

Chapter 3

Writing about a musical celebrity

Hephzibah the musician

In writing about any musician, a biographer has to confront the fact that writing about music is intrinsically illogical, like dancing to architecture or painting a novel. How does one describe one art form in terms of another? And especially when the art form is classical music, in which abstract language must necessarily be used to describe something that may evoke powerful emotional responses in the listener?

This is a difficult subject and dealing with it is not easy. However, as Hephzibah was not a composer but a performer and interpreter, it was not necessary in her biography to address abstract questions concerned with primary creativity. At the same time, the reader had to be aware of the qualities that made Hephzibah the outstanding musician that critics and colleagues asserted her to be, and the reasons for making those assertions.

Hephzibah's story has a specific trajectory: it is not the usual musician's account of fairly humble beginnings, discovery of talent, struggle, success, fame, glory, decline. Her particular problems, as well as her time and place, had to be considered. On that subject, the historian Inga Clendinnen has written: 'What we can do is become increasingly knowledgeable about the contexts in which particular actions ... took place. We do this ... by reconstructing as delicately, as comprehensively and subtly as we are able, not only

the material but also the cultural settings in which other people, once living, now dead, lived out their lives.’¹

In Hephzibah’s case, this can be modified to ask the question: Were any other women musical prodigies who had to face the same conflicts and pressures, and what can be learned from them?

There are two intriguing nineteenth-century parallels to Hephzibah Menuhin’s career. Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847) was the elder sister of Felix (1809-1847). Like the Menuhins, the Mendelssohns were well off and Jewish. Fanny enjoyed a privileged childhood and a broad education with private tutors in Berlin. Her own musical gifts – she was a composer and pianist – were as great as her brother’s, and until Fanny and Felix were adolescents they studied piano and composition together. But, as in the Menuhin family, a career in music was planned for the son while the daughter was always conditioned to expect marriage and children. Indeed, the words Fanny’s father wrote to her when she was fifteen could almost have been said by Moshe or Marutha Menuhin: ‘Music will perhaps become [your brother’s] profession, whilst for you it can and must be an ornament, never the root of your being and doing.’² Felix Mendelssohn comprehensively overshadowed his sister, as Yehudi did Hephzibah, but at least Hephzibah did not have to endure having her musical compositions published under her brother’s name, as Fanny Mendelssohn did.

¹ Inga Clendinnen, *The History Question: Who Owns the Past?* Black Books Quarterly Essay QE 23, Melbourne, 2006

² Carol Neuls-Gates (ed) *Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Harper & Row, New York, 1982, page 143

When Fanny Mendelssohn married the painter William Hensel she lived her musical life at one remove, devoting her life to music at home, organising Sunday musicales at the Mendelssohn family estate outside Berlin. She continued to play the piano and conducted a choral group, as well as writing music. She wrote rather sadly to a friend in 1836: ‘My own delight in music and Hensel’s sympathy keep me awake still, and I cannot help considering it a sign of talent that I do not give it up, though I can get nobody to take an interest in my efforts. But enough of this uninteresting topic.’³

The stories of Hephzibah Menuhin and Fanny Mendelssohn diverge here, of course: there was never any suggestion that Hephzibah was thwarted musically, as she continued to give concerts to the highest professional standards. As an adult she decided not to devote her life to music, but to humanitarian work. However, like Fanny Mendelssohn, she was given conflicting messages about her musical talent from a very early age. Hephzibah’s parents encouraged her to excel, they gave her musical tuition equal to her brother’s, while telling her firmly that she was not to have a career as a concert performer. I have puzzled over this – why spend money on a girl’s education if she is not intended to capitalise on it? – and think that the Menuhins (and probably the Mendelssohns) wanted to make a statement about the brilliance of their children. Both families were Jewish and as outsiders in the society by which they wished to be accepted, they wanted to show that society that they, through their children, were capable of achievement at the highest possible level.

³ *ibid*, page 148

The case of Clara Weick, later Clara Schumann (1809-1896) is somewhat different. Taught by her father from an early age, she was considered the foremost woman pianist of her time, a peer of Anton Rubinstein and Franz Liszt, and her career lasted for fifty years. She introduced much new music by her husband Robert Schumann, as well as by Chopin and Brahms, and played some of Beethoven's sonatas for the first time. But Clara Schumann had to earn a living: her husband Robert was institutionalised for long periods, and she had several children to support.

