

Interview with Daniel Hope in the Synagogue on Rykestrasse in Berlin.

Gösta Courkamp: Your book: "Family Album: Following the Trail" features mostly Jewish musicians and for the most part with those you worked with, starting with Yehudi Menuhin... although you are not Jewish - is it a coincidence that you mention them, or....?

Daniel Hope: I find it difficult to define what is Jewish. When I talk about this with my many Jewish friends and they say: "Your mother is a Jew" - which is not altogether true, but she has an extensive Jewish background - yes, I'm Jewish as far as Jewish religion is concerned. It is not that important to me to belong to a certain group. I have a lot of empathy for the Jewish faith and the Jewish people. I would say also for Jewish music, for the way they express themselves through music on a very special, emotional level which, I think, is part of their culture.

It has always fascinated me, ever since I heard notes played on a violin by people like Yehudi Menuhin or heard a recording by Jasha Haifetz or David Oistrach. It just always inspired me and has given me a certain idea of a sound, which I am still today trying to go after.

Gösta Courkamp: Do you have to be educated in order to make good music?

Daniel Hope: That is a difficult question. I think music educates. That's why it is very difficult to ascertain. I think that - if you really keep your ears open and suck in the music, it has great educational value which you can't compare. Personally - I can only speak for myself - I simply love to take an interest in many different things. Things like literature, music, politics and science. For me, all that is very important, but I find it difficult to generalize.

Gösta Courkamp: You often play "Kaddish" by Ravel as an encore after your concert performances, as we just heard,

and we also heard Schulhoff as an encore and at the Echo Classic ceremony you.....

Daniel Hope: Schindler's List

Gösta Courkamp: played Schindler's List - do you want to convey something with this piece - a message?

Daniel Hope: I would say both. I perform this piece by Schulhoff because I love it and because I am convinced this music is magnificent. And I have many opportunities to play magnificent music. But it doesn't mean I just perform music by Jewish composers. That would be absurd. There are just some wonderful composers whose music I love to play. As far as these particular pieces, "Kaddish" by Ravel and Schulhoff are concerned; there is a special message behind them. Music by Erwin Schulhoff represents a musical world that has almost gone and which the Nazis tried to get rid of. I find it very important to perform this music as well as music that originated in Theresienstadt or any music from this period, this so called "entartete Musik" - I think we have a responsibility to perform that music nowadays, so it will not be forgotten. For me "Kaddish" by Ravel has a long history. This piece connects me very much with Yehudi Menuhin.

I performed this piece as an encore during his last concert, when he brought me back on stage again and asked me to play something in his presence. That's how this piece deeply connects me with him. There are, however, many other composers I like to play, also as encores, be it Bach or - there are just too many, yes, for us the musical world is so rich, especially for us violinists.

It depends a little on what piece was performed before and what is performed after the interval, I take that into account. With the encore I try to create a certain atmosphere and I won't play just any old piece. Schulhoff, on the other hand, was not in Theresienstadt but in another concentration camp. I choose this music because to me it is magnificent and not because it has a special meaning. If you are familiar with what happened to Schulhoff or with the fate of other composers who wrote music in Theresienstadt, of course you

look and listen in a different way. But for me this music is so great, it doesn't need any history. That is really why I play it.

Gösta Courkamp: The "Kaddish" is an arrangement by you. How does it differ from the piece that was performed by Menuhin?

Daniel Hope: Maurice Ravel has written a song for mezzo-soprano and piano - "Kaddish". It consisted of one of two Hebrew melodies. Maurice Ravel's friend, Lucien Gerban, made a transcription for Violin and piano. It is this piece Menuhin always played, accompanied by a piano. The piece is wonderful and is wonderfully transcribed by Gerban. But I wanted to get closer to the roots of the "Kaddish", back to the melancholy singing, the prayer. That's why I play solo. I just left out the piano music and made it into a solo violin piece in order to reproduce this melody of the singing. It doesn't mean I'm against what Ravel did, he is one of the greatest geniuses of all time, but I wanted to get closer to the origins of a Kaddish and I hope I have succeeded.

Gösta Courkamp: On a different subject: how did it make you feel to play for our film in the Konzerthaus? As you said, Berlin has something special - is this closing a circle?

