

## Nathan Milstein – Adrian Boult

The two legendary musicians who collaborate in this exceptional 1968 Royal Festival Hall concert might seem to come from different worlds. I was present on the night (if memory serves me after almost 40 years, I also saw a delayed telecast of the Beethoven Concerto) and I can recall what a contrast the immensely tall and slim Adrian Boult made with the stocky Nathan Milstein. Yet the music-making was sympathetic and all of a piece – not so surprising when you peer behind the superficial façade of each artist to consider the essence of his character. Both men came from the mercantile class and acquired an aristocratic musical poise through habit rather than upbringing. Each was a natural classicist, hating any pretence of ‘show’. Each was also deeply passionate, a child of the late romantic era; and although Boult, as a conductor, perforce had the wider repertoire, the ironic Russian and the reticent Englishman liked much the same range of music.

Adrian Boult (1889–1983) took very little time to become the most comprehensively skilled British conductor of his era. Born in Chester and brought up in the Liverpool area, he showed musical talent early and attended his first concert at five and a half. In 1901, aged 12, he was sent to Westminster School in London. He had a season ticket for Henry Wood’s Saturday and Sunday concerts, spent his pocket money on miniature scores and was bowled over by the conducting of Arthur Nikisch and Fritz Steinbach, Brahms’s favourite interpreter, who brought the Meiningen Court Orchestra to London. He heard Hans Richter conduct Wagner’s *Ring* at Covent Garden and the Joachim Quartet play Beethoven at St James’s

Hall. In 1908 he went up to Oxford, where the busy organist and conductor Hugh Allen, director of the Oxford Bach Choir and an amateur orchestra, often called on the young man to deputise with the baton. In 1912–13 Boult spent a year in Leipzig, attending the Conservatory and watching Nikisch rehearse the Gewandhaus Orchestra. Back in England, he gave his first concert with a professional orchestra in his home town, West Kirby, on 27 February 1914. Unfit for military service in the First World War, he did useful things on the home front and steadily advanced in his profession. Already friendly with Elgar, he got to know Holst and Vaughan Williams: in 1918 he premièred the former’s suite *The Planets* and the revised version of the latter’s *Second Symphony*. When the war ended, Hugh Allen summoned him to take the first class for professional conductors ever organised in Britain, at the Royal College of Music. He conducted the City of Birmingham Orchestra (1924–30) and then spent 20 years in charge of the new BBC Symphony Orchestra, making a vast contribution to British music. For his last three decades he was mainly connected with the London Philharmonic (he was chief conductor in 1951–57), although he worked with all the other British orchestras and made guest appearances worldwide.

From studying Nikisch’s conducting, Boult evolved his own technique, utilising a similarly long stick and requiring the players to watch the tip of it with full concentration. What he did looked effortless and even casual from the stalls, but those in front of him received the full force of a considerable personality. A great interpreter of Brahms and Schumann, Sir Adrian also had a special way with Schubert – particularly the ‘*Great C Major*’ *Symphony* – and Beethoven. He always had his orchestra seated in the old way, with the

second violins on his right and the cellos and violas in front of him, and this pattern worked especially well in classical music (it clarifies the texture even on the monaural sound of this DVD). He was adamant that in a dry acoustic such as the Royal Festival Hall, the cellos should never be seated front right (as some conductors did) because the bass line was then heard fractionally early. His recordings of Beethoven's *Third*, *Fifth* and *Seventh Symphonies* are very accomplished and I remember a stirring *Eroica* with the LPO in the late 1960s. Yet he was temperamentally perhaps better suited to the even-numbered symphonies than the more bombastic odd-numbered ones; and I recall a wonderful *Pastoral*, opening the last concert of a never-to-be-forgotten Philharmonia series of the piano concertos with the incomparable Emil Gilels. Sir Adrian was a consummate accompanist and insisted on re-rehearsing the opening tutti of a concerto, once he knew what his soloist was going to do. When it came to the Beethoven Violin Concerto, Boult had heard or worked with virtually all the great interpreters of the twentieth century – Kreisler, Szigeti, Busch, Menuhin – and we can hear him on commercial recordings with Ricci and Suk. In a televised interview he gave in connection with another 1968 performance – the soloist was again a Russian, David Oistrakh – Sir Adrian Boult described this work as 'perhaps the most thoughtful concerto, the one which needs for the violinist to be a great man as well as a great player'.