There is a parallel with Hephzibah Menuhin here: for years during her marriage to Richard Hauser she played concerts because her fees helped support the household and enabled her and her husband to carry out their joint work. However, it was by no means their only source of income: their work was sometimes supported by philanthropical organisations and contributions from Yehudi. And unlike Clara Schumann, Hephzibah was never really faced with the knowledge that if she did not perform concerts, her family would suffer.⁴

For Fanny Mendelssohn, the practice of her art became an optional extra: for Clara Schumann it was an economic necessity. Hephzibah Menuhin, though she was undoubtedly influenced by the pressures that so greatly affected her predecessors, was luckier: able to regard musicmaking as a skill, a craft, she enjoyed practising, without considering it the centre of her creative life or absolutely vital to her family's well being.

In that sense, she was more fortunate in her time. Yet when she began her performing career – before World War II – the

⁴ For a full account of Clara Schumann's life told in novel form see Janice Galloway, *Clara*, Vintage, London, 2003

classical music scene was still as vibrant as it had been in the days of Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann. Playing and listening to classical music was still part of everyday life; every town of any size in Britain, the US and Europe had its choirs, bands, sometimes orchestras, as well as music teachers.

Classical musicians in Hephzibah's time – and Yehudi's – had several great advantages. The invention and popularity of gramophone records and radio made classical music ubiquitous, as composer and broadcaster Andrew Ford has pointed out: 'In the heyday of radio ... broadcast concerts of classical music were as common as comedy shows and sports reports. Before television, the whole family tended to listen to the radio as a group. Most homes had just the one radio set and very often the only alternative to listening to it would have been to leave the house. Exposure to classical music, then, was nearly unavoidable. ... In the next room to the radio there was probably a piano, and the chances were there would be someone in the family who could play it reasonably well.'⁵

Ford also points out that in the 1930s Donald Tovey was writing highly analytical essays about classical music for the general public, and that his books remained in print for forty years. Such books would be published only by a specialist academic publisher today, illustrating the fact that classical music literacy is no longer considered part of the core curriculum.

So in Hephzibah's time the general musical public had a higher awareness of musical benchmarks, greater opportunity to hear the repertoire and therefore almost certainly wider and more discriminating knowledge of the classical repertoire than they did in

⁵ Andrew Ford, *In Defence of Classical Music*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2005, pages 14, 16

the nineteenth century. Music schools had not yet begun to turn out large numbers of highly skilled and talented musicians, so the pool of talent was undoubtedly smaller as well. (It is ironic and rather sad that now, with so many excellent musicians being trained, opportunities for classical performance are shrinking to such an extent.)

So modern technology has enabled Hephzibah's talent and the quality of her performances to be more readily evaluated than in the nineteenth century: we are no longer dependent on the observations of a relatively small number of people who constituted nineteenth-century European audiences.

But technology was not perfect in Hephzibah's time either. She died in 1981, before the CD came into popular use; her recordings were made first on 78 rpm discs – four minutes a side – and then on long-playing vinyl. Inevitably these lack the precision and clarity associated with the equipment now used for digital recording. Especially during her early career, one or two of her recordings with Yehudi are a little thin; perhaps only one central microphone was used, with the result that the violin's high notes rather shrilly override the darker, heavier sound of the piano.

However, the expressiveness and bravura technique that Hephzibah could call upon are obvious in their recording of Enesco's violin and piano sonata No 3⁶. It is tumultuous and passionate music, and both players need to listen to each other very closely and to respond: Hephzibah and Yehudi almost sound as if they are egging each other on. And Hephzibah's monaural recording of Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet with the Amadeus Quartet

⁶ Yehudi and Hephzibah Menuhin, George Enesco Sonata No 3 on Menuhin and Shankar, *West Meets East*, CD, 1999 (remastered)

(1958), though it lacks the rather cool incisiveness of digital technology, is both warm-toned and responsive to the other members of the group and the demands of the music. These qualities exist in most of Hephzibah's recordings that survive, and they are independent of technology.

Another great difference that separated Hephzibah's career and Clara Schumann's (and other classical music virtuosi of the nineteenth century), and directly related to the spread of classical music knowledge, was the rise of the professional music critic.. There are several histories of music criticism, and its growth and dissemination need not detain us here, except to say that it has always been an extraordinarily varied discipline. Hephzibah herself took very little notice of reviews: her own assessment of the way she played was always more prominent in her (fairly rare) discussions of performance with her brother or father. This was a habit from her earliest years, encouraged by her parents, who did not show early reviews to her (or to Yehudi).

