
Albert Einstein: The Violinist



*By Peregrine White**

To the press of his time Albert Einstein was two parts renowned scientist, one jigger pacifist and Zionist fundraiser, and a dash amateur musician. These proportions persisted during 1979, the 100th anniversary of his birth, as writers in all media jostled each other as they recounted his achievements. Relativity tended to hog the show. Relatively little space was given to Einstein the musician.

This report, an attempt to redress the balance, is based on conversations with several people who used to play chamber music with him.

Einstein was given violin lessons at an early age. By his own testimony he first became really interested in music when he was 13 and made the acquaintance of the Mozart sonatas. When Einstein was an adult, a well-worn fiddle case accompanied him wherever he went.

In 1921, when Einstein arrived in the United States for the first time, reporters saw a kindly man with undisciplined hair, somewhat wayward black trousers—a man of no particular style, fiddle case in hand. He looked for all the world like a professional musician on tour.

Einstein spent many years of his life in Berlin, deeply involved in the scientific and cultural life there. He hobnobbed with musical greats like Fritz Kreisler and the philosopher-artist Artur Schnabel. He used to play violin sonatas with Max Planck, the father of quantum theory.

At the time, Schnabel was the greatest living performer of piano works of Beethoven. Mrs. Schnabel was a singer. In fact, the young couple toured Europe shortly after their marriage, giving song recitals which one critic described as “a piano recital with contralto obligato.”

The conversations of Einstein and Schnabel, whether on music or philosophy, must have been fascinating. One thinks of “Beethoven the Creator.” It was the creativity of



(Photo courtesy of the Southold Historical Society and the Family of Reginald Donahue.)

Beethoven that troubled Einstein, according to one man who used to make music with him. Einstein felt that the very creativeness of Beethoven tended to interpose itself between Einstein and the music.

By contrast, Einstein relished Mozart, noting to a friend that it was as if the great Wolfgang Amadeus did not “create” his beautifully clear music at all, but simply discovered it already made. This perspective

parallels, remarkably, Einstein's views on the ultimate simplicity of nature and its explanation and statement via essentially simple mathematical expressions.

If one could retrace the paths of Einstein's musical travels and talk with his former playing companions, one would meet a long list of fascinating people. But he died in 1955, and only the youngest or most long-lived of his chamber music compatriots are still available for comment.

One of the most interesting of them is Nicholas Harsanyi, who recently retired as conductor of the Piedmont Chamber Orchestra based at the North Carolina School of the Arts, Winston-Salem. Dr. Harsanyi left his native Hungary in 1938 and came to this country to teach at the Westminster Choir School at Princeton, New Jersey. This was five years after Einstein had left Europe for good to work in the United States at the Institute of Advanced Study, also at Princeton.

Before Harsanyi left Budapest, he was fêted at a dinner where he met a young woman who, like him, was shortly coming to this country. It turned out that she, too, was moving to Princeton, where she was to marry John von Neumann, famed mathematician who invented game theory and played a crucial role in the wartime development of the electronic computer.

It followed naturally that once in Princeton, Harsanyi was invited to the von Neumanns' for a birthday party for Einstein. Harsanyi, a violinist, provided some music for the occasion, and was instantly enlisted by Einstein for the chamber music sessions scheduled religiously for Wednesday nights at his house on Mercer Street. He would go to extremes with his calendar to keep that night free for music, according to Harsanyi.

Normally the third member of the group was Valentine Bargmann, a Princeton University scientist specializing in mathematical physics. Dr. Bargmann, an able pianist, thought at one time of becoming a professional musician.

Dr. Harsanyi, a dynamic conductor, made himself felt around Princeton as Music Director and Conductor of the Princeton Chamber Orchestra and of the Trenton and Madison Symphonies and of the Bach Aria Group.

At one point he asked Einstein to serve as vice-president of the Princeton Symphony. Einstein at first demurred, saying "What would happen if the president died?" Later, Einstein agreed and served in the job from 1952 until his death.

What kind of fiddler was Einstein? Many appraisals are available.

Harsanyi described Einstein's tone as "accurate but not sensuous." He confirms the fact that Einstein knew the musical literature, at least up to the present century.

"Einstein would never have listened to Bartok," Harsanyi said.

Dr. Bargmann made this comment: "Most amateurs scrape, play out of tune," he said. "Einstein did not; he had a good technique and an opulent tone."

Famed pianist Artur Schnabel once played with Einstein. Asked later how the great scientist played, Schnabel told friends that he was "relatively good."

At the Mercer Street sessions the musical fare often as not involved Baroque trios for two violins with the piano as continuo. Harsanyi says he occasionally suggested to Einstein that they get a cello also; but Einstein said "No, let's keep it simple."

Depending upon the mood, Einstein and Bargmann would finish off the evening with Mozart and Beethoven sonatas.

Harsanyi recalls how people backstage after a concert by Schnabel or some other old friend of Einstein "would part like the waters of the Red Sea" when Einstein turned up.

Of Harsanyi himself, the rigorous, impeccable conductor, Einstein used to say "You are a crocodile. . . you mesmerize your players!"

