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# ISAAC STERN

MY FIRST 79 YEARS

written with Chaim Potok



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"Two things are necessary for a life in music: a clear idea of what you want to be, and the arrogance to pursue it." —Isaac Stern

For sixty-four years, Isaac Stern has been revered not only for his profound contributions as a great violinist, but for his political activism, his gusto for life, and his inspiration and generosity in sharing knowledge with younger musicians. "I am, for better or worse, a musical activist," the great virtuoso confesses. Indeed, there is no more beloved musician in the classical world, and few have been as crucial to the realm of the arts than Isaac Stern.

Brought to America from Russia while still an infant, Stern grew up in San Francisco and was quickly recognized for his extraordinary talent. He began performing publicly when he was very young, and was soon touring across the country and around the world. His fame escalated when he led the fight to save Carnegie Hall in 1962, and again when he was the subject of the Academy Award-winning documentary film "From Mao to Mozart." In this book, he recalls his great friendships and collaborations with such colleagues as Pablo Casals, Leonard Bernstein, and Igor Stravinsky; his background as an ardent supporter of Israel; and his unique insight into music and the violin.

Told with Stern's incomparable spirit and guided by acclaimed author Chaim Potok, *My First 79 Years* is a revealing autobiography, a candid portrait of a distinguished artist and humanitarian who has lived a lifetime of music.

"His words have moved politicians and heads of state as eloquently as his fiddle playing has moved lovers of the violin." —CHICAGO TRIBUNE

"A significant chapter in the history of high culture in America."  
—WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD

ISAAC STERN lives with his wife Linda in Connecticut.

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charmed and delighted, and the whole affair did nothing to hurt Japanese-American relations. That was the first time any major foreign visiting artist had done something like that.

In certain ways our trip to Japan might almost have been called a diplomatic tour, as we were always regarded as semiofficial ambassadors of American culture. We tried to behave accordingly, by displaying our sincere interest in the Japanese and their traditions and cultural development, and at the same time emphasizing that Americans, too, possess dignity and cultural maturity—something that others were not always willing to grant us. Press conferences took place in every city, and in addition to the usual questions, there were many pointed and searching enough to allow me the chance to talk and promote American standards and beliefs.

I wanted very much to play in Hiroshima. The concert hall there had a capacity of one thousand, but when Zakin and I played, they managed somehow to find room for an audience of 1,600. The recital was followed by various speeches, and I learned that there was a group in Hiroshima seeking to link the horror of the nuclear bombing to what had happened to the Jews in the Holocaust.

Later, traveling through the city, we saw the epicenter of the bombing and the efforts under way to rebuild the city. There was a bustling, a sense of buoyancy, about the people. But I learned later that all the money raised to connect the Hiroshima Memorial to the Holocaust had been placed in escrow because a considerable political campaign had been directed against that linkage. In the end, the effort did not go through, and the money was distributed to various charitable institutions throughout Japan.

A few days before we left, the American Cultural Center director arranged a roundtable discussion with a few of the best musicians in Tokyo and reporters from the three leading music magazines in the country. The entire two-hour discussion was taken down verbatim, to be published in the news and music magazines. As the final major effort in our private foreign-policy program, Zakin and I decided to set aside a portion of the earnings from our last three concerts in Tokyo to establish a fund for young Japanese musicians to go abroad for studies.

I should add that we also played several times in American armed-forces hospitals around Japan, twice making special trips by airplane and once by helicopter. The night before we left Japan for India, General Christenberry, chief of staff to General Hall, gave us a dinner party, where he presented us with gold medallions for playing in the hospitals.

During the six weeks we were in Japan, we were broadcast five times and on television twice, and we hardly had a waking hour when we weren't traveling, playing, or being officially entertained. In forty days, we played twenty-three public concerts and at seven armed-forces hospitals, and we traveled the length and breadth of the three major islands.