The qualities that critics in the USA, Australia, England and Europe singled out in her work are remarkably consistent. When she was judged to have played well, reviewers emphasised her control of tone, as well as thoughtful attention to stylistic detail and dynamics. When she played with other musicians, including of course her brother, she was usually praised for sensitivity to the demands of other instruments and rapport with other musicians. Bad reviews for Hephzibah included descriptions of her playing as 'matter-of-fact' or 'mechanical' or 'accurate but without feeling'.

In evaluating a performing musician, quality of teaching, playing style and choice of repertoire need to be considered.

Hephzibah's principal teacher Marcel Ciampi was, according to his biography ⁷a strict and solid technician: Jeremy Menuhin, who had lessons from him, considered him rather dry⁸. Bracey's biography gives very few clues about Ciampi's teaching methods, which would probably be of greater interest to a specialist than to the general reader. The book is more concerned with Ciampi's illustrious friends and his place in French pianism during the first half of the twentieth century, and Hephzibah is mentioned only as one of his many students.

But Gerard Willems, Head of the Department of Keyboard Studies at the Conservatorium of Music, Sydney, points out that teaching can only bring out in a student what is already there. A very distinguished pianist himself, both as a soloist and in chamber music, he believes that a musical personality begins to be formed very early. 'Teachers obviously have particular aspects of technique they pass on,' he said, 'and the good ones are very attentive to weaknesses in the student's playing. But if you get someone exceptional like Hephzibah, who evidently had a strong and flexible technique from a very early age – and real pianist's hands, strong-fingered, large and supple – your job as teacher is a bit like a doctor's, first do no harm. Let the student's musicality and instinct develop, don't be prescriptive.'⁹ A mature musician must develop his or her own individual voice, and a teacher should guide, not prescribe.

Willems considers Hephzibah to have been an exceptional pianist, and not simply as a technician. 'It was her approach,' he

⁷ John Paul Bracey, *Music to Last a Lifetime: A Biography of Marcel Ciampi*, Edward Mellen Press, New York, 1996

⁸ Conversation Jeremy Menuhin with author, 24 October 2003

⁹ Conversation Professor Gerard Willems with author, 30 June 2007

said. 'Very difficult to pin down in words, but one would have to say that she was an intuitive musician. Quite instinctive. More so than Yehudi.'

Hephzibah's reviews often emphasise her brilliant technique, something not usually associated with musical intuition. But musical instinct, or intuition, is a quality that, in the popular mind, is often confused with something that can be its opposite: physical expressiveness. An enduring perception of 'great' classical musicians, especially pianists, stemming from the Romantic period and given wider currency by Liszt and Chopin in the 1840s, is the artist as highly expressive solo performer. It has become a lasting trope, and one not applied only to players: one need only consider those highly expressive photographs showing Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic.

Hephzibah Menuhin was not a physically expressive pianist. In every film and photograph of her at the keyboard she is still and calm, straight-backed, expressionless, very concentrated. Judging by her demeanour, she could almost be sewing or knitting. Her playing is also devoid of histrionics, rejecting exaggerated rubati, pianissimi followed by fortissimi for the sake of contrast regardless of musical architecture, artificially fast or slow tempi, long and florid cadenzas. (Consequently her playing does not sound old-fashioned today, in contrast to, say, the ardent romanticism of Artur Schnabel.)

Yehudi's performing style, on the other hand, followed the Romantic tradition, which was most often the purlieu of male performers. He moved a great deal as he played, and sometimes his facial expressions mirrored the 'intensity' of the music. Audiences love this sort of thing, and are apt to label this kind of

expressiveness as soulful or indeed intuitive. Over his career, however, the quality of his performances varied considerably, his sound sometimes lyrical, sometimes downright harsh, and his vibrati alarmingly wide.

Musicians who played with both Menuhins have a different perception of their playing, implicit in the distinction between watching and listening. Gerard Willems commented: 'Yehudi was an audience's musician. He pleased the crowds. But once you took away all the physical stuff, and listened to what he was actually doing, the result could be uneven. He could be wonderful, of course, but there were times when his playing was a little mechanical, and he, you know, charged ahead regardless.

