



Isaac Stern plays Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto, Op. 35 and Bartók: Violin Concerto No. 2, Sz. 112

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Fanfare (Jerry Dubins - 2014.02.12)

This release is of particular interest to me, for as one who was born, raised, and lived most of my life in San Francisco, I probably saw and heard Isaac Stern perform live in concert and recital more times than any other single artist. That, of course, was because of Stern's close ties to the city in which he grew up and studied violin under Louis Persinger, one-time teacher of Menuhin, and with Naoum Blinder, the San Francisco Symphony's then concertmaster. In 1936, Stern made his debut with the orchestra under the baton of Pierre Monteux, and though he would soon leave San Francisco to pursue a career as one of the world's most recognized and sought-after violin virtuosos, he returned often to the city that had nurtured him to appear with the orchestra and in recital with his long-time accompanist, Alexander Zakin.

In 1945, Stern signed a recording contract with Columbia, an association that lasted uninterrupted for 40 years, one of the longest such artist/record company alliances in history. And during those years, Stern joined forces with famous conductors, orchestras, and chamber musicians to record the entire mainstream violin concerto and chamber music repertoire, and beyond, often more than once. If you grew up in the 1950s and began collecting records in junior high and high school, as I did, the chances are you grew up with Isaac Stern spinning on your turntables. He was Columbia's intended rival to RCA's Heifetz, and I readily admit that I learned much of the violin literature from Stern's recordings before I discovered those by other celebrated artists.

These versions of the Tchaikovsky and Bartók concertos – let it be stipulated that we are dealing with Bartók's Violin Concerto No. 2, the more famous one, so it needn't be repeated on each subsequent reference – are not only previously unreleased, they're claimed to be quite rare, as Stern was seldom recorded live. A 1959 Brahms Concerto with Monteux and the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood was captured live and released by West Hill Radio Archives, which, I presume is still available since it was reviewed by Richard Kaplan as recently as 35:3. But that was the Brahms, not the Tchaikovsky or the Bartók and while Stern revisited the Tchaikovsky on a number of occasions with different conductors and orchestras, his track record with the Bartók, as far as I know, is limited to his one and only other version, a commercial studio recording he made two years after this one, in 1958, with Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic. That, of course, makes this Audite release all the more valuable.

Of the Tchaikovsky – not counting this live performance – there are four others I'm aware of: (1) a 1949 recording with Alexander Hilsberg and the Philadelphia Orchestra; (2) a 1958 recording with the same orchestra under Eugene Ormandy, released in both mono (ML 5379) and stereo (MS 6062) and originally coupled with the Mendelssohn Concerto, but reissued a number of times in various sets and

singles, including one coupled with the Sibelius Concerto; (3) a 1973 recording with Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic; and (4) the violinist's last, a 1978 recording with Rostropovich and the National Symphony Orchestra.

Let me deal with the Bartók first, since there's only one other Stern version to compare it to, the aforementioned studio recording with Bernstein. Before proceeding, however, I need to voice a disclaimer. I've had Stern's Bartók with Bernstein on LP for longer than I can remember, but I haven't dusted it off and listened to it in ages because, frankly, I never liked it. The reason goes back to my opening paragraph, where I reminisce about seeing and hearing Stern live on numerous occasions in San Francisco, though never in the Bartók.

It was around that same time, however, that another San Francisco-bred violinist, who also returned regularly to the city to [...]