

Chapter 5

Writing Hephzibah 2: The role of Menuhin family members

The relationship between Hephzibah and Yehudi Menuhin

It is impossible to research and write the life story of Hephzibah Menuhin without evaluating the important and at times overshadowing influence of her brother.

Hephzibah always gave Yehudi great credit for her early lessons in performance. She said he taught her to show emotion in her playing, and that his criticisms about her approach to repertoire were very useful. Just how much of her style and approach are heavily influenced by Yehudi is difficult to quantify: he repeatedly said that he and Hephzibah were 'Siamese souls' which suggests they had exactly the same approach to the music. It may be that this was, in some sense, innate.

In their early recordings together, the violin dominates, but that may easily be the result of comparatively primitive recording techniques (as well as the choice of repertoire). As time passed, the qualities of their partnership – responsiveness to tempi, dynamic sensitiveness, smoothness, technical brilliance – became more obvious. By the 1950s and 1960s they played together without even making eye contact, so sure was their sense of the music and the understanding of what each was doing. At the end of their joint playing career, in the late 1970s, some critics complained that their work together was mechanical, possibly because their various other commitments often prevented their learning new repertoire.

Hephzibah's emotional closeness to Yehudi can be seen in her intriguing decision to marry the brother of Yehudi's fiancée

Nola Nicholas. It is a complex decision and one that, by all evidence available, she did not confide to anyone. One view, influenced by Freudian psychology, is that she felt this was the only way she could stay close to her brother. In *Menuhin: A Family Story* Tony Palmer observes: 'While it would be an exaggeration to say that she had married Nola [Nicholas]'s brother on the rebound from being abandoned (as she came to think of it) by her real brother, it is a familiar enough pattern for siblings whose emotional relationship is strong to marry a relative of the partner of their brother/sister in order to preserve what they can of an earlier and more cherished love.'¹ (It is an interesting way of discussing this view: introducing it only to deny it.) Palmer also observes that 'it is strange that as soon as Yehudi's marriage with Nola broke down, Hephzibah reappeared on the scene as a musical partner'.² It is hardly strange, in fact, and not even accurate. Yehudi came to Australia to play with Hephzibah, as arranged before their marriages, in 1940, with Nola expecting their first child. War prevented Yehudi and Hephzibah from playing together, but they resumed as soon as they could. True, the marriage to Nola Nicholas was over, but Yehudi had already found somebody else.

The broadly Freudian interpretation of their relationship could be supported by the fact that as teenagers they were known jokingly to refer to themselves as 'the incestuous sonata players' and also, perhaps, by the fact that each thoroughly disliked the other's second choice of marriage partner. Yehudi's feeling was probably exacerbated by Hephzibah's increasing devotion to Hauser and their work as social planners; he always considered

¹ Tony Palmer, *Menuhin: A Family Portrait*, Faber and Faber, London, 1991, pages 190-191

² Ibid page 191

his sister's real work to be playing the piano, and preferably with him. He could be very possessive of his sister.

There is plenty of evidence that Yehudi and Hephzibah were often at odds with each other, especially on matters of behaviour. During the breakdown of Yehudi's marriage to Nola Nicholas, Hephzibah complained (in letters to Joan Levy) about his inability to be decisive about committing himself to wife or mistress. During Hephzibah's affair with Paul Morawetz, Yehudi offended her by pointing out that she was setting herself up as an object of self-congratulation. Each knew the other well enough to pinpoint weaknesses, and each was a practised enough writer to express their views.

It seems obvious to me that Hephzibah's relationship with her brother heavily affected her dealings with other men. (More than did her relationship with her father, the other dominant male figure in her early life.) She appears to have had a brotherly kind of relationship with Lindsay Nicholas: there is a great deal of warmth and affection in her letters about him, a kind of comradeship without much hint of sexual passion. (The marriage seems to have been sexually unsatisfactory almost from the beginning, probably because of both parties' inexperience.) Yehudi wrote in his memoir that his sister 'needed an object of veneration, preferably her brother'³ and by all accounts she found such an object in Richard Hauser. He was a man of very strong convictions with enormous faith in his own ability to change the world: many people observed that she appeared to adore him and subordinated herself to him, even though she had a strong personality of her own.

³ Yehudi Menuhin, *Unfinished Journey*, Pimlico, London, 2000, page 336

In earlier drafts of this biography, I was so conscious of Yehudi's influence in Hephzibah's life, so concerned not to have him take over her story, that I cut mention of him almost completely. The publishers pointed out the impossibility of telling Hephzibah's story without major reference to her brother. While Yehudi now has an important part in the book, and his influence may serve to explain certain aspects of Hephzibah's psychology, he does not overwhelm her story, and nor should he.

