

## JANOS STARKER

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For personal reasons I have always loved the cello and taken an interest in cellists. I have no hesitation in saying that although there have been many great cellists in the last one hundred years no one is better than Janos Starker and I will explain that later.

He was born in Budapest on 5 July 1924 to a father, Sandor, who was a tailor and whose antecedents were Polish and a mother, Margit, who came from the Ukraine. They were both Jewish. Janos had two brothers who became violinists, hence Janos took up the cello.

He was a child prodigy making his first public appearance at the age of six. He entered the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest and studied with Adolf Schiffer. By the time he was eight he was teaching the cello to younger children. Kodaly, Bartok and Dohanyi were on the faculty at the Academy.

By the age of fourteen Starker made his first professional debut and at three hours notice playing the Dvorak as the appointed soloist was unable to play

The war came and both his brothers were executed by the Nazis. Janos spent three month in a Nazi internment camp.

After the war, Starker became the principal cellist of both the Budapest Opera and the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra but he left Hungary in 1946 and stayed for a while in Vienna. In the Geneva Cello Competition of October 11946 his student Eva Janzer beat him!

He attended a concert given by the ever wayward Yehudi Menuhin which made him physically ill. He heard the very poor technique of this violinist and considered his own and spent a year studying it and wrote a book about cello playing. He regained his confidence after a year of self -criticism and hard work.

He moved to Paris where he made his first recording of the Kodaly Cello Sonata Op 8 the most demanding work in the cello repertoire which lesser cellists cannot play. For this recording he was awarded the Grand Prix de Disque.

He emigrated to the USA in 1948 to be the principal cellist in the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. He moved to New York in 1949 as principal cellist in the Metropolitan Opera under the great Fritz Reiner. Here he recorded the Bach solo cello suites which were sensational performances and some claimed that the recordings were altered electronically.



In 1952, he became principal cellist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Fritz Reiner who was its musical director.

Being a perfectionist there were performers with whom he did not agree. He did not like the conductors Eugene Ormandy and loathed Herbert von Karajan who was a poor conductor, conceited and as despot.

*(see article on Karajan)*

He was kind about Jacqueline DuPre but admitted that she was not a good cellist spending too much time on energy and not on music. A great cellist can play the Kodaly but she was totally unequal to it.

Starker married twice to Eva Uranyi which ended in divorce and then to Gabrielle Starker-Saxe.

He was a heavy smoker, loved Scotch and enjoyed life. He once walked out of a performance of the Elgar Cello Concerto because he was not allowed to smoke before he went on stage.

In a private conversation Starker said that he did not like the Elgar as it was all stops and starts and badly written for the cello which it is. He said it would be better to play in without any strings on the cello but he was a fair and honest man saying that this concerto was admired by the British. Many cellists have said that the work is poorly written for the cello.

His playing was accurate, intense and devoid of the rich over-romanticism of Rostropovich and others. He was humble in his playing and never a show off or show man. He hated excessive vibrato believing it could be a cover up for poor intonation. His style was smooth and effortless.

In 1958, he moved to Bloomington, Indiana and taught at the Indiana University Jacobs School where he was a professor of music. He gave recitals and master classes with his partner Shigeo Noriki. He had many students who have made successful careers for themselves.

He had a bald head and menacing eyebrows which coupled with his strong approach to teaching made him somewhat ferocious.

NOTE: This was written in 1975 and sadly it has been reproduced without my permission.

Janos starker died on 28 April 2013 at a hospice in Bloomington. He was 88. As someone has said, "No greater cellist has ever lived!".

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