The remarkable Japanese affection for Western music—I have my own interpretation of that phenomenon. My first indication of the direction of Japanese musical listening habits came on visits to local bars in some of the smaller cities outside Tokyo. For example, in Sapporo, I went out to a small bar for a nightcap with our Japanese guides and companions, and coming out of the loudspeaker was not jazz or traditional Japanese music or light music, but—to my astonishment—Beethoven quartets, Bach Brandenburg concerti, and Chopin piano music. Upon returning to Tokyo later in the tour, I was invited to one of the early performances of *Fiddler on the Roof*, which was being premiered in Tokyo by a completely Japanese cast. I went as a guest of the actor who was playing the leading role of Tevye. Everyone on the stage was dressed in absolutely correct costumes. The play, of course, was presented in Japanese, with simultaneous translation into English. It lasted a little longer than the performances I had seen before—I was at the opening night in New York, when Zero Mostel played the lead, as well as at two other performances with Mostel onstage. Each time I saw it, I wept. And there I was, seeing it in Tokyo, in Japanese, and I looked around at the audience and saw half the women in the traditional kimono and half in Western dress, and practically everyone there was crying, too, including not a few men.

Somewhat mystified by that reaction, I went backstage afterward to meet the actor who had been my host. I entered his dressing room, and the first thing he said to me was "How could Americans write so



Japanese a play?" That took me by surprise. Then I began to think about the central theme of *Fiddler*: the idea of tradition. There is the moment when an anguished Tevye is confronted by his daughter, who is leaving with a young man of whom he disapproves. Tevye refuses to recognize them. His daughter puts her hand out to him and urges, "Papa, say goodbye." He reaches for her, but just before their hands touch, he abruptly turns away and starts singing, "Tradition." Well, that was precisely what was happening in Japan at that time: the breaking of age-old traditions by General MacArthur and the American occupation forces. The play was a kind of release mechanism, a catharsis, for what the country was still experiencing eight years after the war: the diminution of traditional Japanese culture.

There is yet another way of understanding the Japanese relation to Western music—especially classical music. As far as I know, Japan has no pure music as such, in the sense that a quartet or a symphony is pure music. The identical rules of address that applied to class interaction in Japan—superior, equal, inferior—applied to traditional Japanese music, as well as to poetry. Except for temple music, all other musical expression was accompaniment to either dance, song, or the spoken word. It was all program music of one kind or another. When Western music began to penetrate their culture—to some small extent before the war, and in a major way afterward—for the first time, anyone, regardless of class, station, or economic position, could relate to a mood or a feeling and experience it personally. Western music gave each Japanese the possibility of being a person, a self; of being able to feel as a separate individual despite what the corporation one worked for required, despite what the rules of etiquette dictated. You could laugh, cry, sing, sit quietly, read, think—while you listened to the music. Western music seemed to offer the Japanese people a release that perhaps they could not find in their own traditional forms of music.

That may account for the fact that in Tokyo today there are ten symphony orchestras and, I think, more than seventeen concert halls. It may also explain why so many young Japanese attend concerts.

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FROM JAPAN we flew on to India, arriving in Calcutta at the end of October.

The Indian authorities had made it clear to us that they could not afford our usual fee, and we had agreed to play if they took care of our travel expenses and gave whatever money the concerts earned to a recognized charity. As it turned out, the charity they chose was the Prime Minister's Fund. And one of the rewards for the concert in New Delhi was the opportunity to meet and spend time with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

I'll never forget that first week of November 1953. When we arrived at the prime minister's residence, we were met at the door by his daughter, Indira Gandhi, who informed us that her father would be delayed because the Congress was still in session. She was an attractive young woman, dressed in the traditional sari and very gracious. As I entered the house, she handed me a letter from Kashmir that was addressed to me. It turned out to be a fan letter from someone who had discovered that I would be in the home of the prime minister. The writer requested an autograph. In Nehru's residence!

We were all sitting there politely having tea when Nehru entered, dead tired. He was very much like the pictures we had seen of him, not as tall as one might have expected, but with that handsome, if ascetic, face. Nothing could have interested him less at that moment than the presence of four itinerant people in his home. There ensued a rather uncomfortable half hour. Nehru looked weary, bored, and we were somewhat intimidated by his presence. The air was filled with lengthy silences broken by moments of forced conversation, which was going nowhere until I suddenly said to him, "Mr. Prime Minister, I've traveled a great deal in the world, but I've never seen conditions as terrible and as dreadfully difficult as those we saw in Bombay."

He suddenly came to life, his eyes opened wide, and he began to lecture us about what it meant to have the refugees from the war with Pakistan flooding into India. "Do you know how many refugees we have from Pakistan in one month?" he asked. I said no. He said, "Ten million. That's right. Ten million." The figure was unfathomable to me. That number of refugees would destroy the infrastructure of any city; in the instance of a city with so marginal an infrastructure as