Moshe and Marutha Menuhin

The stronger parental influence on Hephzibah and her siblings was that of her mother Marutha Menuhin. The rules she made dominated the family. In Tony Palmer's television documentary 'Menuhin: A Family Portrait' (released in 1991 to coincide with his book of the same title published by Faber and Faber) Hephzibah says: 'From the first we were imbued with a sense of purpose in all things, a seriousness which precluded, for instance, the existence of toys.'

During research it became apparent that, while Hephzibah was often highly critical of her mother, Yaltah Menuhin was even tougher. In the documentary 'Menuhin: A Family Portrait' she says: 'My mother used to say to me, "I picked a very good father for you." I remember thinking, even at the time, that it took away the respect she had for his masculinity, for his part in our family life, for his responsibility.'

Yaltah's version of one event in the Menuhins' childhood has come to be generally accepted. This concerns the 1933 haircut. Yaltah wrote that, when she cut her long golden hair at the age of eleven and made a botch of it, her mother, in a fit of temper, cut

her hair very short. (According to some accounts, she shaved Yaltah's head.) Hephzibah and Yehudi, in an act of solidarity and defiance against their mother, cut their own hair. It is probably not an entirely reliable account of this episode for at least two reasons: almost all the stories published anywhere about Marutha's cruelty to her children can be sourced to Yaltah, and her brother and sister considered Yaltah a rather tiresome child whom they would probably not have supported against their mother.

Menuhin biographers have variously interpreted this episode as a pleasant example of Marutha's joking with her children and one more example of Marutha Menuhin's cruelty and need to control her children. The image of very short cropped hair is an equivocal one: it signifies the helplessness and humiliation of women being prepared for Nazi gas chambers, as well as an aggressive punk fashion statement. In the 1930s very short hair held neither of these connotations. However, one's interpretation of the episode greatly influences perception of Marutha Menuhin

The difference in the Menuhin parents' way of dealing with their children becomes obvious when considering Hephzibah's decision, at the age of thirty-three, to leave Lindsay Nicholas and her boys and to live with Richard Hauser. Moshe Menuhin sent her letter after letter in which he alternated between storming at her, asking why she had to change her life, accusing her of lying about her marriage and upbraiding Hauser. He also lectured Lindsay Nicholas, whom he considered weak. So Moshe Menuhin was prepared to blame everyone for what his daughter had done except Hephzibah herself: Marutha Menuhin, on the other hand, withdrew all direct contact from Hephzibah, refusing even to speak

to her on the telephone for a long time. (Marutha evidently left the letter writing to her husband, communicating by telephone: I have never seen her handwriting.) This withdrawal of affection was a weapon she used repeatedly on her daughters from the time when they were small (though never on Yehudi).

Hephzibah sought approval from her parents all her life. Once married to Richard Hauser and living in London she constantly wrote to them, explaining how important her work was, describing her happiness. Both Moshe and Marutha softened a little after a while, though neither wished to hear about Richard Hauser. Marutha described him as 'Clara's begetter' and Moshe made a point of not commenting when Hephzibah mentioned her husband.

Hephzibah was often scathing about her parents during her adult life. Tony Palmer's book *Menuhin: A Family Portrait* quotes a letter from Hephzibah to Yaltah about their mother and, though Palmer gives no reference for it, it is not dissimilar to other comments she made over the years. 'You are right in saying that [Marutha] never knew happiness and that is why she lived through us. Proxy was as near as she came to romance, and because it was unattainable she longed for it all the more, through our letters, our love experiments. She hungers for it so much that, like starved humans, she would feed on it at the cost of destroying it. It is pathetic and bloodcurdling and [Moshe's] role in their matriarchal scheme is even more repulsive than anything else. He is a martyr and being a Jew he has a depth of capacity for enduring pain which wrings one's heart. He has been so repressed, so beaten, so thwarted, so humiliated that perhaps he has no one opinion of his own at all. [Marutha's] cruel handling of us all – and of you in

particular, Yaltah, because you had the most elusive spirit and are also the least well defended – is the spiritual counterpart of cannibalism.’⁴

Marutha Menuhin, unlike her husband Moshe, has been a difficult biographical problem. Evaluating the evidence about her dispassionately is almost impossible, simply because so much of it is negative. All her children alluded to her fierce identification with the Tartars, a warrior people from whom she claimed descent (though this is open to doubt) and her refusal to show great emotion or to allow it in her children. Other people – notably Daniel Fleg and Rosalie Leventritt – commented upon her controlling maternal behaviour. It would be easy to portray Marutha Menuhin as a dominating monster, a malign version of the archetypal Jewish mother who lives only for and through her children.

