

HANDLED WITH CARE

Ida Haendel, who celebrates 50 years of performing in London this season, speaks to Jessica Duchon about her present activities and reminisces about her childhood. Portrait: David Banks

Ida Haendel first picked up her father's violin at the age of three and announced that she could play the song which she had just heard her mother singing. It was immediately obvious that the child had a truly extraordinary gift, and her father set about finding her the best possible teacher. The family moved first from Chelm, the small town in provincial Poland where Ida and her elder sister were born, to Warsaw where Professor Michalowitch at the Chopin School of Music agreed to teach her without a fee.

Study abroad seemed impossible at first as there was not enough money. Ida's father was an artist who relied on portrait commissions for an income. It was a grant from the Jewish philanthropic organization, the B'nai Brith, which enabled Ida, accompanied by her father, to go to Paris. The grant was awarded to her after Bronislaw Hubert, hearing her play at a reception organized in his honour, declared her to be the greatest talent he had ever heard.

They travelled to Paris hoping to take up an offer of lessons from Joseph Szigeti; however, when they arrived it was only to discover that Szigeti had unexpectedly signed an American contract and was to depart at once. Nevertheless he was still an important influence on Ida's musical development. She was often exposed to his personality by meeting and talking to him, and she sees him as the ideal musician from both technical and intellectual standpoints.

Her principal teacher was subsequently Carl Flesch and she also studied occasionally with Georges Enescu. 'They were as different as day and night. In approach, Flesch was very much the violinist. He took care of all faults. If somebody could not overcome certain technical difficulties he was the one to facilitate that, and he would work out particularly intelligent fingerings. He was an extremely professional, experienced violin teacher. Whereas Enescu would embrace just

everything. He really analysed the depths of a composition and was intellectually very profound, on a higher level in my opinion than Flesch.'

Miss Haendel's own approach to the violin has always been extraordinarily natural and instinctive. 'I've been very lucky in that I've had good teachers but also in that I've never had any problems. When I picked up the violin I knew that I could produce what I heard. There was never any doubt in my mind so I just picked up the violin and played. I would imagine that one of the most difficult things for a child who is made to play an instrument and begins to scratch is that the horrible sounds are enough to put anybody off. I never had to contend with that. The problem I had when I was very young was that I could not quite grasp the meaning and concept of the actual music because I was too young or the direction was not very good. I suppose this is why a lot of prodigies fail - they may not mature accordingly in intellect.'

The greatest danger for any child prodigy is probably "burn-out" induced by exploitation or over-exposure at a stage when musical development is not complete or when the child is psychologically unready for a large number of public appearances. Miss Haendel is one of a small number of child prodigies whose career has developed smoothly from extreme youth to maturity unimpeded by any such problems. She feels that this was largely due to the care and caution which her father exercised over her early career. He took care not to exploit her talent while she was growing up and thus was frequently at odds with managers. 'It was very wise on his part and very lucky for me. He wanted me to study, to learn and to live a sensible family life as a child, not to go gallivanting around the world to make pots of money - maybe this is what saved me. In my youth I did not play quite so many concerts at a certain point as other people did. I think it was very im-





portant that I did not overdo it.'

Allowed to develop naturally in this way, she has never regretted having been a child prodigy. 'Possibly because I didn't know any other kind of life - but I don't think it did me any harm. It becomes a very natural thing to continue as you mature. I think it is probably more difficult to start giving concerts when you are an adult because then you are in a different world entirely. I was slowly eased into it so that it was a very natural process of growing up.'

Many of the works which she performs today have been part of her repertoire since childhood: she has been playing the Beethoven concerto, for example, since the age of five. But there is never any sense of staleness or stagnation. 'You learn, if you study, every day; there is always something to discover. It's the inexhaustible nature of music, which I find so fascinating.'

In her London *pic-d-terre* Miss Haendel presents a vivid, colourful personality with a forceful intensity which marks her out as a solo performer. As a child she also had a talent for dancing and for art, and feels that, had she had the opportunity,



Ida Haendel as a young girl

she could have made a career out of acting or designing clothes. In common with music, these pursuits all have the central element of dynamic artistic self-expression. Perhaps it is not surprising that it is still the great concerti of the late romantic repertoire for which Miss Haendel is most celebrated. 'Being a soloist I must be more of an individualist.



Ida Haendel in the 1940s

It is more convenient to play concerti because for a recital you have to have a compatible partner and they are not easy to find - and if you think in terms of trios or quartets you have to find several people with congenial collaboration. Having done so little chamber music I've never learned the necessary self-effacement.'

Craig Sheppard is one pianist she has worked with frequently; recently they undertook a European tour together. But she does feel that violin recitals do not attract the same public that some pianists draw. 'This may be because some violinists try to be *avant-garde* and burden the public with the most recent compositions when they would rather be listening to something more enjoyable - Mendelssohn or Kreisler for example. Also for sonatas you need a certain type of audience which may be very limited. Many people play the piano but few play the violin - so the violin repertoire is less widely known.'

