

# Martin Ormandy

## The Remarkable Nonagenarian

By Steven Richman

I have been acquainted with the cellist Martin Ormandy as a colleague for some time. But three or four years ago, through my wife Katsuko Esaki, a violinist with the New York Chamber Symphony and the Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center, we became friends and dinner partners. She and Martin perform together in both ensembles. After a delightful evening of Italian food near Lincoln Center, Martin, at a surprisingly late hour, invited us up to his apartment. We were treated to refreshments, stories, memorabilia and a tantalizing look at his superlative collection of personally photographed musical photos. Martin knew them all: Toscanini, Rachmaninoff, Bartók, Gershwin, Heifetz, Piatigorsky, Mengerberg — the list is virtually endless. For those who don't know or haven't figured out, he is the brother of renowned conductor Eugene Ormandy, and a walking history of 20th-century musical life.

Martin came to the United States from his native Hungary in 1920. In 1929, he joined the New York Philharmonic and remained a member for 40 years. He is still active in New York's freelance music scene and performs regularly with a

number of ensembles at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. Martin Ormandy is certainly the most venerable performing orchestral musician in New York, probably the U.S., perhaps even the world.

When I suggested that I interview him for an article, he replied with customary modesty, "No, no, I would rather remain in the background." But when I invited him and his charming daughter Dolores (who studied harp with



Salzedo at the Curtis Institute and is now in the art field) for dinner and mentioned that we would informally chat, he agreed.

Martin Ormandy's father's great love was music, and he begged Martin's grandfather to allow him to study the violin, but grandpa, an official in the police department, discouraged papa. However, Martin's father, who became a dentist, went to many concerts and produced two remarkable sons who went on to prodigious musical careers. Martin began attending the Academy of Music in Budapest at age 10. In our conversations, he stressed the high quality of musical life and string playing in Budapest. He had wished to study with the great Popper, who unfortunately died before this was possible. At the time, Martin was principal cellist at both the conservatory and with the opera company in Budapest.

His brother Eugene was a violin prodigy who began playing at age two and entered the Academy at age seven. With absolute pitch and an infallible memory, Eugene was a soloist as a young boy. Their father also encouraged them to study medicine because he thought it prudent to have a second profession in case something should happen to their hands. Fortunately for the music world, an alternative profession was not necessary.

As a child, Martin remembers the family went away for the summer for eight weeks near the Danube. Father's dictum was "during winter, hard work; during summer, rest." There were no instruments or books in the summer but during the rest of the year there was not only musical study but Gymnasium as well, where the boys studied eight years of Latin and six years of German. At 15, Martin already had a 28-year-old student. Later, even after playing with the New York Philharmonic for five years, he got special leave from the Lewisohn Stadium summer concerts to go to Paris to study with the famous Alexanian for 10 weeks, a lesson everyday. Casals was the preeminent teacher but Alexanian's way of thinking was analytical which was important to the young cellist.

Martin recalls that when he first came to New York, both he and his brother played at the Capitol Theater, his brother as soloist and later as conductor. At that time, the theater had an

excellent symphony orchestra, including members of the Philharmonic, and featured top-name artists. An interesting tidbit of historical information, especially apropos the current interest in early cinema as a unique art form, brother Eugene, under another name, conducted the film score to *Birth of a Nation*. He also made many records as music director of the Minneapolis Symphony. In addition, of course, he led innumerable recordings as the longtime music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Having played in the New York Philharmonic during its golden age with every important conductor, soloist and many great composers of the 20th century, Martin is a fount of priceless anecdotes and impressions. On Toscanini: he "was never mad at the musicians unless he saw them relax or if they were talking or not paying attention." With Toscanini at the Philharmonic: "Someone put rags in the tuba before the big solo in *Pictures at an Exhibition*!" On Stravinsky: "Robert Craft rehearsed everything. Stravinsky or someone else simplified the notation of the end of the 'Sacre du Printemps' for performance." Beecham: "Once I was walking by his dressing room before a concert. He lost his collar button so I lent him mine." Casals "was a tremendous musician; he played with more color than Piatigorsky." About Gershwin: "I played with him at Lewisohn Stadium. He gave everyone cigars." Heifetz: "My brother was friends with him — they played ping pong together." And "I saw Mascagni conduct in Italy — he made a big mistake." Bartók "was very quiet and aloof. He brought his lunch to rehearsal." Sibelius "gave cigars to his guests. If you put it in your pocket, he would take it back, saying, 'You must smoke it here!'"

As part of our evening's entertainment after dinner, I played Martin some historic concert videos, curious to get his reactions. First off, we watched Mischa Elman playing the Dvorák *Humoresque*. Martin opined that "his intonation and interpretation were not always the best." But his reaction to Efrem Zimbalist and Harold Bauer performing Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata was very enthusiastic. Martin also mentioned a fact I had not previously heard: that pianist Bauer was also a fine violinist. He expressed great admiration for

Heifetz and Milstein as well.

When I showed him the laserdisc of the New York Philharmonic playing the Tannhäuser Overture in 1926 under assistant conductor Henry Hadley, he was able to point out individual members of the orchestra by name, including solo oboist Bruno Labate, principal horn Bruno Jaenicke ("the horn section were like a family — they actually were brothers-in-law"), concertmaster Guidi and first cellist Schulz. There are probably few around today who could accomplish this feat.

Martin Ormandy is truly a remarkable man. He loves chamber as well as orchestral music and has played in such prestigious groups as the NY Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble under Mitropoulos, the Varga Cello Quartet and a string quartet with the Philharmonic's late concertmaster, John Corigliano. He makes friends wherever he goes all over the world. "When the Philharmonic went on tour, I would walk by myself down the streets to meet people, the only way you really get to know a country." One can see this in New York as well. Walking near Lincoln Center, everyone, it seems, says, "Hello Martin!" He is a gentleman of the old school, gracious, courtly and courteous. He is generous, too, about the younger generation of players: "They have beautiful tone, marvelous instruments, technique, wonderful musicians — very good."

And his sense of humor is remarkably intact after so many years in such a tough business. When I told him that my wife and I met in a symphony orchestra backing up British rock star Rick Wakeman and only had to play 20 minutes for the performances, he asked, "Did you get paid overtime?" In response to my request for him to sign a program from Berlin of the Toscanini/NY Philharmonic tour in 1930 on which he played, Martin said, "I'll sign anything but a blank check!"

He is a devoted musician still, preparing at home and diligently marking his music during rehearsal. After our five-hour visit, past 11 o'clock in the evening, he told us, "I must go home now to practice...two rehearsals tomorrow!" One can only admire and cherish the man and the musician. We're lucky to have you with us, Martin. □