

MAX ROSTAL



*Bach · Beethoven · Biber
Brahms · Mozart · Paganini*

"A violinist must be acquainted with the life of the composer he is trying to interpret, and with the social background of his period. It is impossible for any instrumentalist to translate into sound all the emotions, thoughts and peculiarities of the composer if he is entirely ignorant of his life, his temperament, beliefs, struggles, social environment and so forth." - Max Rostal



Max Rostal was born on July 7, 1905 in Teschen (now Cieszyn) in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He received his first violin lessons at the age of five. Three years later the family moved to Vienna, where he studied with Arnold Rosé (1863-1946) and his assistant Franz Suchy. Rose was the eminent concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and leader of the famous Rosé Quartet for several decades. While still a student of Rosé, Rostal stood on countless stages of the Danube monarchy as a child prodigy. At the Hanukkah Evening of Jewish youth in Vienna, on December 4, 1918, he played Sarasate's Faust-Fantasie with Else Schwarz at the piano. In 1919 Rostal continued

his study with Carl Flesch in Berlin. Rostal described Berlin's overtaking of Vienna as the centre of culture: *"Once again reaching back in time a bit, I would like to return to the fabulous years between 1920 and 1930 in Berlin. What arose artistically in many areas in this decade is surely unique. In retrospect, the gathering and concentration of so many extraordinary artists seem almost unbelievable. What made Vienna a cultural centre before World War I transplanted itself to Berlin after the*

war. A similar situation arose shortly before, and mainly after, World War II: in every respect, Berlin was a heap of rubble, and so London took on the cultural importance that once Vienna and later Berlin had claimed for themselves". To be sure, Rostal understood his movement from Vienna to Berlin (and, later, to London) as pursuing the centre of art and culture without regard to nationality. But he also regarded relocating to Berlin as a logical pursuit of the cultural life that he felt had moved on from Vienna. Flesch's pedagogic method was unique. He gave each student a notebook in which specific instructions were written on how to practise any technical problems arising during the lesson. He gave general instructions about practising too, advising students to work in three stages: firstly, to approach the work in small sections; secondly, after some relaxation and breathing exercises, to play the work right through without stopping but mentally noting the places where there are problems; and thirdly, to work in immense detail on these places. He would guide his students to a balance of works, without specifying composers. He expected them to be sufficiently aware to make their own choices. The lessons were open to anyone who wanted to sit in, and Flesch's pupils quickly found out the order of scheduled lessons, so that they could hear the most interesting students. The number of listeners present was a measure of a student's success. "You were immediately part of a hierarchy. You knew, or found out very quickly, that if you were the 10 o'clock pupil, you were the lowest of the low, and you had to work your way up to the 10.45 slot; 12.15 was at the level of Josef Hassid or Ida Haendel", as his pupil Yfrah Neaman remembered. Four years with the master enabled him to make his debut as an adult musician on February 3, 1923 at Berlin's Singakademie with Waldemar Liachowsky (1874–1958) at the piano. In 1925 Rostal was awarded the Mendelssohn prize at the international

competition held in Berlin. Even in those early days, he was keenly interested in teaching and readily accepted an invitation to become the official assistant to Carl Flesch in Berlin. In 1926 he married the cellist Sela Trau (1898-1991) and returned with her to Vienna. Unfortunately a job there as orchestral musician or teacher was denied and he had to work as a private tutor. After working briefly as concertmaster in Oslo 1927-28, he was nominated to at the State Academy of Music in Berlin in 1929. As far as his official duties permitted, he continued to give regular concerts including duo recitals with George Szell, and he was able to undertake several tours. Berlin's café Ruscho became a favourite meeting place where tourists and emigrants could hear talented musicians play salon music. Other musicians soon turned up to hear them play as well. Piatigorsky was especially embarrassed when artists of his age such as cellist Emanuel Feuermann or violinist Max Rostal came to the café, sitting uncomfortably close—no doubt surprised that such a noted artist was without enough means to avoid such commonplace work. It was on one of those evenings that a performance of a Mendelssohn trio was attempted amidst the clangour of the clientele. After a few minutes of confusion, Piatigorsky stormed out of the café and did not return for two days. During the mid—1920s Piatigorsky, Karol Szepter and Rostal occasionally worked for the Tri-Ergon label. They recorded the usual trio fare, and as before, kept their names out of the venture, revealed only as the Tri-Ergon Trio or Instrumental Trio. They were young and needed money. But they didn't like to use their names, because the records were light classical music (Salonmusik). Very few discs of the Tri-Ergon Trio with the Szepter-Rostal-Piatigorsky assemblage were released. Rostal bitterly resented the Nazi Party's intervention in cultural affairs and early in 1934 found himself dismissed along with Flesch and many other distinguished musicians, including Schnabel,



