

GINETTE NEVEU

by Dr David C F Wright
(1965)

WARNING Strict copyright exists on this article and all of Dr Wright's articles

There is an old Negro spiritual which has the line, "There ain't no justice in the world."

Ginette Neveu would have been the greatest female violinist of all time had she not be killed in an air crash, along with her brother, on 28 October 1949 at the age of thirty.



No one who saw or heard her perform will ever forget her. She had unequalled concentration, an intensity in her playing that was always under control, her technique was impeccable and always unobtrusive. She was not a show-off but had that determination which made her excel at her playing.

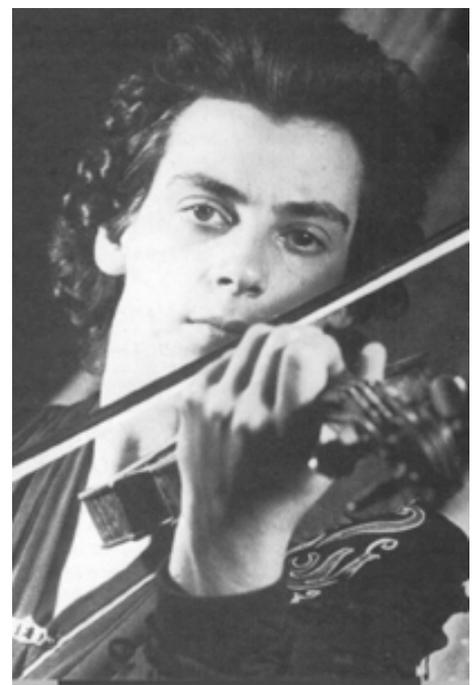
On stage she had presence. She was slim, dark-haired, dark-eyed and had a stance like that of a conqueror, undefeated. She made demands upon herself that could be called unreasonable. Her style was assertive but warm. To her, music was not a job, a money-earner or a profession. It was a mission.

Her playing and recording of the Sibelius Concerto will stand the test of time and of all time and what makes this more notable is that when she played it in France, the French were adverse to Sibelius. She once said that the French did not want to know Sibelius.

Ginette was born in Paris on 11 August 1919 and began to learn the violin from the age of five. She was the grandniece of the composer Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937) Her first teacher was her mother. When she was seven, Ginette played the Mendelssohn's E minor Concerto with the Colonne Orchestra under Gabriel Pierne. She had some lessons with Line Talluel. In 1929, she entered the Paris Conservatoire where her teacher was Jules Boucherit, a man noted for his elegance. Nine months later, at the age of eleven, she won first prize in a competition thus equalling Wieniawski and Kreisler, but it must also be noted that she was the first female violinist to achieve such an accomplishment. She won further prizes and after the success of her fourth prize in Vienna, Carl Flesch offered her a scholarship in Berlin.

She had completed her studies with George Enescu and Nadia Boulanger.

Flesch was born in Hungary in 1873 and at the age of ten went to Vienna joining the conservatory class of Jakob Grun. At 17, Flesch went to study in Paris as did a fellow pupil, Fritz Kreisler. Flesch played in the Lamoreux Orchestra when the conductor was an avid fan of Wagner. Flesch specialized for a while in the unaccompanied works of Bach and the first concerto of Paganini. He accepted a post in Bucharest which he held for five years and then, 1908 accepted a professorship in Amsterdam. He was fortunate to work with the Concertgebouw Orchestra under Wilhelm Mengelberg and he added more concertos to his bow from Corelli to the superlative concerto by Max Reger.



Flesch settled in Berlin soon afterwards and was horrified at the poor standard of violinists emerging from the Hochschule and set about a quest to improve technique. He made his debut in New York in 1913. It has been said that he was not the greatest violinist but a superior musician.

He had many famous pupils and when the Nazis came to power he settled in London in 1934. He devoted most of his time to tutor manuals dealing with fingering, bowing, intonation, vibrato and other aspects of technique which were not popular with everyone. He was a connoisseur of violins and bows but a stern teacher as Max Rostal has told me. But his violin school was a force to be reckoned with. His students included Szymon Goldberg, Bronislaw Gimpel, Roman Totenberg, Henryk Szeryng and Ida Haendel.

Neveu was with Flesch for four months and his analytical approach suited her. She was an intellectual player not an emotional one.

In 1935 Flesch entered her for the Wieniawski Competition in Warsaw and she won and she beat David Oistrakh, already an established virtuoso thus deserving earning the accolade that she was far better violinist and musician than Oistrakh. She was only fifteen. Other competitors whom she beat were Henri Temianka and Ida Haendel. The required pieces by Wieniawski were not her strongest performances but a Bach solo sonata and Ravel's Tzigane were. She became an ambassador for French music.