Then he would add: "What a remarkable city, your town of Budapest! Think of all the great musicians who have come from it!" He would tick off the names of Eugene Ormandy, Fritz Reiner, George Szell, Antal Dorati, Georg Solti, and of course, Harsanyi.

Another of Einstein's chamber music friends was David Rothman, now 84, who owns a department store in Southold, Long Island, not too far from Einstein's old summer cottage at Nassau Point. An avid musical amateur, Mr. Rothman sheltered the British musical greats Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears during several years of World War II when, as pacifists, they were sitting it out in this country.

In 1939, Rothman and Einstein became acquainted when Einstein came into the store to buy a pair of sandals. Somehow or other the common interest in music was uncovered. Einstein became a participant in the musical evenings held at David Rothman's house.

On what must have been one of many marvelous evenings of music, Rothman and Einstein and others

had a session of quartets, with an entr'acte of Schubert songs sung by Peter Pears, with Benjamin Britten playing the accompaniments.

Mr. Rothman recalls that Einstein felt that of all music geniuses, Haydn was the absolute tops. In fact, Einstein would never let an evening of quartets break up without doing some Haydn.

"Haydn," he would say, "was a musical genius who could write a symphony in an afternoon and we are still playing it."

Amateur quartet players, like scientists, form an international brotherhood. The venue is often as not the living room in a modest house on a quiet street. Maybe the stairs to the second floor come down into the room. The best lighting is concentrated around the quartet, leaving the rest of the room in relative shadow. The nonplaying spouse may well be busy in the kitchen, fixing sandwiches or setting up a few drinks. Children of the house, frequently music lovers like their elders, sit with wan, pale faces as the evening lengthens.

From his Princeton years Nicholas Harsanyi recalls with particular savor a dinner for six that he and his wife, a professional singer, attended at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Frank E. Taplin. (Mr. Taplin, a noted American patron of the arts, once served as Chairman of the Board of the Marlboro School of Music and is currently President and Chief Executive Officer of the Metropolitan Opera Association.) After dinner the host, a good pianist, accompanied Mrs. Harsanyi in some Schubert songs.

The other two members of the party, seated at opposite ends of the table, were Svetlana Alliluyeva,—Joseph Stalin's daughter,—and Albert Einstein's stepdaughter, Margot.

As the songs unfolded, Harsanyi relates that he was fascinated to observe that Svetlana was silently mouthing the German texts. It intrigued him that the daughter of Joseph Stalin was conversant with German romantic poetry.

Einstein's passion for music ran deep. His step son-in-law Dimitri Marianoff notes that Einstein remembered chiefly from the short period he spent in Prague "the solemn sounds of the organ in Catholic cathedrals, the chorales in Protestant churches, the mournful Jewish melodies, the resonant Hussite hymns, folk music, and the works of Czech, Russian, and German composers."

In 1929, Einstein visited Belgium and was invited to the royal palace to play chamber music with Queen

Elizabeth. The Queen, formerly Princess Elizabeth of Bavaria, was an ardent violinist and supporter of the arts, including the famed Brussels Competition, which she originated.

When Einstein went to Leiden, in the Netherlands, it was often to confer with his lifelong scientific friend, Paul Ehrenfest, Vienna-born physicist and skilled pianist. Einstein and Ehrenfest spent many hours making music together.

At Oxford, where Einstein resided for a short time, he was taken up by the celebrated musical family named Deneke, whose household frequently sheltered professional quartets, composers, and performers at all levels.

Einstein accumulated musical friendships everywhere. He was an intimate friend of Adolph Busch and of Busch's son-in-law, Rudolph Serkin. He was a close friend of Robert Casadesus and his wife, Gaby, both super-pianists living in Princeton.

On one of the rare occasions in which Einstein played in public, it was a benefit recital in Princeton for the American Friends Service Committee for Refugee Children in England. Einstein was accompanied by Gaby Casadesus.

On December 17, 1955, following Einstein's death, Nicholas Harsanyi conducted the Princeton Symphony in a memorial concert. Robert Casadesus was soloist in the Coronation Concerto ("Homage to a King") of Mozart, written in 1790. The orchestra played the Christmas Concerto of Corelli and the Sonatina (funeral music) from the *Actus Tragicus*, Cantata No. 106, by Bach.

One could perhaps describe Einstein as a professional musician's amateur musician. He was the intellectual match of the pros. As a violinist, he practiced regularly, was a careful, reasonably talented player, with the speed of mind essential to ensemble playing.

As a dedicated quartet player, Einstein presents no contradictions and is completely understandable. He is seen as the denizen of dimly lit music rooms of the world where enthusiastic friends and fiddlers bend together over their instruments and sleepy children yawn, and towards the end of a long evening someone says "Let's play some Haydn and then call it a night."

* **Peregrine White** (deceased) held two degrees from Harvard University. He was music reviewer for the Durham (NC) Morning Herald for 16 years. This paper was originally published in the Miami International (Feb. 1980) and was reprinted in The American Music Teacher (Feb./March 1982, pp. 24 and 26).