are opposed to their own. You--it is a key which unlocks so many doors. And never does one find the-any resentment at the doors being unlocked. On the contrary, one can very often later then discuss things which otherwise might have remained closed and frozen.

[ER:] Well, I-I uh I-I think that's very true. I wonder when you say you went--did you go to Africa on your trips?

[Yehudi Menuhin:] I went to South Africa.

[ER:] You went to South Africa? (6:13)

[Yehudi Menuhin:] Yes, uh [ER: Um--] it was my second visit; I'd been there fifteen years ago. And that is a very interesting uh country at the moment. Of course, we all know the uh political difficulties that the country's facing.

[ER:] I wondered if you felt them when you-when you were there, I mean--

[Yehudi Menuhin:] Yes I did. And as usual, all circumstances bring about a reaction. And perhaps the best English press anywhere is the English press in South Africa.

[ER:] That's Interesting!

[Yehudi Menuhin:] It is quite curious, because, of course, they are honor bound and obliged to uphold the very principles which, of course, we associate with England and with the United States; principles which at the moment are being attacked by the opposers. And that makes the English group, and those that write for the English papers, doubly conscious of their responsibilities.

[ER:] Do you find in different countries a desire for certain special kinds of music? For instance, can you say when you're making up a concert for different places that you go, what kind of music will be [Yehudi Menuhin: Yes.] liked?

[Yehudi Menuhin:] There are certain composers that are almost universal. I would say [Ludwig van] Beethoven was one, and then [Johann Sebastian] Bach in a different way too. And there are other composers that are as one thinks un-exportable; that are so very characteristic of the country, of the people to which they belonged or belong, that they can hardly be quite understood. It is something like humor, you know? We know British humor sometimes is not quite appreciated outside the empire, and the same with our own humor. Thus a composer like [Edward] Elgar is revered in England and in the dominions as well. I just played his concerto in Montreal. [ER: Yes.] I believe for the first time in Montreal. I had already played it in Toronto last year, where it was very well received. I have played it in Paris and in New York as well, but it wasn't accepted in the same way. [ER: That's very interesting.] And then, of course, you have French composers like [Gabriel] Fauré who is not appreciated [ER: Not appreciated except in France?] -- outside-- except in France. [ER: That's very interesting.] And uh

[Guillaume] Lekeu would be in Belgium and France of course, and [Max] Reger in Germany, and so on. (9:02)

[ER:] Do you find uh in Germany now that there is a revival of the um interest in music, or do you think it never died out?

[Yehudi Menuhin:] I don't believe it ever died out. [ER: Mhm.] I believe everything was attempted to suppress it, as they tried to destroy and suppress everything that had any value or any ennobling quality. But the audiences today in Berlin and the symphony, the Berlin Philharmonic, is on as high a level as it has ever been.

[ER:] That's encouraging, I think, because it gives you something to build on, for --

[Yehudi Menuhin:] If-If we build on it, yes. If we --

[ER:] Uh did you feel we were building on the best in Germany, or not?

[Yehudi Menuhin:] It is very difficult to tell at the moment. There is a good element in Germany and it remains to be seen whether that element will gain in power and weight and support.

[ER:] Well now, for a minute I'll have to go back to our sponsors, and then we'll come back.

[Break: 10:03-08]

[ER:] I'd like to ask you, because I know you've done a great deal of research work on it, um a little bit about the classical and modern compositions which you've saved uh from being completely lost um.

[Yehudi Menuhin:] I think that is putting it a little bit dramatically. [ER: It is.] It isn't quite as uh-- what-- what I did uh does not measure up to those--to that description, really. Uh there was uh-uh known to be a concerto by [Robert] Schumann, which owing to a curious provision of a will by [Joseph] Joachim, the great v-violinist to whom Schumann had dedicated to work and with whom he had been uh very intimate friend, uh this curious provision prevented the work from being disclosed to the public for one hundred years following the death of the composer. And uh -- [ER: Good gracious, why?] No one has been able to explain that satisfactorily. The concerto itself is a very lovely work; though it may not uh measure up to the highest standards which Schumann set himself, it certainly is most satisfying to our standards. And especially the first two movements are really most beautiful. And uh no one--Schumann of course ended his life very tragically, and perhaps it may have had something to do with those circumstances. In any case, as soon as the work was released for publication, I immediately played it and therefore came to introduce it in this country. But uh I cannot claim to have unearthed it. (11:54)

[ER:] Well, are there a number of things you have brought to the attention of the public that you are particularly proud of?

[Yehudi Menuhin:] Well, uh an interesting thing is um the work -- the [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart, concerto I'm performing with the New York Philharmonic. That concerto bears the number-number seven, and if you ask almost any musician, they will question the existence of that work. They've only heard of six. That work came to light after the other six, which had been written almost in one short period. And therefore, not having been known at the same time, eh people became acquainted with the others first. And you know how it is when one knows already something; one is reluctant to learn anything new. [ER: Yes.] This concerto is, I believe, at least as beautiful if not more beautiful than any of the others. And it is--as it is written uh-a few years after the others, it also shows a greater development in the use of the violin. It reaches higher positions in the violin, and in fact employs uh intervals of tenths, which for Mozart is quite exceptional. Uh this concerto in a way I'm introducing, not that it hasn't been available to the public for many years, but no one has played it.

[ER:] No one's played it? So it's really like giving people something completely new, isn't it?