It must be remembered, however, how difficult Marutha Menuhin’s early life had been. Her father deserted the family home when she was small and at the age of about fifteen she was forced to flee Russia. She was a highly intelligent and beautiful young woman schooled by circumstance into developing a fierce sense of independence. When she discovered that all her children were freakishly talented, her instinct was to control their upbringing. She determined they would be brought up as special people, artists, exposed above all to what was great in art and life. They would not be permitted to be hurt or contaminated by the world: all influences upon them, received through their parents, would be benign and educational. This hermetic inclination was reinforced by the willingness of several influential philanthropists to support Yehudi’s musical education to the point of allowing the family to remain

⁴ Tony Palmer, *op cit*, page 154

together. Marutha's experience had evidently taught her that parental love was not unconditional. Implicit in the upbringing she gave her own children was the expectation that they would repay their parents' total investment of time, and that there would be bad consequences if they did not.

Her upbringing prompted Hephzibah to observe: 'We are not at all extraordinary, not any of us, not even Yehudi, except in our queerness and maladjustments.'⁵ She also stated that 'Our upbringing had made awful fools of us when we faced our first life situations.'⁶

These 'maladjustments' need further explanation. Yehudi, who never suffered the withdrawal of his mother's love, believed that his talent, while it gave him authority, also permitted licence to do as he wished without reference to the feelings of others. Many people, including his wife Diana and his chief of staff Philip Bailey⁷ have borne witness to his capacity for assuming that, once he began a project, others would continue it, even picking up the pieces. When thwarted, his temper tantrums could last for days.⁸ Yehudi's youngest son Jeremy, a concert pianist, has observed that his father's love was always conditional, that he himself felt Yehudi loved him only when he played well.⁹

Yaltah, always the chief target of her mother's wrath, evidently reacted to Marutha's parenting by adopting the role of victim. Of all three Menuhin children she was most diligent in blackening her mother's name and representing herself as a

⁵ Tony Palmer, op cit, page 13

⁶ Ibid page 154

⁷ Diana Menuhin, *Fiddler's Moll: Life With Yehudi*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1984; conversation Philip Bailey with author, 12 September 2004

⁸ Krov Menuhin in Palmer, op cit, page 153

⁹ London *Daily Telegraph*, 21 December 2005

hapless and passive recipient of her mother's cruel domination. She told her son Lionel Rolfe that the American writer Willa Cather was 'the mother I never had'¹⁰ and Tony Palmer that because of Marutha it was 'no wonder all of us have failed so often in our attempts to reach out and touch other people.'¹¹

Hephzibah's response to her mother was perhaps the most complex of all. She was apparently the most successful of the three in circumventing Marutha's influence; she escaped it by marrying Lindsay Nicholas and going to live in Australia. At the same time, she was fulfilling her mother's ambition for her by marrying, having children and giving up the thought of music as her career. She was determined that none of her three children should suffer from the same degree of control as she had done. She was an attentive and responsive mother to them when they were young, encouraging them to develop independence. Sometimes she allowed them to make decisions that parents normally make for their children (e.g. allowing her daughter Clara to interview different schools' teaching staff in deciding what school she would attend).

At the same time, Hephzibah was accustomed to being told what to do from an early age, first by her parents, then by her teachers of music and her tutors. She did not rebel against this control, as did Yaltah: indeed, she maintained the mindset of a student that she had learned as a young girl. She never taught piano and continued to study languages in later life. Her affair with Paul Morawetz during her marriage to Lindsay Nicholas had definite pupil/teacher elements, though less than her marriage to

¹⁰ Lionel Rolfe, *The Menuhin Odyssey*, Panjandrum Press, San Francisco, 1978, page 63

¹¹ Palmer, op cit, page 154

Richard Hauser. Interviewees have observed the extent to which she adopted his ideas, agreed with what he said, and often cast herself as his secretary and research assistant. Her submissiveness to his mind and teachings struck observers so forcefully because she seemed in other respects to be so vital, energetic, and in control of her life.

