

BOOKS EXTRACT

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One-time child prodigy violinist **Sir Yehudi Menuhin** died 20 years ago this month. He is one of many distinguished individuals, now dead, included in a new, 800-page retrospective collection of interviews by **Naim Attallah**, 'No Longer With Us', from which the following edited extract is taken

NAIM ATTALAH: Albert Einstein said when he heard you play as a young boy, "Now I know there is a God in heaven." Were you aware of the extraordinary nature of your talent?

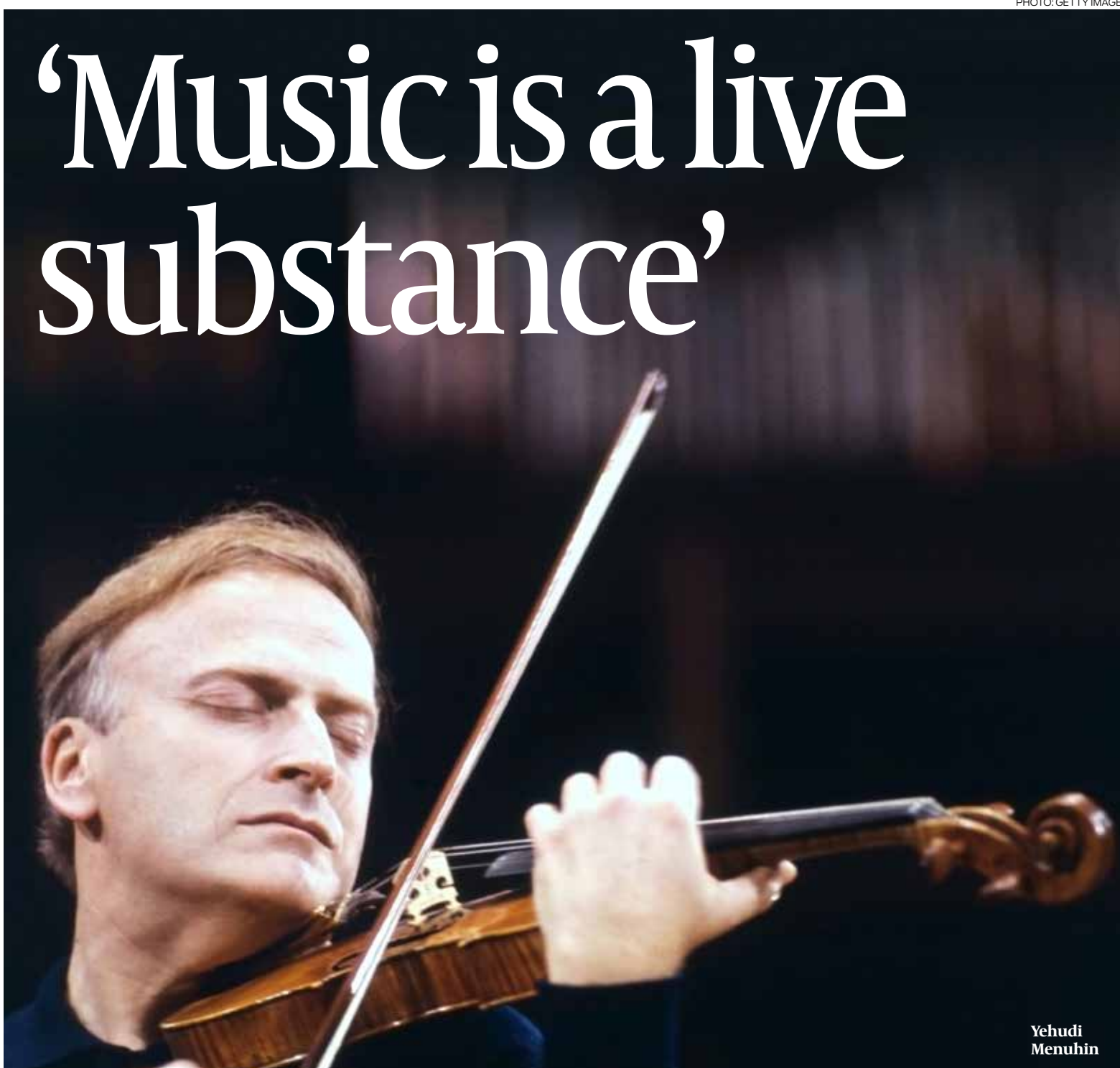
YEHUDI MENUHIN: I'm still not aware of it, and I become less and less aware of it as I listen to very remarkable, talented children who play beautifully, and then hear of others who rob banks at the age of 11, others who tap into computers at the age of 12 and learn the secrets of the Pentagon, and others who storm into Tiananmen Square and are ready to be immolated for their peaceful purposes.

