

# Fiddler on the hoof

## Interview

by Helena de Bertodano

For years, Diana Menuhin held the fort while her maestro husband roamed the world — a world which, at nearly 80, he still hopes to 'leave a better place'



Whatever you wish. I believe that every branch of every tree is inhabited by a spirit." His wife, a former ballerina who has encouraged his transformation from violinist to world figure, calls him the Bodhisattva, Hindu messenger of the gods. "He enjoys living on Cloud Nine," she explains. "I try to haul him down occasionally but he sees far away where other people stop being able to focus."

Before I can answer, she is off again. "You cannot be expected to be ordinary..." she utters this word as though it were a bad smell "...if you shoot to the top at the age of seven, playing an enormously difficult concerto that most adults find beyond them."

Maybe she is right. The world does not expect Sir Yehudi — who made his debut as a violinist playing Lalo's *Symphonic Espagnole* at seven — to be average. But he himself seems to wish otherwise. In a telling passage in his autobiography, he describes the children at his music school who, for all their musical brilliance, are, well, ordinary. "It vindicates my life and proves me to have been normal all along."

Sir Yehudi acknowledges that he has not been an exemplary father to his four children. Krov and Zamira, by his first marriage, and Gerard and Jeremy, by Diana. In an extended version of his autobiography *Unfinished Journey* first published by Methuen, he volunteers that he saw less of his children than anyone not sentenced to life imprisonment.

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"You're absolutely right," he says. "It's so much easier to help other people's children than your own — you receive only gratitude and joy; whereas helping your own is always a duel. I'm afraid Diana was both mother and father to them. Maybe I should have had fewer concerts. But whether it would have suited my temperament is another thing. Also, I had actual financial responsibilities which were inescapable — I am not a rich man."

Lady Menuhin, three years his senior, placated the children during her husband's long absences by explaining how unusual he was. "I would say 'Do you want a father who puts on a bowler hat and leaves for the office and comes back with the same hat and reads the evening newspaper?' Or do you want this extraordinary man? They've been awfully good about it, and Yehudi has been a very good, very kind father — in his own vaguely unfocused way."

I ask Zamira if she minded

that her father was not around as she grew up. "Of course I minded," she replies, "and I made sure that I married someone very different. But I treasure my father and I always knew that he could not be ordinary. He is a very positive, optimistic person who doesn't let little things get in the way."

When I was asked on *Desert Island Discs* for my choice of book and luxury, I unhesitatingly chose a guide to the firmament and a telescope. Then, in effect, I would have two books, the sky-atlas and the sky, and the telescope would enormously increase my range. It would also allow me to spot a distant fishing-boat, which I would summon to my rescue by smoke-signals, but I did not tell Sue Lawley this.

replied, pointing to a spot some 2,000 feet above our heads on the slopes of Annapurna. My second "experience" with a comet was with the most famous of them all — Halley's. In 1986, when it was due to reappear after 76 years, I was in Florida, and was told that the best view of it over the ocean would be from Daytona Beach. I rose from my hotel bed at 5am and



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whereas if we sit in the darker area I can focus inwards." He is a difficult man to interview. Not, I think, intentionally. But he approaches each subject with such thoroughness that, if left to his own devices, it would take him a week to get to the point. He is very keen to relate every detail of the opening celebrations for his 80th birthday — actually on April 22 — to be held by the Prince of Wales at Buckingham Palace the night before, including listing a large chunk of the 350 people present.

By three, he was demanding a violin and says, in retrospect, he knew instinctively that "to play was to be". Nowadays he plays rarely, devoting more time to conducting. He believes that he has changed as a musician. "When I hear recordings of myself as a child, there is obviously a really searing, burning passion in the playing, which over the years has become more philosophical. But I have never become detached from my music."

crowd gathered outside the concert hall to glimpse him, his father told him it was for a football match nearby. Nevertheless, Yehudi became, as has been ever since, the pivot around which the lives of others revolve.

He smiles often as he talks, using his tiny, slightly tremulous hands to explain himself. He has a complete assurance in what he says — particularly when he speaks about the power of music, which he believes can change the course of history.

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where taught at home, under the control of their parents. "A leitmotiv of my history has been the happy accident which demands from me no more energetic act of will than compliance." He prefers to work within a female framework: his office is run by a team of women, while his wife and his mother have guided his life. "I want to be surrounded by women I can be fond of and dedicated to."

The only time he found himself completely thrown off course was during his first marriage to Nola, an Australian with whom he became desperately unhappy. Having not been allowed to cross the road alone until he was 18, he became drunk with his sudden independence, and proposed virtually on meeting her. "It was almost the first independent act I made. It would have been far better, if I had read an affair and called it a day. The extraordinary thing about my life is that it's been lived the wrong way round — I was born old and I've become younger."

People are sometimes sceptical about meeting him because of his integrity and selflessness. But he really does radiate an almost beatific air, thrown into relief by the hard realism of his wife, Ian Stoutzker, who runs Sir Yehudi's foundation, Live Music Now.

He is the only man I know of whom I can say without a doubt that he wants to leave the world a better place. "Sir Yehudi himself takes pains to dispense his boiler-plate 'I caused my first wife a lot of pain' — I can assure you that I have been as guilty as other people of sins of both omission and commission. I even wrote terrible letters to my own parents at one time."

Yoga and a careful diet keep him youthful, he says. He certainly moves with great agility, bounding up the stairs of his four-storey house while his wife takes the lift. Yet people seem surprised when they hear that Sir Yehudi is "only 80". This is partly because his long career spans most people's lives. But it also has to do with the sense of timelessness associated with his name.

I ask how he would like to be remembered in 100 years' time. "I don't think they'll remember me at all," he says, exploiting his wife's temporary absence to talk himself down again. "I have left no works — no masterpiece behind. I really do not live for posterity — I hope I have been of some use, that's all."

# Star-struck by a comet, after all these years

the Pleiades, thinking that the stars were the only objects simultaneously visible to my loved one in Dumfries. But I had never seen a comet.

hitherto, I have had two chances. In 1973 there was a comet called Kohoutek, which had been advertised as the most brilliant celestial spectacle of the 20th century, and at the moment of its approach, I was walking down a gorge in the Himalayas with a *Time-Life* photographer called Terry Spencer. For the first time in weeks the day-time sky was clear except for small puffs of cloud that might have been fired there by anti-aircraft guns.



Time of My Life

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looked east. Nothing to be seen. Halley was drowned by the city lights. Not to have seen a comet is like never having seen the sea. In the early part of this week, thinking it my last chance, I have watched the skies over Kent for a glimpse of Hyakutake cradled in the handle of the Plough. The clouds never parted.

Hyakutake was like a lovely woman permanently veiled. Then, on Wednesday night, the veil lifted, and in the neighbourhood of Cassiopeia, I saw a dimly luminous object, soft and out of focus, too large and spongy to be a star; a snowball in the sky. The good news is that in mid-April it will be brighter and perhaps sport a more convincing tail.

hensible. I know that it obeys the immutable laws of gravity, but it is whimsical, reasonable that an object with a nucleus little larger than the county of Rutland should hurtle beyond the orbit of Neptune in an ellipse shaped like a gigantic hairpin, and return to graze the sun.

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