

Cellists' Corner

Brief Career Details of Important Cellists

prepared by David Johnstone from public information

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SPECIAL FEATURE on MISCHA SCHNEIDER

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Birth: 5th February 1904 - Vilnius, Lithuania

Death: October 1985 - U.S.A.

(Budapest String Quartet from 1930 to 1967)

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Born in 1904 in Vilna, Russia (though some place it in Poland at that time; anyway now definitely Vilnius, Lithuania), where celebrated violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz was also born in 1901, Mischa Schneider had a rather difficult upbringing. The family had little money, and his father was a tyrant. Mischa often found himself defending his younger brother Sasha against their father!

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In 1920, at the age of 16, Mischa left home to study in Leipzig under Julius Klengel, his teacher's eminent teacher. Fellow students included Emanuel Feuermann, Gregor Piatigorsky and Benar Heifetz. After graduating he moved to Frankfurt, where he taught for a while at the Hoch Conservatory. He was originally named Mojzesz Szejder, but later Germanized to 'Mischa Schneider' to which he became known professionally.

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His move to the quartet world was curious! He found that he suffered from stage fright when playing as soloist, but that was a problem that did not seem to exist when he was playing in a quartet. Therefore he firstly joined the Prisca Quartet, but resigned after a time due to a personality clash with two of the other members. The Prisca had often played in Cologne and there he got to know the Reifensbergs, whose daughter Eva had married Emanuel Feuermann. It was Frau Reifensberg who introduced Schneider to the Budapest Quartet.

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Because of political conditions in Europe, the members chose to settle permanently in the USA in 1938. In 1940, the Budapest Quartet became quartet in residence at the Library of Congress in Washington. The Quartet had a huge influence on chamber music in the United States and internationally. When they relocated to the U.S. in the late 1930s, it was hard to attract large audiences. The concerts in Washington and New York, the radio broadcasts and the many records gradually raised their audience numbers, made them famous and wealthy at least as far as classical musicians go(!), and set high performance standards for later quartet and other chamber groups to follow.

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The Budapest Quartet played together until 1968, and set a benchmark standard for mid-20th-century chamber ensembles. The group toured Europe, the Middle East and the United States extensively. After World War

II, its players took advantage of the new long-playing record technology and its recordings were lavishly praised. The Budapest recorded extensively for the big HMV and CBS labels, and included in its projects were the full Beethoven cycle and the bulk of the Classical and Romantic literature.

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As the 1960s approached, the quartet was still quite happy. It was probably the most popular and world-famous quartet, with 55 record albums published by Columbia and an incredible two million copies sold, and they were constantly playing in many famous venues and festivals. But then ... one of the quartet was noticed to have intonation problems, apparently in the aftermath of a mild heart attack at the end of 1960. Due to a problem with high blood pressure this member (not the cellist!) had occasionally had intonation problems before, but these certainly worsened in the 1960s.

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Mr. Schneider, besides also playing with such artists as the Guarneri Quartet and Peter Serkin, the pianist, was very well-known in the U.S. as a teacher. He taught at Mills College in California in the 1930's, at the State University of New York at Buffalo after the Budapest took up residence there in 1962, and also at the Curtis Institute of Music, the Cleveland String Seminar and the California Institute of the Arts. He was active for 25 summers at the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont, where he both performed and worked with young musicians.

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Mischa Schneider died at his home in Buffalo, N.Y. in October 1985, aged 81. Mr. Schneider was widely admired throughout his career, both for his skills as a cellist and as an ensemble player.

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Photos: Mischa Schneider as solo cellist, and the Budapest String Quartet in 1944



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