

Spivakovsky, Jascha (1896–1970)

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Jascha Spivakovsky (1896-1970), pianist, was born on 18 August 1896 at Smela, near Kiev, Russia (Ukraine), fifth of nine children of David Spivakovsky, synagogue cantor, and his wife Rahel. Descended from generations of musicians, Jascha showed musical ability very early and began learning the piano when he was 3. The family survived the pogrom at Odessa in 1905 and later moved to Germany. Jascha studied in Berlin with Professor Moritz Mayer-Mahr at the **Klindworth-Scharwenka Conservatorium**. In 1910 he outclassed an adult field to win the coveted Bluethner prize. His career as a concert performer blossomed until he and members of his family were interned as enemy aliens in World War I.

After the war Spivakovsky presented a series of concerts in Berlin, tracing the historical development of the concerto from Bach to Brahms. The success of the performances established him as one of Europe's foremost pianists. In the 1920s he appeared as a soloist with leading orchestras in Europe, Scandinavia and Britain. He and his brother Nathan ('Tossy'), a violin prodigy, formed the Spivakovsky Duo and gave recitals of the violin and piano repertoire in a number of European countries. Jascha made two triumphant Australasian tours in 1921 and 1929, performing demanding programmes. In 1926 he married Leonore Krantz in Czechoslovakia. They had met in Adelaide, and were to have a daughter and two sons.

In 1930 Jascha, Tossy and the cellist Edmund Kurtz established the Spivakovsky-Kurtz Trio which came to be highly regarded for its outstanding ensemble-playing and the flawless musicianship of its members. The trio left Germany to tour Australia in 1933, shortly before Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor. Settling in Melbourne, Jascha joined the staff of the University Conservatorium where he introduced new methods of teaching, including master-classes. He also performed regularly on radio for the Australian Broadcasting Commission. In 1938 he was naturalized. Before World War II began, he helped most of his family and a dozen other people to migrate from Germany to Australia. During the war he served as an air-raid warden, and gave charity concerts for the Australian Red Cross Society and allied troops.

A successful Australian tour in 1947 preceded Spivakovsky's return to the international stage. He played in New Zealand, the United States of America, Canada, Iceland, Scandinavia, Britain, Europe, Israel and Africa. He was 5 ft 8 ins (173 cm) tall, with a powerful build and somewhat ferocious appearance. His hands were unusually large, with chunky fingers, which necessitated his use of unconventional fingering patterns when playing the piano, and which discomforted those who felt his 'vice-like' grip in a friendly handshake. Contrary to his appearance, he was kind, gentle and good-humoured. He was fluent in five languages: English was not one of them, although later in life his grasp of it improved noticeably. Illness curtailed his international career in 1960, but he continued to perform in Australia. At the time of his death he was planning to record Beethoven's violin and piano sonatas with Tossy. Jascha died on 23 March 1970 at Toorak, Melbourne, and was cremated; his wife and their sons survived him.

In performance, Spivakovsky's extraordinary legato technique, extensive tonal command and remarkable intellectual and physical powers were all employed to convey the emotion and passion of the music. His expressive interpretations of works from the Baroque period to the twentieth century won acclaim from audiences and critics. With even the most complex and difficult pieces, he brought out the lyrical and emotional aspects in a way that made sense of the whole. He excelled in communicating with his audience, and made a significant impact on the

musical life of Australia, and Melbourne in particular.

Tossy Spivakovsky (1907-1998) studied violin in Berlin with Willy Hess at the Hochschule für Musik. From 1920 he toured as a soloist and as a member of the Spivakovsky Duo. He became concert-master of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in 1926, but resigned in the following year. When the Spivakovsky-Kurtz Trio decided to remain in Melbourne in 1933, Tossy was appointed to the teaching staff of the University Conservatorium, as was Kurtz. He migrated to the U.S.A. in 1941. After World War II he appeared as a soloist (playing his 1721 Stradivarius) with major American orchestras. He held teaching positions at Fairfield University, Connecticut, and the Juilliard School, New York. Handsome and intense, elegant and graceful in his movements, he had an idiosyncratic bowing technique and a striking stage presence. His repertoire included numerous twentieth-century works in addition to the classics. Critics considered his interpretations of the concertos of Tchaikovsky and Sibelius to be his finest.

His brother Isaac ('Issy') Spivakovsky (1902-1977) studied violin under Willy Hess, and cello with Hugo Becker and Gregor Piatigorsky. Issy possessed the traditional family genius for music, but suffered from poliomyelitis as a child and did not pursue a career as a performer. He held a violin teaching position at the Royal Conservatorium of Music, Leipzig, before migrating to Australia in 1934. From 1937 to 1965 he taught violin, viola and cello at Scotch College, Melbourne, contributing much to the development of music at the school. Charming and sensitive by nature, he was warmly regarded by his students despite the rigorous demands he placed on them.

Another brother Adolf Spivakovsky (1891-1958) was a bass-baritone. His stage career was cut short by a stress-related ulcer while he was still in his twenties and he devoted the remainder of his life to teaching. He migrated to Melbourne in 1934 and taught at the University Conservatorium where his students included the sopranos Glenda Raymond, Kathleen Goodall and Sylvia Fisher.

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