

Yehudi Menuhin, Prodigy and Phenomenon.

Prodigies – individuals who possess exceptional abilities beyond those considered normal for their age or circumstances – are rare. Even rarer are those individuals whose abilities are exceptional enough to place them on a level of accomplishment that defies rational explanation. Their attainments are so phenomenal as to be freakish.

Yehudi Menuhin was a prodigy who became a musical phenomenon. Born in New York in 1916 to Jewish parents who had emigrated from Palestine, he was raised in San Francisco where he began to exhibit signs of uncanny ability from the age of two. By then he could serenade himself to sleep with his own lullaby sung in perfect pitch. After attending symphony concerts – first in a bassinet and then perched on his father's knee – he decided that he wanted to be a violinist. On his fourth birthday he asked for a violin and was given a toy version made of metal. In a fit of rage he threw the present to the ground and stamped on it.

After persuading his parents to buy him a proper instrument and having tuition from teachers who could not believe the child's capacity to play almost anything with a maturity expected of adults, he was ready to make his professional recital debut just one month short of his ninth birthday. Audiences listened in wonderment, critics struggled to comprehend what they were witnessing. Superlatives were inadequate. By the end of the next twelve months he had made his debut in New York and had played his first orchestral concert. On the eve of his departure for Europe in March 1926, an audience said to number 11,000 attended his performance of the Tchaikovsky Concerto in San Francisco.

The main purpose of the European visit was study, but he managed to astound audiences in Paris with his unique virtuosity. In what might be called "Yehudimania", women rushed towards the stage tearing bunches of violets from their breasts and flinging them at the lad's feet. Returning to America, he made his New York orchestral debut playing the Beethoven Concerto in a Carnegie Hall concert that has attained legendary status. In 1927, his fame matched that of Albert Einstein and Charles Lindberg. Yehudi's father, who had abandoned a teaching career to manage his son's career, was able to charge an astonishing fee for a single recital equivalent to \$US130,000 today.

Yehudi had two younger sisters both of whom were prodigies of the piano, if not quite phenomenons. Hephzibah made her debut aged eight in San Francisco. Yaltah, the youngest child was not afforded a similar opportunity although she was regarded by some observers as being more musical than either Hephzibah or Yehudi. An unwanted child, Yaltah had to make her own career in music with minimal assistance from her family.

Yehudi made his inaugural tour of America during the winter of 1928-29, aged twelve. He had already made his first recordings. During the tour he met wealthy banker Henry Goldman who enabled the boy to purchase a Stradivari violin, a gesture that was then worth in excess of \$US600,000 in present terms. (The same violin would be insured today for at least \$US10m).

Yehudi and the family returned to Europe in 1929 where he was due to make two momentous debuts. The Berlin debut was made more compelling because of the rise of the Nazis who were already making life difficult for Jews. The concerts in Berlin and in London provoked identical responses from the audience – police struggled to hold back crowds that threatened to overwhelm Yehudi.

The Menuhin family settled near Paris from where Yehudi made his annual winter tour of the United States. By 1935, the unstable political situation in Germany and across Europe prompted the Menuhin family to consider moving back to America.

Before making that decision final, Yehudi made his first round-the-world tour that included an extended visit to New Zealand and Australia where the demand for tickets meant that the planned four recitals in both Melbourne and Sydney had to be doubled in number. Yehudi was feted like a movie star and became the idol of a legion of teenage girls.

The Menuhin family went on to South Africa before ending their tour back in Europe. The political situation had not improved by 1936 and the family journeyed to California where a new family base was established.

In early 1938, the Menuhins sailed to Britain for what proved to be their last visit until the end of World War II. After a recital in the Albert Hall, Yehudi was introduced to a nineteen-year-old beauty from Melbourne, Nola Nicholas, who was then enjoying a grand tour of Europe in the company of her brother Lindsay. The Nicholas family fortune was derived from a pharmaceutical empire based on the production of a generic aspirin, better known in Australia as "Aspro".

Two months later, Nola became Mrs Menuhin while Lindsay was engaged to Hephzibah who later joined Lindsay on his property in the Western District of Victoria. Yaltah, just sixteen, was encouraged not to be left behind and married a man she did not love. Her first marriage lasted six weeks.

Nola soon found herself living under the same roof as her formidable in-laws. Yehudi, inexperienced in the ways of the world and ignorant of his duties as a husband was unable to bring himself to live apart from his parents. After four years, he eventually took his wife and young daughter to live in a new home outside the town of Los Gatos where he appeared to enjoy a brief period of domestic bliss.

Before America entered the war, he and Nola visited Australia in 1940 where their son was born. The attack on Pearl Harbour changed the speed and direction of Yehudi's career. He maintained his American tours, but augmented them with recitals for troops. He managed to talk his way on to a military flight that brought him to Britain in 1943. He gave concerts for munitions workers, in factories, in military hospitals and for various charities.

Yehudi then went to Hawaii where he played for the hundreds of wounded returning from the Pacific Front. He was sent to play for troops stationed on the remote Aleutian Islands off the coast of Alaska. Exhaustion and a neurological tremor in his bowing arm meant that his playing afterwards was often marred by lapses in intonation.

Yehudi met Diana Gould during another wartime visit to London in 1944. He was captivated by the ballet dancer. The affair had begun as the war was entering its final stages and heralded the end of Yehudi's marriage to Nola. Before returning to America, Yehudi managed to make his way close to the front line in Belgium to give concerts in Antwerp followed by a 'liberation' concert he organised for the people of Paris.

Yehudi was back in London in early 1945 before going to Germany to play for the survivors of the Holocaust then living as Displaced Persons in former concentration camps. He also played for the German public, a unilateral act of forgiveness that caused resentment among sections of the Jewish community in Europe and in America.

Yehudi invited himself to Russia in late 1945 where he received a hero's welcome. He was back in Europe during 1946 giving concerts and recitals in countries now under Soviet rule. By 1947, he was living a dual life, maintaining the pretence of a marriage to Nola while deepening his involvement with Diana. Nola wanted to avoid divorce for the sake of her two children. Diana was unwilling to persist with this arrangement.

Nola was eventually persuaded to divorce Yehudi who then took Diana on his concert tours in Europe. They were married in October 1947. After living briefly in California and after stays in Switzerland and in Italy, Yehudi and Diana settled in London where they were domiciled for the next fifty years.

An account of this period is contained in the second volume of *Yehudiana* published late 2010.