She does take considerable interest in contemporary music herself, however. 'I've recently discovered a sonata by Benjamin Frankel which I want to suggest for performance. Also there's a concerto by the Swedish composer Alan Pattersson. It's extremely complicated - about an hour of solid violin playing with very little orchestral tutti. I've made a recording of it and have been asked to play it in the States. It's quite fascinating.' She has also championed the concerti by Walton and Britten, and has tried particularly to interest audiences outside Britain in them.

Miss Haendel's violin is a Stradivarius of 1699 which she has been playing for about thirty-five years. Finding a suitable violin had previously been a problem for her as she has unusually tiny hands. 'Most good instruments are built rather heavily; I was very lucky to find this one. It has a very beautiful sound and is a lovely-looking instrument. A lot of people think it is one of the best. It doesn't have an extremely loud sound - but then I never thought that the violin should be like an explosion!'

Miss Haendel now makes her home in Montreal, Canada, and also in Miami, Florida, but she still retains British nationality. Having lived in wartime London she considers herself very British. At the outbreak of the war she had felt devastated, expecting all concerts to stop and thinking that her whole career would have to end. 'But England is England. The people never really allowed themselves to be dominated by anything. Life went on; culture went on; bombs were falling, and we were giving concerts! That's a very British characteristic. Morale was always high, even at the worst of times. After the blitz everything rose from the ashes and we went on; I really caught the spirit.'

She also sees London as a special place because of the number of good orchestras which are based there. 'Where else do you find so many top notch orchestras? There are at least five in London - this is quite

unique. New York has only one really good orchestra, and the same is true of Berlin.' Her rapport with most orchestras is good everywhere. 'I love most orchestras and I'd like to think that they like me. It's very comforting to feel that they are really behind you.'

Even today the world of the international performing soloist seems to be largely dominated by men. Has Miss Haendel ever found any sort of prejudice against female soloists? 'I never had any conflict with anybody about being allowed to perform - I was always flooded with concerts. The prejudice came through a different door - the fee. They thought that a woman is not worth as much as a man. And that really made me angry. But I don't know why there are not more female violinists; I think our brains are just as good as a man's, and of course women have accomplished fantastic things - for instance in all the sports and in politics too. But for some reason we haven't had a Shakespeare or a Rembrandt or a Beethoven. Maybe the time will come when we will.' She feels that some female soloists may be less successful because they are trying to produce a masculine sound. 'I am not trying to sound like a man. I am trying to sound as the composer intended the music to sound. A lot of women are so aggressive that they surpass the men and beat the violin black and blue. That's not right. You have to make music, not to pretend to be masculine. Just do justice to the

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music, think in terms of the composition - not what you are but what the composer is. Composers are able to bring you to tears because they had the heart to do so - they are often so lyrical and so feminine!'

Ida Haendel grew up during a golden age of violinists; she listened to recordings and occasional concerts by artists such as Kreisler, Huberman, Szigeti and Heifetz. Many people today find that modern violin playing differs greatly in style from that of the giants of the past. Miss Haendel does not think that the playing of the younger generation of violinists has altered so radically. 'There is only one certain way of playing a violin. Technically speaking, we still have the one and only Heifetz - everyone is guided by his excellence and mastery. But in the past there were good violinists and bad violinists; and the same is true of the present.'

Miss Haendel's plans for the future include a great many concerts which are already booked. 'But my plan is to cut down a bit because travel is very hard on the system - jet lag from going back and forth across the Atlantic is very tiring. I'm trying not to play too much in one coun-

try. I want to limit myself to the big orchestras and big cities. Not that I don't enjoy concerts in the provinces very much - but one can only do so much and there are many countries in the world one has to play in.'

Teaching has not played a large part in Miss Haendel's career beyond the occasional masterclass in the north of England and in America, but she expects to teach more frequently when she retires. 'At the moment I don't have the time - besides which it is a vocation and I feel I'm naturally a performer, not a teacher. In order to teach you need to analyse exactly what you are doing yourself, and I have never tried nor wanted to. The actual mechanics of it are purely instinctive, although I could give a lot intellectually.'

Beginning in autumn 1986 is a film project which will be a two-hour documentary of Ida Haendel's entire career, to be shown on television and possibly in cinemas. This will involve the recording of all her concerts on film, and a trip to Poland to film there. Besides this, she is in the process of writing a second volume of her autobiography. The first volume, *Woman With Violin*, was published in 1970. 'It's going to be quite different from the first volume. The main question is when will I be able to get on with the writing? When I wrote my first volume, travel was so different to what it is now - I was travelling on board ships for days at a time and on trains as well, so I had time to write. Now it's all Concorde!'