I feel more and more that I'm one of a great many people, almost one of a great many young people, and, at the age of 73, that is probably a permissible illusion.

When I was a child, I felt absolutely normal and resented any allusion to wunderkinder and prodigies. I hated it and I think I was right then and am right now. No doubt I played beautifully and had deep feeling, but Einstein was a man who was very impulsive, very emotional, and he could have said the same thing about his own remarkable, intuitive discovery of the oneness of the universe. Anyone who looks on an insect or a flower could say there is a God within us and we are a part of that God.

I am indebted to the quality of my parents and my teachers, and their high-mindedness. There was never any talk of money in the house, no vulgarity; always high purpose, good literature and poetry and a great deal of fun. I was spared all preoccupations with violence, or with sex, or with the unhealthy worries and frustrations that many people have to live under; the bad air, the sidewalks they have to walk on, the ugliness they are surrounded by. I feel therefore fortunate and grateful. I believe firmly that children

Naim Attallah



Yehudi Menuhin

bring a great deal into the world that they then forget. Learning is a process of forgetting.

It sounds a paradox, but none the less, as we learn to live in the world, we forget that intangible quality we brought with us when we were born. People are conditioned by their prenatal stage.

I was lucky, since children who pursue a career often leave the parental nest early and have to fend for themselves, but I don't think any child in the world can have seen more of both parents than my sisters and I did.

Of course, they had their frictions because they were totally different characters. My father was very emotional and deeply moral and felt for the whole of humanity. My mother was very maternal and felt for her own children first, then for others. She was highly disciplined and a remarkably strong character.

The concerts were always in the evening, so they didn't inter-

rupt the day. Any tribute or adulations from the public was also kept at arm's length, although I would be aware that the concerts were sold out. My father looked after the business interests and the rest of the family life on tour.

Later, it took me a long time to get accustomed to dealing independently with people on a one-to-one basis, for we had never been to school to receive a formal education, though my mother saw to it that we had wonderful tutors. And when you spend your life with Mozart and Beethoven, Bach and Schumann and Brahms, you are living with great minds.

It is a privilege given to a very few people, for the great composers are those whose works convince the interpreter of the great and good truths, eternal and immutable, recognised in the proportion and structure of their works.

NA: When you hear your first recording of the Elgar Violin Concerto, conducted by the composer himself, do you see it as the definitive performance?

YM: No, I don't. Rarely, if ever, do I consider any musical performance a definitive one. It can never be nearer or farther from the absolute truth, but music is a live substance and, even today, performances in the recording studio can still be "live" if you play the whole work—or a whole movement—through, for, even today, retouching is not always feasible in many cases.

When I listen to that recording of the Elgar, I enjoy it, and I have listened to it perhaps twice or three times since I made it. I always feel it is a beautiful recording. It has the ardour of youth; it has deep feeling; it has the authority of the composer and it has the historical uniqueness of the fact it was done with the composer. Therefore, I am very moved by it. Naturally, I can imagine certain things I could do better or differently. But it doesn't matter; it's beautiful.

NA: Your former marriage to Nola Nicholas apparently provoked a lot of adverse criticism from the Jewish press at the time.

YM: I wasn't aware of it. If they had criticised me for other reasons, I would have accepted that certainly, and as it turned out it was not a successful marriage. That was as much my fault as

hers but I didn't realise there was that criticism. Any number of Jews marry out of their religion, and I wouldn't either applaud it or condemn it. It is just one of the things that happens or doesn't happen...

It is true that the Jews are far too sensitive, though they have perhaps been sensitised by history.

They are too ready to imagine an insult; they are not prepared to give enough leeway, even to allow for a certain misbehaviour; they do carry a chip on their shoulders. They have to compensate, and it is a part of the psychology.

NA: What prompted you to record with musicians outside your own sphere, like Ravi Shankar and Stéphane Grappelli?

YM: There are no boundaries where such superb musicians are concerned. They are simply the masters of their art, and enlarge one's mind.

'No Longer With Us: Encounters with Naim Attallah' is published by Quartet at £30. Other interviewees in 'No Longer With Us' include Betty Friedan, Sir Ernst Gombrich and Lord Goodman, as well as Lady Menuhin and Moshe Menuhin