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Book Review: *Michael Rabin, America's Virtuoso Violinist* The first authorized biography, revised and updated – Anthony Feinstein (Amadeus Press, 2011)

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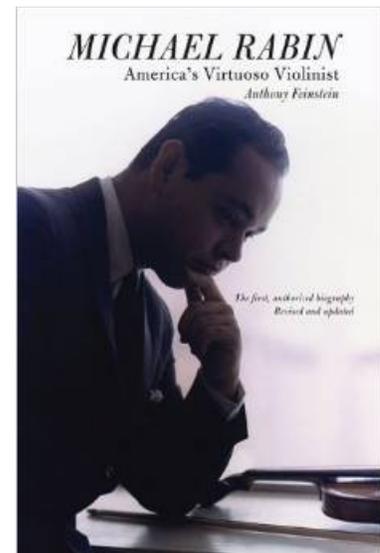
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This biography of Rabin by Anthony Feinstein—author of books on multiple sclerosis, post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury—puts the reader in the mid-20th century classical music world of memorable string players, pianists and conductors, including (to name just a few): Elman, Francescatti, Galamian, Gingold, Heifetz, Huberman, Kaplan, Lack, Menuhin, Morini, Oistrakh, Piatigorsky, Ricci, Rose, Stern, Szigeti. The biography clearly outlines Michael Rabin's development musically and emotionally.

An underlying concern addressed in the biography is the work ethic required to develop the technique and repertoire at the level Rabin accomplished, versus the artist's emotional life. It can be argued that, while Rabin loved performing, he may have been exploited without reference to his socialization and emotional needs. His sister—while insisting the children were not "beaten"—nevertheless did say that their mother hit them, and certainly Michael was forced to practice and also isolated from other children, whisked away after orchestra rehearsals, and totally controlled by his mother.

When Michael was seven he found a half size violin at their friends, the Spielberg's home; he had already been studying piano with his mother, Jeanne, for a year. His lessons began with his father, George, a violinist with the New York Philharmonic. When it became clear that a new teacher was required, he played for Galamian who initially had Micheal study with a Galamian assistant, Yuri Osmolovsky. Details about Galamian's life are fascinating to read, including a brief stint in a Russian prison, "presumably for the bourgeois sin of having wealthy parents." (p. 19-20) The relationship between the artist and his teacher was intense and significant; Galamian invited Michael to Meadowmount, which Michael first attended in 1944.

Rabin's success as an international concertizing performer and recording artist is based on several factors in his personal history: (1) being born in a musical family—mother was a pianist, dad a violinist



—and thus exposure to music from infancy; (2) prodigious innate musical ability; (3) intense work ethic which included practice from six to nine hours a day; and (4) Galamian's technical system, a comprehensive system of scales and arpeggios in three or four octaves, and études, beginning with Dont Op. 37, Kreutzer, Fiorillo, Rode, Gavinies, Dont Op. 35, Wieniawski and Paganini caprices. [Dont Op. 37 and Op. 35 were particularly important to Galamian, as his lineage was Mostras-Auer-Dont.]

In the course of his extremely demanding concert schedule, Rabin kept very clear, meticulous records of his travel; airline, mileage, hours, and concerts. The author characterized these entries as "obsessive" and "compulsive" (p. 43). The number of concerts and countries he traveled is really astonishing. But throughout all that, his early career and successes, he had no personal friends, no peer contact, but relied on letters from Galamian, Francescatti, Kaplan and Michael's sister and parents, to assure him he was loved and missed while away. Kaplan and Michael's sister, Bertine, were his only really close friends, and when each of them married, Michael backed away.

While Rabin almost invariably got good reviews and was nearly univerrally admired for his virtuosity, his mother never seemed to positively comment on his successes (to him); she was the ruler in the family, even of her husband. An incident is mentioned where she was observed, chasing her husband out of the house, brandishing a frying pan, stating that she "was going to get him." Michael was lonely and came to resent his mother's control. According to the author, it could be argued that even Galamian exploited him, reveling in Michael's success without reference to Michael's emotional needs. In his late teens he found himself, like so many other child prodigies (Argerich, Midori, Starker), facing the sacrifices he made for his career: "A childhood has slipped by unrecognized, friendships never cultivated, education neglected." (p. 116)

Many students of this era are aware of the tragic nature of Michael Rabin's untimely death. There were warning signs of an impending difficulty; Rabin had on occasion an intense fear of falling off the stage. In Israel, for example, he refused to perform until a tarp was placed over the orchestra pit, and often, he performed from an unusual spot in referernce to the orchestra, deep into the orchestra, rather than standing directly to the left of the conductor. He sometimes performed sitting down, as well, which was unusual. As a celebrity, it was easy to see numerous doctors and he became addicted to prescription drugs, both sedatives and stimulants. His playing suffered—intonation problems, memory slips, concerts "better forgotten." (p. 176) After a very shaky and embarrassing concert in Los Angeles, Michael overdosed on the plane to his next gig and ended up in Mount Sinai Hospital.

What followed was an attempt to rebuild his career. After detox, he moved out of his parents' house—though not very far away—stayed a second time in hospital for drug addiction, started psychotherapy, and began concertizing again. It is good to read that, by the mid-1960's, most critics felt that Rabin's "interpretative powers had finally caught up with his formidable technique." (p. 195). However, his concert schedule—particularly outside of the United States—was much reduced, and recording was basically stalled, mainly because he was not proactive and "had no business acumen." (p. 203) And drug usage reappeared, with faulty performances.

Though Micheal Rabin didn't die from a drug overdose, nor a suicide attempt (as speculated by some) the use of drugs contributed to his death; his girlfriend, June, found him, deceased, in his apartment. It looked as if he was about to have lunch, but slipped on the newly waxed floor, hit his head on the wooden seat of a chair and cracked his skull. No overdose, but according to the coronor, drugs were

found in his system and in his apartment. He had fooled everyone about his drug use. His memorial service was attended by a large crowd, including such artists as Itzhak Perlman and Van Cliburn. Perlman's recordings of the Paganini Caprices on the Angel label were dedicated to Rabin.

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