[Yehudi Menuhin:] It-it is. I actually played it some, oh, many years ago in New York. But uh it has to be brought anew to the public, before it will take root. (13:30)

[ER:] Are you going to stay now a little while in this part of the country, or are you going to travel away from us right away again?

[Yehudi Menuhin:] No, I'm--although I am on tour, I'm remaining in the country until the middle of January. And in --

[ER:] Until the middle of January. I suppose that seems to you a long while, to me it wouldn't seem so very long! [ER laughs] Are you going out to the west coast again?

[Yehudi Menuhin:] Yes, I'll be on-in the west coast in December. And I must say I am looking forward now to a period when I will remain a little longer at home than I have been accustomed to in the last years.

[ER:] I'd like to ask you something: Do you find any difference nowadays in your American audiences? Do you find any more sureness of their appreciation without waiting to be told?

[Yehudi Menuhin:] Yes, I believe one can say that. Certainly there are many small cities that today boast of a symphony orchestra. And you have pla-you placed the question extremely well, because I'm glad to see that you specified not the enthusiasm, not the natural courtesy, natural warmth, but rather the critical faculty. And uh that is the one factor which remains to be developed more in this country.

[ER:] Because I've always felt that both um -- that practically in all of our artistic appreciation in this country, um we had labored for a long time under uh serious drawbacks, because uh if anyone was going to be a success they had to go and study abroad first and make their name abroad. They couldn't make a name in this country, because we weren't as-as audiences sure enough of our own taste and our own judgement. We didn't as a whole know enough about art, or the theater, or music, or painting. But lately I think we've been getting -- um perhaps because as a country we're getting more mature, we've been through more, [Yehudi Menuhin: Yes.] and we've had um we've had to do more for our artists. Perhaps we've begun to think more about them and therefore to get a little more security. (15:57)

[Yehudi Menuhin:] Yes, undoubtedly. There are many artists today that have never -- in the United States -- that have never been to Europe. That have received their entire training in the United States. In fact, I've just played with two orchestras in very small cities: Bloomington, Illinois, a city of about thirty thousand [ER: Oh yes. I've been there to speak.]-- Yes -- and Huntington, West Virginia, [ER: Yes, I know that too.] which although three times as large, is hardly more intense in its enthusiasm than Bloomington is in its own way. It uh it's not measured [ER: Well, of course it's -- it's in the heart of the coal country.] -- It's not measured either by quantity, [ER: No.] by number. And these orchestras are composed mostly of nonprofessional people, people who in the daytime do their regular jobs and in the evening rehearse, and otherwise of students graduated from the Eastman or the Julliard or other schools of music in the United States. Of course, the enthusiasm is a wonderful thing, and the spirit is quite extraordinary. They do need, however, still a contact with the old traditions. [ER: Yes.] They cannot really do the very best unless they keep up that link, that bridge.

[ER:] No, well, I'm-I'm sure that's so. Uh we have a-a little orchestra uh that has been now um playing together for three or four years, possibly longer, in um Poughkeepsie, New York, which is [Yehudi Menuhin: Mhm.] nothing but a small county city. [Yehudi Menuhin: Yes.] It's uh-it's much bigger than it used to be [Yehudi Menuhin: Yes.] because we have a tremendous influx of um oh engineers, and people who work in International Business Machines [IBM], [Yehudi Menuhin: Mhm.] which has just built a big um uh factory there. [Yehudi Menuhin: Mhm.] Uh and so we've-we've sprung quite quickly into a bigger place. But uh I-I haven't had the opportunity just lately to hear them play but I'm told they have improved

[Yehudi Menuhin: I'm sure.] enormously. (17:57)

[Yehudi Menuhin:] What I was referring to is just as when we love a poet or want to acquaint ourselves with his style, we try to learn to know the country of his origin, the landscape that he loved, the people that were around him. And in the same way, if we are to continue playing Beethoven, [Johannes] Brahms or César Franck or Bach we must keep in contact and we must learn to know that country, the country of their origin. I had a very interesting feeling in Salzburg this summer, where I did play at the festival --

[ER: Oh you did go to Salzburg?] yes. Uh I for the first time visited the Salzkammergut, that beautiful countryside of Austria. And to see those sudden storms, to see the tender and most friendly countryside and the lake suddenly whip up into angry, furious eh moments, and then just as suddenly subside. It gave one an understanding, and a really intimate understanding of Beethoven. Which I don't believe could be gathered any other way.

[ER:] Well, I think that's quite true. You must really know the soil and the country from which an artist springs before you can understand what he produces.

[Yehudi Menuhin:] I believe that, yes.

[ER:] That's very interesting. And um I wonder if um different parts of this country, which is such a big country, won't eventually produce artists that have uh very distinctive talents because of the place they come from.

[Yehudi Menuhin:] I think that's possible, yes.

[ER:] That's interesting. I hope so because [Yehudi Menuhin: So do I.] I always have a feeling that our greatness lies so much in our um scenery, in our natural um uh [Yehudi Menuhin: Yes.] country. And perhaps our people could draw from that great artistic value.

[Yehudi Menuhin:] They should. I think they will.

[ER:] I want to thank you so much for being with me today, and tell you how much I appreciate your coming. [Yehudi Menuhin: I'm grateful to you.] And now we must go back to my son Elliott.

(20:12)

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