



Having evaded the Gestapo in occupied Paris, violinist Devy Erlih defied convention to champion contemporary French music. On the eve of his 80th birthday, he tells JESSICA DUCHEN his extraordinary story

‘UN MAUVAIS CARACTÈRE’

So few of his recordings have made it to CD that Devy Erlih remains an elusive presence among the violin greats of the last 60 years. Yet this *éminence grise* of the instrument was associated with some of the finest composers of the mid-20th century, and gave numerous world premieres, often of works written especially for him. His role in contemporary music in postwar France is as significant as his wartime experience was extraordinary: as a Jewish child prodigy in Paris, his tale of survival ranges from the hair-raising to the miraculous.

Erlih was born in Paris on 5 November 1928. His Romanian-Jewish parents were immigrants from what is now Moldova. His father was a folk musician, playing the cimbalom and the pan pipes. Before he was ten, Erlih was the star attraction in his father's café orchestra, performing nightly in a brasserie.

'My parents spoke both Romanian and Russian,' says Erlih, 'but I never spoke either language because my parents always wanted me not to be a foreigner, not to have all the problems that they were having. So I only spoke French.' His father had no formal musical training, and at first, neither did Devy. 'My father just played because in those surroundings, that was what people did. I performed with him for years, and I loved it — it was full of fun. My father taught me, and only by ear.' That, he adds, was an advantage: 'It was a wonderful beginning, not to start with solfège — how can a child be stimulated by a horrid burden like that? It's known that a child speaks his mother tongue after about three years of age — therefore he can speak music in the same way. It's easy.'

One day, a music-loving philanthropist missed a train and wandered into the brasserie where the Erlih family orchestra was in full flow. 'This gentleman saw the poster outside billing me as "Le petit Devy" and came in to listen,' says Erlih. 'Afterwards he spoke to my father and said, "You know, your son is gifted and you should make something of him. I could have him participate in a concert because I am the head of a music society — could he play the Mendelssohn Concerto?"' My father was certain that this offer was a fake, so he said, "Oh yes,

The Gestapo came looking for 'the little Jew who played the violin'. They knew all about me

no problem," and our friend said, "Give me your address and I'll write to you." To my father's amazement, he soon received a letter containing the date of the concert. 'Le petit Devy' learnt the Mendelssohn Concerto, gave the concert, then went straight back to the café orchestra.

But the seeds of an idea had been planted and a few months later his father took him to visit one of the Paris Conservatoire's leading violin professors, Jules Boucherit — among whose pupils were Ginette Neveu, Henri Temianka and Michèle Auclair. 'He said that he would gladly take me, but that I would have to stop the café music and concentrate on violin studies,' says Erlih. 'My father said, "Well, maybe one day," and we went home.' By the outbreak of war, however, the brasserie had closed down and the family was unemployed, so father and son went back to Boucherit. 'That was when everything began.'

After the German invasion, the Erlih family was in grave danger. Erlih's father was arrested and taken to the notorious detention and deportation centre at Drancy. 'He was saved by a sort of miracle,' Erlih declares. Living in desperate conditions,

the prisoners fell victim to disease and starvation, he recounts. 'They began to die. The Germans wanted to maintain an image of order and they didn't want this story to be spread around, so they began to send home the people who seemed likely to die, so that they would not be held responsible. They sent a commissioner to assess the sick prisoners, and the man next to my father told him he should go and see this fellow. My father tried to refuse because he weighed too much — 38 kilos — but his friend insisted.' The commissioner drew down Erlih senior's lower eyelids and asked him whether they looked bloodshot in the morning. 'He didn't know what to say; he knew that "yes" or "no" could be the difference between life and death. He made a choice and said, "Yes".' Soon Erlih's father was on his way home.

In hiding, and hence unable to work, the Erlihs found it impossible to support their young son and sought a better way of providing for him. Through Boucherit, they met one Mr Ferretti, an Italian who was a long-time resident in Paris. He took Devy in. 'He treated me like his own son,' Erlih says, 'and he had a fantastic library >



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A teenage Devy Erlih (fourth from left) with American soldiers after the liberation of Paris in 1944



Erlih in the 1970s: despite success early in his career, none of the violinist's first recordings are now available

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in which I could continue my schooling. Every Sunday his friends would come round and I would play to them. I didn't know their names. It was only later that I discovered one of them was de Gaulle's private secretary, another was one of his ministers, and a third was the papal nuncio who later became Pope John XXIII! But after a while, Erlih went to visit his father, who instructed him to leave Paris at once.

Boucherit took Erlih out of the city to his country house, where the boy stayed with the caretaker. 'The very next Sunday the Gestapo came to Ferretti's home, looking for "the little Jew who played the violin". They knew all about me.' Then Ferretti produced a personal coup. 'He told them: "You are wrong!" and pulled a card out of his wallet.' On it was the name of a pizza restaurant in Italy, an appointment time, and the signature 'Benito Mussolini'. The card, as Ferretti intended, intimidated the officials into thinking Ferretti had friends in high places, and was on their side. In fact, the situation was somewhat different: 'Ferretti and Mussolini had been students together and were totally opposed politically — they used to meet for arguments in cafés regularly,' Erlih explains. 'So when Mussolini took power, Ferretti knew that it was time to leave Italy as fast as possible.'

After the war, Erlih resumed his official studies at once, entering Boucherit's class in the Paris Conservatoire and soon earning the sought-after Premier Prix.