Her New York debut in 1937 was not a success largely due to the choice of programme, the Bach Chaconne and the Richard Strauss Sonata. She gave concerts in Germany, Poland and the Soviet Union as well as the USA and Canada.

She made her London debut in 1945 to play the Brahms concerto for the BBC. Her conductor was Roger Desormiere. With her brother, she toured post-war Europe extensively and appeared at the Prague Spring International Festival. She also performed in Australia and South America.

On 26 March 1946 at Studio 3, Abbey Road, London she recorded Ravel's Tzigane with her brother along with Rodinov's transcription of Chopin's posthumous Nocturne in C sharp minor. On 12 August 1946 at the same studio she recorded Kreisler's transcription of Falla's Danse Espagnole from La Vida Breve and the following day Heifetz's transcription of Dinici's Hora Staccato. In Studio 1 on the 16th and 18th August she recorded the Brahms Violin Concerto with the Philharmonia under Issay Dobrowen.

The Gramophone of April 1948 reviewed the recording of the Brahms and said the soloist has remarkable power and the purity of her production is fascinating and in the finale there is delectable solo work indeed with glorious fine bow-detail and the violinist's technique shines triumphant. In her performance of the Suk's pieces her swift variety of style and exquisite light bravura is commended. Her performance of Ravel's Tzigane was described as awe-inspiring.

Her London debut in 1946 filled the Albert Hall and was a resounding triumph. On 21 November 1946 at Studio 1, Abbey Road she recorded the Sibelius Violin Concerto with the Philharmonia under Walter Susskind. There was a tight schedule to record this work. Two single sessions in the course of one day were allocated. The time proved not enough and Neveu's chin and neck were bleeding from such a long and arduous spell of playing.

She returned to American in 1947 playing the Brahms Concerto in New York and in Boston which were massive successes. America welcomed her again in 1948. In 1949 she appeared with the Halle orchestra under Sir John Barbirolli in the Beethoven and Sibelius Violin Concertos. She was set to tour America in 1949 and was on her way from Paris to the States when the plane crashed off the Azores in mid-Atlantic into

the Algarvia mountain having tried to land twice in dense fog.

The plane was an Air France Constellation air liner with 48 occupants on board. One occupant was the former French world champion middle-weight boxing champion Marcel Cerdan. Another was 39 year old Ernest Lowenstein who had been divorced in Reno a month earlier and it was thought that he was returning to New York to seek a reconciliation with his ex-wife. All forty eight passengers were killed.

Some have reported that when her body was found on the mountain she was clutching her Stradivarius.

This story is almost certainly apocryphal since the plane was burned out and there were no survivors.



During the return of the bodies to France, Neveu's coffin was confused with that of another victim, Amelie Ringler. The funeral for Ringler took place before the error was discovered. On 28 November, Neveu's brother-in-law identified her remains in the coffin disinterred from the graveyard in Bantzenheim in Alsace in north-eastern France.

A week earlier Ginette and her pianist brother, Jean-Paul, had given a farewell concert at Salle Pleyel in Paris.

Her recording of pieces by Ravel was posthumously awarded a Grand Prix du Disque in 1950.

Within days of her death, Barbirolli dedicated a performance of Verdi's Requiem to "this fiery young spirit, in whose frame quivered the very essence of musical beauty and nobility."

Barbirolli, apart from being a poor conductor, was arrogant in the Elgar mould. He claimed that he discovered Neveu and made her famous. He made the same ridiculous claim about Jacqueline DuPre.

On her death the French violinist, Jacques Thibaud said she was the high priestess of music. Pablo Casals said her playing was one of the greatest revelations of music with perfection, balance, artistic taste, fire and abandon which filled all her playing with richness.

The conductor, Eugene Ormandy, said that she was the greatest woman violinist ever, and one of the greatest interpreters of the violin of our time.

Her recordings of the Sibelius and Brahms concertos will never, never be equalled let alone surpassed. It is curious that the dedicatee of the Sibelius Concerto, Franz von Vecsey died young at the age of 42.

Whenever I listen to her, I am both amazed and saddened. The tears come. Such a magnificent player lost for ever.

Indeed, there ain't no justice in this world.

COPYRIGHT David C F Wright 1968. This article or any part of it, however small, must not be used, copied, downloaded, stored in any system including any mechanical system without the prior written consent of the author. Failure to comply is illegal being theft and will render the offender (s) or their representatives liable to action at law. However, the author may willingly give the permission upon written application.