

Yehudi Menuhin —

the Artist and the Jew

By FELIX GROSS

SEVEN years ago Yehudi Menuhin, then a boy of 12 years, gave his first New York concert in the famous Carnegie Hall. We — the music critics of the New York Press — did not expect much from this concert. There had been a spate of infant prodigies of late, dazzling the public with brilliant virtuosity, the outcome of a few years' hard practice. These poor children, exploited by unscrupulous parents and managers, quickly returned to obscurity. Only in a few cases had such children grown up and continued to charm. But, on leaving this first appearance of Menuhin, my colleagues all agreed with me that a new star had appeared in the sky of violinists. To the illustrious names of Kreisler and Heifetz must now be added a third — that of Menuhin.

This was long before Hitler's fanaticism raised the question of racial characteristics. Yet when we of the Press gathered after the concert in the lounge of the Ambassador Hotel, we were struck by the fact that these three great violinists were all Jews. And discussing the most promising artists in other spheres of musical activity, we found that Jews — as conductors, pianists and singers — were pre-eminent. We tried to discover what qualities in the Jew made him such a perfect reproducer of music. After a long and fiery exchange of views, we came to the conclusion that technique, or virtuosity, is something which can be acquired by anybody who has the necessary ability. How easy it is to create the virtuoso who thrills his audience only by his manual dexterity! But from an artist; a true artist, we demand more. We demand that identification of the artist with the intentions, feelings and emotions of the composer, which, translated through his own personality, creates in the course of reproduction a new work of art.

The Jew has been forced by his destiny for the last thousand years to adapt himself to the different economic conditions of the countries in which he has had to live. Driven from one land another, he has had to identify himself with various cultures. Thence has come about his cultural cosmopolitanism. He has become habituated to adapting himself, while men of other nations were always surrounded by the same cultural backgrounds. The Jew learnt how to be a good Jew, and yet possess a cosmopolitan mind.

When, for instance, Yehudi Menuhin plays Bach, the most German of German composers, he plays him without any free alteration or exaggeration, exactly as the composer intended. In spite of this, there is in his playing, besides the highest possible technical perfection, something which produces a new impression: he puts into his playing the Jewish soul, Jewish understanding. He does much more than play Bach or Beethoven or Brahms: he interprets them. By his

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genius, he puts his audience into touch with the *spirit* of the composer. His personality is so great that, while he keeps himself in the background and the composition in the foreground, it nevertheless transfigures his playing. This is the greatness not only of Menuhin, but of the Jewish contribution to art — the offering of incense to genius, worship of greatness and the service of beauty.

AND he was a boy, not yet twelve. And a healthy boy, too, no pallid, nervous infant prodigy. A fair haired, blue eyed boy, an outstanding contradiction of the stupid "Nordic" theories of Herr Hitler's racial theorists, chubby-faced, unconcerned. There was the intellect of a man, but the child's pleasure in a tune, the competent perfection of a virtuoso, and the

tender emotion of a romantic dreamer.

In my long journalistic experience, I cannot remember ever having seen the Press of the entire world so united in the praise of one artist as they were of this blessed lad. And Yehudi Menuhin has fulfilled his promise. He has kept to the ideal of being an intermediary between his public and great music, and not a virtuoso.

He has not been satisfied to restrict himself to a few well-known items according to the usual rule. He is always enlarging his repertoire. He takes this part of his art very seriously, studying the composers' original manuscripts in the museums where they are preserved.

Menuhin has received a general private education which can compare with that of any Oxford graduate. His father sees that he retires for five or six months of each year to the vicinity of Paris, where the Menuhins own a picturesque castle. There he receives tuition from Professors of the Sorbonne in history, economics, literature and languages. In addition he studies — showing he is a true artist, striving always to reach a higher level — with his old master, Adolf Busch.

To-day Menuhin is nineteen. He is no more the chubby-faced boy, but his beauty, now the beauty of an intellectual young man, is still striking. When he stands on the platform, with his £15,000 Stradivarius under his chin, his appearance alone is impressive.

And he has character. Last year he was invited — no, implored — to play in Berlin and the German provincial towns, at a high, even for Yehudi Menuhin, a very high fee, by Professor Furtwaengler, who mentioned that approval of the Nazi Government had been obtained. Menuhin did not even trouble to answer this invitation. He has always prided himself on his Jewishness, knowing the historic values that form that Jewishness. He is a good Jew, no less than a great artist. And civilised people everywhere respect him all the more because of this.