This enabled him to give his first recital, where again an accident of fate intervened. 'The critic Antoine Goléa, who was Romanian and had formerly been a violin student of Enescu, turned up by mistake. He was supposed to attend the Salle Pleyel and I was at the Salle Gaveau; he went to the wrong hall. But seeing that a young violinist was making a debut, he decided to stay.' Goléa's review lauded the youngster to the skies; the critic also recommended him to a conductor friend, Henri Tomasi, who gave Erlih the opportunity to play the Brahms Concerto with his orchestra.

These events helped to launch his career, and in 1955 he won the

Long-Thibaud Competition — the last French violinist to do so. Ironically, Erlih had encountered Jacques Thibaud himself several times. 'He was like a brother to Boucherit and whenever he came round, Boucherit would say, "Listen to this little boy." Each time, Thibaud just patted me on the shoulder and said "Very good, very good, now continue, *mon petit*," and these were his lessons! I was lucky enough to hear him in what proved to be one of his last concerts — he played the Brahms Concerto, rather surprisingly — and I was very struck by the spiritual quality of his playing then.'

A more profound impression came from George Enescu, with whom Erlih gave a recital including the Romanian composer's Second Sonata. 'He played the piano like a god,' Erlih recalls. 'He had a quality similar to Charles Munch and Leonard Bernstein, two musicians who only had to step in front of an orchestra and the musicians would at once want to play. I couldn't always understand what he said, but he could bring you to do something musical just by his presence and his music making. This was a tremendous inspiration.'

How did Erlih become interested in contemporary music? 'Ah,' Erlih twinkles. 'That was because I had what we call in France *un mauvais caractère*! I was extremely contrary and I was terrible to Boucherit.' Boucherit, he adds, had the reputation of being a dictator. 'It was that particular generation. In those days, the father figure was a dictator. You did what



A young Devy Erlih on a visit to Shinichi Suzuki's violin classes in Matsumoto, Japan, in the early 1950s

he demanded, without questioning. Boucherit was a dictator — which didn't stop him from saving my life. But in the meantime I had discovered a new world — Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Bartók. I went to Boucherit's class with the Bartók Second Concerto. And he said: "In my class we do not play savage music: go away!" He literally threw me out of his class for wanting to play Bartók.

'Also, I was lazy,' Erlih smiles broadly. 'I used to learn very quickly, probably too quickly, and I was always looking for new things. And I soon realised that Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Bartók were not the only ones. This news spread quickly and composers began to approach me, asking me to play their works. I made a point that any time I was in contact with a composer, I would ask him to write a violin concerto. Why not?'

Henri Tomasi was among the first composers who wrote for Erlih. 'Bruno Maderna didn't write his concerto for me, but I gave the premiere; it's fantastic, an astonishing piece. I also gave the world premiere of Milhaud's Second Concerto. Then Martinů came to hear me in New York and gave me his concerto, asking whether I could play it in France, which I did — it was my first concert with the National Radio Orchestra of France.' That was the tip of the iceberg: in due course he championed concertos by Charles Chaynes and Pierre Max Dubois, *Mobile* by Maurice Jarre, and music by Giacinto Scelsi and Yves Prin. He gave the Japanese premiere of Dutilleux's violin concerto *L'arbre des songes* in 1989, standing in for an indisposed soloist at just three days' notice.

André Jolivet loomed especially large in Erlih's life; he frequently performed the composer's 1972 Violin Concerto and *Suite rhapsodique*. 'Jolivet was a massive person, rather severe and reserved, but he gave you the impression of an immense solidity of character,' recalls Erlih. 'I was terribly impressed by the style of his music which I felt very strongly, and the accuracy of writing that he had to express this. The language was not traditional at all; it was very personal, but with a permanent need of expression, and that to me is what says the most.' After the composer's death, the link went even deeper: Erlih married Jolivet's daughter, Christine.



Erlih in the 1990s: an early interest in Stravinsky and Bartók led to a lifelong passion for contemporary music

Though Erlih's recording of the Jolivet Violin Concerto is available, his copious early recordings are long deleted and have never been transferred to CD. Today, there is sadly little to document the qualities of imaginative freedom, tonal beauty and spontaneity that he brought to mainstream repertoire. Philippe Graffin, who studied with him in Marseilles in the mid-1970s, pinpoints his special qualities as a musician. 'He's a very free player with a clear point of view, a beautiful tone that's never forced, and lots of imagination,' he says. 'You can hear his folk-band childhood in his playing, yet he's also a very civilised musician. His early live recording of the Tchaikovsky Concerto was one of the most exciting things I ever heard. When I was a kid studying with him, I always felt hurt that a whole generation didn't realise what a great violinist he was — it was only violinists like Szeryng, Milstein and Stern who'd look him up when they came to town because they knew all about him. I loved his approach to the repertoire, always to be inquisitive and never take anything for

granted. At a time when France was extremely conservative and did not like the avant-garde, Devy was a pioneer.'

'There is a constant evolution,' Erlih himself says, 'and to me there is no such thing as one way to do things. I am against any system that is supposedly good for everything. You cannot play, for instance, Bach the same way as Mozart, because what existed in Bach's time did not exist in Mozart's, and vice versa. Similarly you cannot play Brahms like Beethoven. And the greater the complexity of the music, the more your technique has to evolve. Then what remains, no matter what you play, is the question of translating what you think is true.'

Music does need 'translation' in performance — and the best way to celebrate Erlih's birthday would surely be if a connoisseur would reissue some of the violinist's early recordings, and if we could explore anew the works he championed and reassess their lasting worth. Much of this music has been silenced for years or decades as new fashions take over; and, as Erlih suggests, we may be missing out. ■