Nathan Milstein (1903–92) would have raised an eyebrow at being dubbed 'a great man' but he was unquestionably a superlative artist, who placed the Beethoven first among the violin concertos: 'It is a miracle, something that seems

to have come out of thin air, like some sort of divine message. You can discuss the revelations of his concerto endlessly.' Born in that musical melting-pot Odessa, Milstein was encouraged by his mother to take up the violin before going at seven to Pyotr Stolyarsky's school. In 1915 he performed Glazunov's Concerto with the composer conducting. In 1916–17 he was at the St Petersburg Conservatory with Leopold Auer. He suffered hard times after the 1917 Revolution, but gradually built up a career and in 1921 met Vladimir Horowitz, forming a duo with him. In 1923 Milstein played the Glazunov Concerto in what was now Petrograd with the conductorless orchestra Persimfans. He and Horowitz also shared concert platforms with the Stradivarius Quartet, or singers such as Antonina Nezhdanova or Leonid Sobinov. At a Moscow concert in 1923, he gave the local premieres of the first concertos by Szymanowski and Prokofiev, with Horowitz acting as 'orchestra', and at an orchestral concert, he again collaborated with the composer in the *Glazunov Concerto*.

At the end of 1925 Milstein left Russia to tour Europe with Horowitz. An appearance in Spain led to recitals in Buenos Aires and Montevideo with the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska; and at a Vienna concert Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, Karl Amadeus Hartmann and Julius Korngold were among his audience. He spent the summer of 1926 with Ysaÿe. He emigrated to the United States in 1928, playing with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Stokowski the next year and the New York Philharmonic-Symphony in 1930. After that he divided his career between the two sides of the Atlantic. Although he became an American citizen in 1942, he was based alternately in Paris and London after World War II. In his later years he taught

privately, as well as at the Juilliard School and the Zurich Conservatoire. Milstein's elegant tone sounded quite slim in the concert hall but carried well, because it was so focused and his scale was so beautifully equalised, with no ugly emphasis on the G string. Violinists of the younger generation who gyrate like whirling dervishes should be sat down and forced to watch his restrained, concentrated, technically impeccable delivery. He was an ideal interpreter of the Beethoven *Concerto* and although we have two commercial recordings of his interpretation, it is valuable to have this visual confirmation of his mastery. He seems to have all the time in the world for the long opening movement and the ethereal Larghetto. He plays his own cadenzas.

Sir Adrian Boult was on intimate terms with virtually every British composer of his era and had a particularly close relationship with Vaughan Williams, reflected in two recorded cycles of the symphonies. He was at the 1910 première of *A Sea Symphony* and gave the fourth performance; and with the subsequent eight symphonies he gave either the première (nos 3, 4 and 6) or one of the earliest performances. *The Eighth Symphony* may not tower as high as the central triptych of nos 4, 5 and 6 but it is beautifully proportioned. The composer himself called the opening movement 'Seven variations in search of a theme' and Boult holds it together masterfully. The *Scherzo*, for wind band only, is tremendously droll in his hands; and the *Cavatina*, featuring the LPO's strings – among them such fine players as leader Rodney Friend, principal cello Alexander Cameron and principal viola John Chambers – is done with a tender touch. The *Toccata* is evocative of pealing bells: Vaughan Williams included bells in the score and then added gongs after attending a

performance of Puccini's *Turandot*. Boult is in his element here. To have him conducting Vaughan Williams is like going to the fountainhead; and to be able to watch him doing it in colour is a bonus.

Tully Potter. January 2007