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September 23, 2001

Violinist Isaac Stern Dies at 81; Led Efforts to Save Carnegie Hall

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"Simply for reasons of sentiment and piety, it would be wanton to destroy it," he said of Carnegie Hall at the time. "Think of Tchaikovsky conducting there at the opening, in 1891! Think of Paderewski and Chaliapin! But there are practical reasons, too, for not destroying it. The young people of this country are demanding more and more music and producing more and more first-rate musicians. How dare we take away from them, the music, and the audiences of the future, one of the great music rooms of the world?"

Mr. Stern's efforts led to legislation that allowed the New York City to buy the hall for \$5 million, and when the Carnegie Hall Corporation was established to administer it, Mr. Stern was elected its first president, a position he held until his death..

At the time of the Carnegie Hall battle, Mr. Stern was 40 years old and at the height of his powers. Harold C. Schonberg, reviewing one of his performances in The New York Times in 1962 put his artistry in perspective.

"Mr. Stern's playing," Mr. Schonberg wrote, "is a perfect illustration of the fact that a big tone can be delicately and even vigorously colored without recourse to a heavy vibrato. There are also a few other features of his playing that differ from the masters of yore. His rhythm is unflagging and his tempos on the fast side. He is not a musician



Associated Press

Isaac Stern in his studio, 1997.



Steve J. Sherman

In 1996, Isaac Stern, left, performed at Carnegie Hall with the pianist Emanuel Ax and the cellist Yo-Yo Ma.



Reuters

Isaac Stern at his 80th birthday celebration at

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who dawdles over a phrase; there are no intermissions, no time out during a piece for a meditative dissertation on the beauties of a specific passage. And by holding to a clean musical line, Mr. Stern makes his interpretations that much more beautiful."

Carnegie Hall last year.

During the 1960's, Mr. Stern made chamber music a central component of his repertory. The Istomin-Stern-Rose Trio made its debut in Israel in 1961 and its first New York performances the following year. The group made classic recordings of the centerpieces of the trio repertory, including all the Beethoven, Schubert and Mendelssohn Trios. After Rose died in 1984, Mr. Stern formed a new trio with Mr. Ax and Mr. Ma, with the violinist Jaime Laredo sometimes rounding out the ensemble.

Mr. Stern's other collaborations include appearances with Benny Goodman and his sextet in 1963, frequent performances and recordings with Mr. Rampal, and occasional collaborations, some also recorded, with the pianists Daniel Barenboim, Peter Serkin, Joseph Kalichstein and Mr. Bronfman; the violinists David Oistrakh, Midori, Mr. Lin, Mr. Zukerman and Mr. Perlman; the violist Michael Tree and the cellists Pablo Casals, Sharon Robinson, Matt Haimovitz and Peter Wiley.

On Teaching and Music-Making

He was also an engaging teacher, and in recent years he gave a regular series of master classes and workshops for young chamber ensembles at Carnegie Hall.

"You cannot force someone to think as you do, or to feel as you do," he said of his teaching in 1995. "But you can teach them to think a little better, to think a little more. To listen a little more critically. To listen to what they're really doing, not what they think they're doing. To have more respect for the necessary lengthy internal and external collusion between the performer and the composer."

Mr. Stern was also more devoted to contemporary works than many soloists of his stature. He included the Bartok, Prokofiev, Berg and Barber concertos in his repertory long before they were commonly played. He never commissioned new works, explaining that he did not want to be obligated to play the pieces if they turned out badly, and that he was more interested in whether he liked a work than in giving its first performance. Still, several works were commissioned by orchestras and other organizations on his behalf, including concertos by Krzysztof Penderecki, Henri Dutilleux, George Rochberg and Peter Maxwell Davies.

Mr. Stern gave the world premieres of those works, as well as Mr. Bernstein's "Serenade" and William Schuman's Violin Concerto, and he recorded all but the Schuman. He also gave the American premieres of the Bartok Concerto No. 1 and the Hindemith Concerto, and made the first recordings of both. And he collaborated with Copland and Stravinsky on recordings of their violin works.

There were times, in the last decades of his career, when Mr. Stern's concert performances were less consistently polished

than they had been, and suggested that he was devoting greater attention to his other preoccupations running Carnegie Hall, campaigning for increased government support for the arts and education, and seeking out new talent to lend his support to than to practicing. When critics addressed these questions, Mr. Stern responded testily. "Whether I'm capable of the same uncaring, unworried pyrotechnics of 30 years ago doesn't make any difference," he said. "What has happened is that my music-making has deepened, and that cannot be touched."

Nevertheless, he cut back substantially on his performances in the 1990's, and when he did perform, it was more often than not in chamber music rather than as a soloist. He published an autobiography, "My First 79 Years," written with the novelist Chaim Potok, in 1999, and in September 2000, Carnegie Hall honored him with a weekend-long celebration of his 80th birthday that included an exhibition of materials from his personal archives, screenings of documentaries about him, a day of chamber music and educational concerts, and a birthday concert at which more than a dozen of his colleagues and protgs performed.

Mr. Stern received many honors and awards, including the first Albert Schweitzer Award (1974), the Kennedy Center Honors Award (1984), a Lifetime Achievement Grammy (1987) and an Emmy for Outstanding Individual Classical Music Performance (1987). He received the Commander's Cross of the Order of the Dannebrog, from Denmark (1985), the Wolf Prize, from Israel (1987) and was made a Commandeur of the French Legion d'Honneur (1990).

"I have been very fortunate in 60 years of performance," he said in 1995, "to have learned what it means to be an eternal student, an eternal optimist because you hope the next time will always be a little better and eternally in love with music. Also, as I said to a young player the other day, you have no idea of what you don't know. Now it's time that you begin to learn. And you should get up every morning and say thank God, thank the Lord, thank whomever you want, thank you, thank you, for making me a musician."

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