Yehudi's children

Yehudi had a daughter, Zamira, and a son, Krov, by his marriage to Nola Nicholas, and two sons, Gerard and Jeremy, with Diana Menuhin. All four are now heavily involved in managing Yehudi's estate (he died in 1999) from which they derive the greater part of their incomes. Except for Jeremy, a concert pianist and the only professional musician in the family, none has undertaken sustained vocational training.

Zamira and Jeremy were most forthcoming about their aunt Hephzibah. However, during the interviews I conducted with them in London in 2003, both were concerned to impress upon me how badly they have been treated by their father. This was particularly true of Jeremy, who has since given interviews on the same theme.¹²

Their generosity with information and eagerness to talk puzzled me not a little. While I would like to attribute it to my own interviewing skill, I think the reality is that they were quite happy to talk to an Australian who was not aware of the minutiae of being a member of the Menuhin family. Some of the information they gave

¹² London *Daily Telegraph*, 21 December 2003

me was highly personal, with candour bordering on recklessness.¹³ This material was not included in the biography, partly because it would have caused unnecessary hurt to several people, and also because I felt it would unbalance the story and change its focus. However, I could not pretend not having heard these stories, and I cannot say they have failed to influence some of my views.

I am particularly grateful to Zamira Menuhin Benthall. At our first meeting, we had been talking for only a few minutes when she excused herself and returned a few minutes later carrying a pile of papers about fifteen centimetres thick. They were more than a hundred letters between Hephzibah and her parents, dating from Hephzibah's time in Australia and later; with newspaper clippings about concerts, letters to and from Lindsay Nicholas and much else. Zamira told me she had been given them by her grandfather Moshe Menuhin, had never looked through them and thought they might be useful. I was permitted to take them away and photocopy them if I wished. This material enabled me to write the story of Hephzibah's divorce fully, from several points of view. To say these letters were important in Hephzibah's story is an understatement.

Hephzibah's children

Hephzibah and Lindsay Nicholas had two sons: Kronrod George Nicholas, born in 1940 and Marston Menuhin Nicholas, born in 1944. Hephzibah and Richard Hauser had a daughter, Clara, born in 1953, and Richard already had a daughter, Eva, born in 1938. All were naturally significant sources for the biography. Just as

¹³ Jeremy Menuhin told me his pregnant girlfriend had been persuaded to have an abortion by Richard Hauser; Zamira that he had tried to seduce her when she was a schoolgirl.

importantly, as they were Hephzibah's heirs I needed their permission to use her letters. I undertook to show them the final draft of the biography at the same time as I submitted it to the publisher: though under no obligation to do so, and mindful of possible problems (see below) it seemed appropriate.

Hephzibah's children had varying attitudes to the telling of her story. Kron, the eldest and apparently the most straightforward, provided me with a large number of letters to and from his mother, all of which were valuable. He also suggested other subjects for interview and where necessary prepared the way: several times I found that several interviewees already knew about the biography through Kron.

At first I did wonder whether Kron was being so helpful because he wished me to adopt his own ideas to the exclusion of other people's: to control material and access to it. However, I came to the conclusion that this was not the case.

Marston Nicholas was more reserved and less forthcoming as an interview subject, though he later proved eloquent and thoughtful in emails. Both brothers were diligent in correcting small errors in the final manuscript, and were encouraging at all stages of the process.

I had to ask both Kron and Marston difficult questions concerning the section of Curtis Levy's documentary *Hephzibah* (1998) in which both described the day their mother left. Kron said he did not see her for three years afterwards; Marston said that she left the day he started school. Both are very powerful statements, and both have naturally led those who have seen the film to believe that Hephzibah was a cold-hearted, callous mother.

But according to Hephzibah's letters she returned to Melbourne to visit her sons about six months after leaving, and constantly kept in touch with them by telephone. In letters to her parents she provided many details about what both boys were doing, obviously at pains to show that there was no ill-feeling between her and her sons.

I asked both Kron and Marston, now men in their sixties, about the differences in their recollections and the evidence I had discovered. Kron's response was that his mother's absence from his life had seemed to last three years, but evidently memory plays tricks. This seemed a little equivocal, but understandable given the trauma of Hephzibah's departure. Kron later told me he had been very angry with his mother, that the divorce had been 'bloody awful, as they always are'.¹⁴ When Hephzibah moved to England with Richard Hauser, he made little effort to maintain contact for several years. Then, when he was in his early twenties he wrote his mother long, furious letters in which he accused her of thinking of herself and her work more than about her children. These letters apparently shocked and hurt Hephzibah, who replied that the kind of mothering he wanted was only appropriate to 'very young children, the very sick and the very old' and that once people became independent 'grownups need partners and friends to help them develop'.¹⁵ Over time Kron apparently accepted his mother's words and they became friends.