Daniel Hope: I love to play in the Konzerthaus in Berlin because it is a place where, for a long time now, I have had wonderful musical experiences. And always when I am here - there are always stages in the world where one feels good - better or more at home. This Konzerthaus is very special to me. Working with Jan Müller-Wieland, my friend the composer, comes to mind, he wrote a violin concert for me; and us working so intensely together in that place. Or the first time I performed the Bartok violin concert with the Konzerthausorchester. That too was in this auditorium. Those are lasting memories for me and I think of them with great pleasure.

Gösta Courkamp: Mendelssohn lived just around the corner. Today we were in the cemetery and visited his grave. How did you experience that?

Daniel Hope: On the one hand, to be in Berlin today and to see the grave of Mendelssohn, that was a great inspiration for me, but on the other hand it made me feel rather sad to see such a great master in such a small grave, right in the middle of a residential area, and everybody's backyard so close to it - that I found somehow a little sad for him. But for me personally it was wonderful to be there and see it.

Gösta Courkamp: In his time these 'Lieder' by Mendelssohn were contemporary music and a completely new thing, revolutionary so to speak - Romanticism against Establishment. And they are still "wondrously beautiful" - but thematically, do they still have the same meaning today?

Daniel Hope: Those Lieder by Mendelssohn represent a time that, of course, is no longer here. But they have such a sensational phrasing, such beauty, form and structure and Mendelssohn, he just immerses himself in beautiful sound. He does it with such simplicity, and I so admire him for that. Specially this "Auf den Flügeln des Gesangs". You can safely say it was a 'hit' in those days, everybody knew this song, sang it, played it and made his own adaptation. And this music - for me there is nothing more beautiful than this. That is why I very much wanted to transcribe it and play it.

Gösta Courkamp: Are they also a musical challenge to world-class players like you and Sebastian Knauer?

Daniel Hope: Any piece by a composer like that is a musical challenge. To even try and come close to someone like Mendelssohn, Brahms or Schubert is a constant - yes, a battle. But we appreciate a battle like that very much.

Gösta Courkamp: During your conversation with Daniel Harding, he says that in this respect he is just a "recreating artist". Do you agree?

Daniel Hope: I must say that I do agree with Daniel Harding up to a certain point. I don't find what we do really new. We have a chance to reproduce magnificent music. As far as that goes we have not created, but at the same time we do have to somehow contrive an interpretation, bring it to life and that has to be created. It means that the two are very close together. We can't be compared to composers that would be absolutely wrong, because what someone like Mendelssohn or Brahms has created is so different from what we do.

We are an art medium between a mostly dead composer, his message and the public that wants to hear his, or their, music and keep on enjoying it. We are therefore in a very lucky position to be able to transfer this music. We do, however, have to work hard at it our whole life, just as if it were a creation.

Gösta Courkamp: And do you discover something new every time, even after having played it a hundred times?

Daniel Hope: One discovers something new every day, in every note, in every bar. This is great but also horrible, because one never feels like "yes, I did it", but you say "today I was rather pleased - tomorrow I might not be happy at all, because I have found a completely new way of playing or hearing, or a new way to convey this music." And when, for example, you look at someone like Menachem Pressler, the pianist of the Beaux Arts Trio who is 84 years old, and then you see and understand why music keeps you young, because this man works this way all the time. And it keeps him really young!

About the violin

Gösta Courkamp: How is your relationship with your violin?

Daniel Hope: One has a very close relationship with his instrument. I have played this violin since I was fifteen years old. I bought it of Yehudi Menuhin. It was built in Naples by Gagliano, Gennaro Gagliano. And I carry this violin around with me almost every day, all over the world since my fifteenth. One interacts every day with this instrument. In the first place one has to learn how to handle it. It is very difficult to handle a strange instrument. Of course you can play the instrument and make some music, but that doesn't mean much. You first have to learn how to handle it, much like you learn how to deal with a person. And that could take a long time. In my case it took at least one and a half years before I knew how to steer it. And this long journey teaches you to discover its limitations, how far you can go: how loudly and how softly can you play, and what's in between. And how does the violin react in different circumstances - What if it's very warm or very cold or very humid? Because I travel a lot I am always in very different surroundings and different temperatures. So one always has to be careful to treat the violin in the right way.