

Itzhak Perlman, Violinist

One of the preeminent musicians of the 20th and early-21st centuries.



Joie de vivre (French for “joy of life”) comes to mind when speaking with the reigning violin virtuoso of the 20th and early 21st century. Itzhak Perlman’s remarkable artistry has transcended classical music. He is equally beloved for his charm, humanity, master classes, personal views and irrepressible joy in his playing. Perlman was born in 1945 in the British Mandate of Palestine (now Israel). Self-taught on a toy fiddle at age 3, he lost the use of his legs a year later due to polio. He attended the Sulamit Conservatory in Tel Aviv and ultimately the Juilliard School in New York City. His appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1958 propelled the then teenager into the international spotlight. In the decades that followed, he has received more awards and honors than can be mentioned here. He has played for kings, queens and presidents, and has performed a number of movie music scores, including Schindler’s List and *Memoirs of a Geisha*. He’s appeared with every major orchestra around the world, and has enlightened millions via TV appearances on the Late Show With David Letterman, Sesame Street, the Academy Awards broadcast and even a cooking show on PBS. Perlman lives in New York City with his wife, who is also a classically trained violinist. They have three daughters and two sons.

DAVID: You are clearly a musical prodigy. Do you feel an obligation for having been so touched?

PERLMAN: I don’t view myself that way. I played at an age-appropriate level for a young person with talent. I was not ready at 12 for Carnegie Hall!

DAVID: To what then do you attribute your great success?

PERLMAN: Four things, I think. A great passion for what I do; a knowing inside that what I’m doing will become inevitable. It was important that people believed in me. I had very supportive parents. I was fortunate to have the best teachers, which is rare. And practice. Without it you are a talent stuck with unfulfilled promise. Mind you, I hated to practice, but what kid doesn’t?

DAVID: How did having polio affect your progress?

PERLMAN: It didn’t, except that I had to work harder to prove myself. Some were doubtful that I could go the distance with my disability. It never discouraged me. It just

presented another challenge.

DAVID: You love to teach, in particular the past 15 or so years with your wife at The Perlman Music Program. Can you elaborate on that aspect of your life?

PERLMAN: We’re a mom and pop Perlman production! We work well together and share a lot of humor with ourselves and our students. The program is the dream of my wife Toby to provide a humane music education to help shape future musicians, ages 11 through 18. Teaching is not so much what to say but what not to say. A student with talent has a certain kind of magic, which is precious and fragile in its infancy. You have to guide it carefully until it is strong enough, so that when shaken, it won’t break.

DAVID: What do you enjoy about conducting?

PERLMAN: Conducting has improved my playing. Listening to the orchestra players has changed my point of view about music by enhancing my ability to hear myself when I play. I now rarely play the same piece the same way twice. And being a guest conductor ... well, it’s like being a grandparent. When you are through, you can give them back to their parents.

DAVID: What lies ahead for you?

PERLMAN: I’m excited to be promoting and performing music with Cantor Yitzchok Meir Helfgot on our recently released CD called *Eternal Echoes: Songs and Dances for the Soul* for Sony. I find that there is a real communication between voice and violin. The songs come from the cantorial-liturgical Jewish traditions, but for me it’s Jewish comfort music. Everything I recognize from my childhood is in this program. Sheyibone Bays Hamikdosh recalls memories from Shabbat morning prayers in Israel. The well-known Mizmor L’Dovid from Psalm 23. We end with Kol Nidrei (The opening prayer for the Yom Kippur Friday night service.)

DAVID: What are some of the highlights looking back and ahead?

PERLMAN: Always enjoying each song, no matter the audience or how many times I’ve played it. Giving my all to everything I do. Inspiring those with disabilities. Mishpacha (Hebrew for family). My wife is my greatest supporter. Hers is the only critique I will ever trust. And continuing to make music ... for as long as I can.