Marston's response was more complex. In the film he gave the impression that he had been a little boy about to start primary school when his mother walked out: simple arithmetic reveals that

¹⁴ Email communication Kron Nicholas to author, 12 April 2007

¹⁵ Hephzibah Menuhin to Kron Nicholas 25 May 1962

he was nine years old, though admittedly about to start at a new school. Leaving a nine-year-old under those circumstances is problematic, but probably less so than abandoning a five-year-old about to attend school for the first time.

Marston acknowledged that his statement had been wrong, but shrugged it off by saying that people could believe what they liked and that it was all ‘ancient history’ anyway. It was possible to conclude that on some level, Marston was still angry with his mother. I was later told by Curtis Levy and his mother Joan that Marston had been a withdrawn and distant child for a long time after his mother’s departure. However, though never as close to Hephzibah as Kron later became, Marston reconciled with his mother.¹⁶ A talented amateur cellist, he played with Hephzibah at a Musica Viva concert in Melbourne in the late 1970s; a happy experience for both of them. But he has never publicly contradicted the statement he made in the documentary.

Richard Hauser’s daughter Eva, now the distinguished feminist commentator, broadcaster and writer Eva Cox, was always very fond of Hephzibah. She has been publicly critical of her father – ‘my father was not a mentor, he only wanted acolytes, and he had to be adored’ is a typical comment. In interview I found her calm, forthcoming, helpful and, considering her reputation for forcefulness, surprisingly non-directive.

Her view was that Hephzibah had never learned a way of forging an independent identity. ‘Hephzibah did not have the confidence to make decisions for herself, on her own behalf,’ she said. ‘She had been trained to be subordinate from a very early

¹⁶ He even forgave her for calling him ‘Marston’; his preferred name is ‘Nick’.

age, and despite all that intelligence and brilliance she had never learned how to break away.¹⁷

When I sent Eva a copy of my biography for her to check details, and when she saw others' comments about Hephzibah and Richard and read the conclusions I had drawn about their relationship, she was very critical, springing to her father's defence. (I had evidently forgotten a basic fact about families: criticism is permitted only in the inner circle. Eva could lambast her father with impunity but an outsider was not to be permitted the same latitude.) She corrected some small errors in the manuscript and she also spent some time explaining in more detail her father's methods and beliefs. I assured her I would revisit her comments in the final draft. Being sure that Richard's other daughter Clara would have similar concerns, I took care to tell her about Eva's and my discussion.

Two weeks later, having read the manuscript, Clara replied: her response was abusive and almost hysterical. Though disconcerting, this was not entirely unexpected. Clara had always been ambivalent about the book; when interviewed in Beaufort, South Carolina, in 2003 her manner had been prickly, even brittle. She insisted that her childhood had been idyllic and her parents wonderful. At the same time she described a childhood where her parents neglected her in favour of their own projects, were careless about her education and later allowed her to be promiscuous. She was therefore also encouraging a less favourable view of her parents.

The evidence suggested that Clara liked the idea that a book was being written about her parents, but was reluctant to give

¹⁷ Conversation Eva Cox with the author 25 November 2006

much real help, partly because she was busy, but also because of her own unresolved feelings about her parents and upbringing. This latter hypothesis was supported by the strength of her reaction. Clearly Clara disliked all the people who had clamoured successfully for Hephzibah's time, insisted on her help, taken her away from her family and who 'tore her apart' without giving anything back.¹⁸ (A comment of Yaltah's is apposite here: she told her son Lionel Rolfe that, 'If Clara things she has problems because her parents love the world before their family, she should be glad she did not have parents who loved only their family.'¹⁹)

Such strongly held and diverse opinions given by Hephzibah's children would seem to support the saying that 'every child in a family has different parents', i.e., that different characteristics bring forth different reactions. In Hephzibah's biography, these different reactions have all, I believe, been taken into account. And although Kron and Marston Nicholas, Eva Cox and Clara Menuhin Hauser have all had difficulties with some aspects of the finished book, not always agreeing about the interpretation of various events or discussion of personalities, they have never at any stage sought to censor what I have written or to prevent publication.

¹⁸ I have joined this group, it seems.

¹⁹ Lionel Rolfe, op cit, page 146