Hindemith and Feuermann. As he had several friends in England, he came to London with a number of his pupils, determined to start afresh, and in time succeeded in establishing himself, though not without some difficulty. He found the British to be reserved at first, but eventually achieved enthusiastic acclaim by audiences and friends alike. Of the British audiences he was especially appreciative; he delighted in the faithfulness they showed to all good musicians. Meanwhile, in 1939 Flesch made the decision to go to Holland, which was then neutral, and recommended his students go to Rostal, whose teaching

skills had been recognised soon after his arrival in England. In time he played with all the leading symphony orchestras and did a great deal of broadcasting. During the Second World War, he regularly took part in the lunchtime concerts run by Myra Hess at the National Gallery in London, appearing quite often with the pianist Franz Osborn, with whom he gave sonata recitals for many years. In 1944 Rostal was appointed a professor at the Guildhall School of Music. Rostal has been described as "*a thinking violinist*" because he expected his students to look into the life and background of a composer before attempting an interpretation. Furthermore he insisted they study more than their own part of a concerto but the full score and not make do with only the piano reduction. He would also insist that his pupils use his fingerings and bowings and would allow no leeway. For this he was accused of "*cloning*" violinists, an accusation he strongly denied. In the music of his contemporaries, Rostal took the keenest interest, and he had the honour of performing many English works for the first time. These

included the concerto by Bernard Stevens, Benjamin Frankel's Sonata for violin, the Meditation and Lyric Interlude by Alan Bush, the Sonatina by Robin Orr, as well as that of Lennox Berkeley, and many other works. In his extensive repertoire the concertos of Moeran, Bax and Bartok figured prominently, and his name was always be associated with the remarkable concerto by the Soviet composer Khachaturian, of which he gave the first British performances in 1940. Rostal used to tell about his experience crossing the border from the USA into Canada at a remote part of the frontier. When the official saw his double violin case, he asked him how much the contents were worth. Rostal quoted a figure which made the man gasp. *"Where were they manufactured and by whom?" Rostal told him that they were made in Cremona, Italy by two makers, Antonio Stradivari and Guarneri del Gesu. "When were they made?" insisted the man. When he was told they were made in the eighteenth century, he was nonplussed and said he would have to call his boss. The 'boss' went through the same questioning but suddenly looked closely into Rostal's face and asked, "Why do you need two violins?" Without moving a muscle, Rostal replied, "I have just come from New York where I have been playing Bach's Concerto for Two Violins." The man threw up his hands in despair, "OK, go through!"*

In 1957 Rostal returned to Germany where he was appointed a professor in Cologne. Following his formal retirement in Germany, the tireless Rostal took on a professorship at the Berne Conservatorium where he continued to teach a regular violin class and gave annual summer courses and masterclasses. In 1973, together with Menuhin, Neaman, Nannie Jamieson and others, Rostal formed the European String Teachers' Association (ESTA) for the exchange of information on the technique and teaching of string playing. He taught with

unsurpassed enthusiasm and energy until his death on August 6, 1991 in Berne, Switzerland. Rostal's students include many distinguished violinists including Ulf Hoelscher, Edith Peinemann, the Amadeus Quartet and Igor Ozim, the latter continuing the Rostal tradition of combining high level artistry with outstanding pedagogical abilities. Rostal left a large legacy of editions and some writings. His edition of the Studies op. 35 by Dont in particular with their "preliminary exercises" are a model of analytic clarity and understanding. Editions of Beethoven Sonatas, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Mozart and Dvorak Concerti (Edition Schott) are valuable sources for fingerings and bowings even if one decides not to follow all his suggestions. Rostal's book on Beethoven's Sonatas for Piano and Violin is (together with Joseph Szigeti's book) an essential work to be consulted with much benefit by any violinist studying these works in earnest.

Notes by Michael Waiblinger, 2016

Beethoven-S. Mittwoch, 14. März, 8 U.:

II. Konzert — MAX

ROSTAL

Tartini, Emil Bohnke (Son. f. Viol. all. op. 12. Aus Verlangen), Pergament, Mozart-Kreisler, Sarasate, Paganini.

A. Fl.: Waldemar Liachowsky.

Karten 3000—500 M.

Singakademie. Sonnab., 3. Febr., 9 U.:

Konzert — Max

ROSTAL (Viol.)

Am Fl.: Waldemar Liachowsky,

Vivaldi, Emil Bohnke (Erstaufführung), Glasunoff, Reger, Dvorak-Kreisler, Paganini. | Kart. · 700 +50 M.

Early recitals in Berlin in 1923 with Waldemar Liachowsky as accompanist.

Arthur Grumiaux

Max Rostal

Tibor Varga



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