

GEORGES ENESCO

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Georges Enesco objected to being called a violin virtuoso. He considered them to be convicts condemned to hard labour and this may be why he did not compose a violin concerto. Yet he loved the violin at times, and, latterly, enjoyed teaching it.

With Carl Flesch and Jacques Thibaud, Enesco was a student of Martin Marsick at the Paris Conservatoire in the 1890s. Enesco was probably the best violinist of the three and he was also a pianist, conductor and composer. He wanted to be known as a composer and he did not relish violin playing too often. He was guest conductor with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in 1937 and so well received that he was guest conductor for the next two seasons. His skill at the piano made Artur Rubinstein somewhat envious and he had a phenomenal memory. He was a brilliant teacher and Ginette Neveu was one of his pupils as was Yehudi Menuhin who started well but was certainly not a great violinist although he did much for music and the education of young musicians. Other Enesco pupils were Ivry Gitlis and Arthur Grumiaux.



Enesco wrote three symphonies, a chamber symphony, a sinfonia concertante for cello and orchestra, an opera, Oedipus, three violin sonatas, two string quartets and other chamber music but he is only really known for his two Rumanian Rhapsodies. He was a genuinely modest man and did not regard his early compositions with much favour. Of all his music abilities he preferred conducting.

Enesco was born in a Rumanian village, Liveni-Virnav (now renamed Georges Enesco), in 1881 and was taught the violin by a gypsy fiddler. He showed early talent and was taken to Iasi Conservatory to study with Eduard Caudella who had been a pupil of Vieuxtemps. He gave his first public recital at the age of seven. From there, Enesco went on to the Vienna Conservatory from 1888–1894 studying all aspects of music. He lodged with one of his teachers Joseph Hellmesberger II and he was encouraged to play in the orchestra. By 1894 he was an accomplished performer and pursued further studies in Paris. He did not seem to enjoy his lessons with Marsick. He preferred his theory lessons with Gedlage, Massenet and Fauré. Failing a violin competition in 1898, he resolved to give up the instrument. He had to play a Viotti concerto (number 29) which he found tedious but it was Saint-Saëns who persuaded him to persevere and the following year Enesco played Saint-Saëns Violin Concerto no. 3, the piece chosen for the competition, and he won. His orchestral work, Poème Roumain, had been premiered in 1898 by the Cologne Orchestra and with success. In 1900 he was a soloist with that orchestra and Thibaud premiered Enesco's Violin Sonata no 2 with the composer at the piano.

His modesty was shown in that he did not want to be a showman. He was happier giving sonata recitals and he founded a piano trio in 1902 and a string quartet in 1904 and, at a time when Brahms was not popular in France, he gave an all-Brahms programme in Paris. Although living in Paris he kept his ties with Rumania and the Queen appointed him her Court violinist. In 1912 he established a prize for Rumanian composers.

He made impressive debuts in Berlin in 1902, in London in 1903 and in Russia in 1910, the year in which he performed all the Beethoven violin sonatas with Edouard Risler in Paris. During the Great War he was in Rumania working in a hospital but in the years 1915–16 he gave a series of recitals and illustrated talks in Bucharest on the history of the violin.

His first visit to America was in 1923 as violinist, composer (he conducted one of his symphonies) and

conductor with the Philadelphia Orchestra. He also played in San Francisco to the delight of seven-year-old Yehudi Menuhin and three years later the ten-year-old went to Paris to study with him.

For some years Enesco was the sonata partner of Alfred Cortot.

Enesco was an unusual violinist and not adverse to improvisation. He refused to be tied down with academia. He felt that baroque ornamentation was both a blight and a curse and that the composers should have written out everything that they wanted to be played and not be lazy. He could be fiery in the gypsy manner with his black hair flying all over the place and giving an air of spontaneity.

Nowhere was he more popular than in America.

During the Second World War, Enesco was in Rumania. In Bucharest in 1941 he took part in all the string quartets of Beethoven. In Bucharest in 1945 he conducted the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto with David Oistrakh as soloist. He also conducted the Rumanian premiere of Shostakovich's Symphony no. 7 (The Leningrad). He had a happy association with Oistrakh playing the Bach Double Concerto with him in Moscow in 1946 when he also conducted symphonies by Beethoven and Tchaikovsky and accompanied Oistrakh in a violin sonata by Grieg. The Soviet Union loved him but he objected to Communism and refused to return.

When he heard of the tragic death of Ginette Neveu he wept openly and was inconsolable for weeks. He said, "She was the greatest of us all!" He was not being polite or sympathetic. He meant it!

"She was the greatest of us all!"

His last trip to America was in 1949. He conducted in Washington and was soloist in New York and held master courses. A farewell concert took place on 21 January 1950 in which he played the Bach Double Concert with Menuhin and accompanied him at the piano in one of his violin sonatas and conducted his Rumanian Rhapsody, Opus 11.

Ill-health had crept up upon him. He was now bent and small and he lived in Paris in one room, narrow and white-washed with one luxury, a piano. The world showed no interest in him. In 1954 he was asked to teach at Chigi Academy in Siena but he so weak he had to spend all day in bed to take the early evening courses. Sadly he became paralysed on the left side and a cripple. He died in Paris on 4 May, 1955. He was 74.

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