'Hephzibah was a musician's musician. That is what I mean by intuitive. She always thought of the music and what it needed, and played it with the expressiveness the composer demanded. And she was mindful of the piano's role in other musical textures, and judged her playing according to that.'¹⁰

Violinist Harry Curby, an original member of the Sydney String Quartet, said something very similar: 'Hephzibah played as though she were really a violinist who was accompanying herself on the piano,'¹¹ a comment about a musician who thoroughly understood her role within an ensemble. All the musicians I met who had played with Hephzibah made similar comments: she was thoroughly professional, she was a joy to work with, she understood instinctively what was required of her, and used her formidable technique to express it.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Conversation Harry Curby with author, 23 February 2003

Hephzibah did not specialise in playing the works of particular composers (cf Rosalyn Tureck playing Bach, Mitsuko Uchida playing Mozart); she was familiar with many different styles of music. According to program notes, newspaper interviews and concert critiques, she played comparatively little twentieth-century music, though she and Yehudi played Bloch, Enesco and Vaughan Williams and she also introduced some Bartok to Melbourne. However, she tended to stick to the classics of the piano repertoire: Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin, Schubert, Schumann, some Mozart.

During her second marriage she was a part-time concert artist, and she did not devote a great deal of time to learning new repertoire. Several interviewees have testified to her speed and accuracy of recall for pieces she had learned a long time before. In the last decade of her life, when she was extraordinarily busy and then very ill, her concert reviews became increasingly negative, sometimes describing her playing as 'mechanical'.

Gerard Willems believes that Hephzibah's lack of singlemindedness as a concert performer has robbed her of the right to be numbered among the greatest pianists. 'She was distracted by other things, and I'm not saying she shouldn't have followed what was most important to her,' he says. 'But she had the qualities of the greatest. I have heard her play Mozart concerti that moved me to tears.'¹²

The role and importance of celebrity in Hephzibah's story

¹² Conversation Professor Gerard Willems with author, 30 June 2007

Writing about celebrated people presents problems of its own, well summarised by Ian Jack: 'Celebrities are often seen as fictions, the argument being that they are media inventions, with various amplified, distorted or invented parts of their lives assembled for our benefit and made familiar to us through the media ... their particular humanity is ... elusive'¹³ This certainly applies to Hephzibah and Yehudi Menuhin: indeed, celebrity is almost a character within their story.

Yehudi Menuhin, whose career drove the fortunes of the entire family and had such a great influence upon his sister's life, was the classical music world's first multimedia celebrity. The discovery of his outstanding talent as a violinist coincided with the growth and development of twentieth-century mass media: radio, newsreels, newspapers, magazines, television and film. Because he was a *wunderkind*, and attractive, as were his parents and his two young sisters ('adorable' was a word far too often used to describe Hephzibah and Yaltah Menuhin as children), the media were avid for stories about the Menuhins. Moshe Menuhin, who was in charge of the family's public relations, quickly and smoothly developed a 'line' for journalists, capitalising on the popular idea that such precocious and dazzling talent was not only freakish but mysterious.

Hephzibah's marriage and flight to Australia in 1938 could well have been a wish to escape from the burden of being a 'celebrity' Menuhin (as well as an escape from her mother's dominating influence). By doing so, she was of course escaping the glare of publicity consequent upon her debut at Carnegie Hall, planned for the following year. Her ability was not in question, but

¹³ Ian Jack, *Celebrity*, Granta 79, Granta, London, Autumn 2002, page 6

she appears always to have been happiest when working with other people, not being required to seek the limelight. Many stories and anecdotes testify to her modesty and self-effacement. At a time when women musicians were encouraged to be elegant divas, when, for example, the pianist Eileen Joyce was famous for wearing at least two eye-catching and elegant gowns per concert, Hephzibah would come to the concert hall in trousers and a sweater, with her music and gown bundled together in a plastic bag.

Of course Hephzibah's studious avoidance of this kind of glamour is itself an evaluation of it. She was effectively making the statement that she was an artist in her own right, with no need for the trappings of fame. However, there is some evidence – admittedly anecdotal -- that as a performer she insisted on due recognition of her worth.. Her son Kron has commented: 'She got very frosty if people didn't realise who she was.'¹⁴

But the real effects of early and continuing celebrity on Hephzibah Menuhin were, I believe, more subtle, and they may go some way towards explaining some of the more difficult parts of her story.

Having been photographed and interviewed since she was a small child, Hephzibah had learned how to present herself before a generally admiring public. She seems to have taken for granted that whatever she did would find favour in the eyes of the world. Her upbringing, isolated from many of the normal childhood influences, had given her comparatively little understanding of the needs of people outside the family or musical circles. She therefore had little chance to develop empathy with other people if

¹⁴ Conversation Kron Nicholas with author, 22 March 2003

their lives and views differed from her own. She was always respected as a musician. The Nicholas money also cushioned her against many features of 'ordinary' life. Realising this, and to her credit, she did what she could to become involved with society as widely as possible. But the barriers were always there.