

4-25-94

Jascha Heifetz

In the thirties and forties, Southern Methodist University sponsored a series of subscription concerts called The Community Course. These concerts were scheduled to be given at least once a month, during the season. Seating was on a first-come first-served basis, and doors opened at 7:00 p.m. on the Thursdays of the concerts. Although the concerts did not begin until 8:00, a small crowd was usually waiting for the door to open in order to secure desired seats. The performers were some of the all-time greats, such artists as Isaac Stern, Pablo Casals, and Jose Iturbi, to mention just a few. McFarlin Auditorium on the SMU campus was always filled to capacity. Season ticket holders who could not attend always passed their tickets on to eager friends. As I remember, the cost of a ticket for the season was ten dollars.

I will never forget a concert in the spring of 1942, one of the great experiences of my life. The performer was to be the great violinist Jascha Heifetz, whose playing I had enjoyed on radio and record. It would be a rare treat to hear him in person. My mother and I went by bus and streetcar, arriving just before the doors opened. Everyone in the early audience always came prepared to while away the waiting time. I had lessons to prepare for classes the next day (this was my senior year, with graduation coming soon); Mother had a book to read.



These audiences were always polite and patient, but by 8:30, this one was getting a bit restive. Stanley Marcus took the stage to announce that Mr. Heifetz was having transportation problems, not unusual in the war years, and would be late. At 9:00 o'clock he repeated his announcement with the assurance that our musician would arrive as soon as he could. At 9:30 Mr. Marcus told us that Mr. Heifetz had been bumped from his airplane in west Texas, but had found a small plane which took him to Fort Worth, where a music lover awaited with sufficient war time gasoline to drive the forty miles to Dallas. For anyone who wanted to stay, Mr. Heifetz would fulfill his contract to play. Very few people left. I do not know how binding his contract was, but I doubt that he was forced by contract to perform that night. I like to think that knowing the tribute his audience was paying by waiting so long for him was responsible for his continuing his interrupted journey and performing for us.

At almost exactly 11:00 p.m., an elegant Jascha Heifetz, with his accompanist, bowed to the greatly relieved and thunderously applauding crowd. He played all of his announced concert. I remember the names of none of the pieces, but they were all beautiful, and Mr. Heifetz played impeccably and graciously. I had read that he was a perfectionist in his interpretation of music but that he was remote and somewhat cold in his relation with his audiences. Not so that night, although he remained a perfectionist. He must have been weary, but the warm reception he found from a long-waiting audience must have inspired him and thawed whatever chill he generally showed. He played a generous four encores with the audience clamoring for more. He finally begged off at 1:30 a.m. with a brief speech, another rarity thanking us for our patience and attention.

Mother and I found our way home on the last streetcar and buses of the evening. It was difficult to get to sleep that night because of the exhilaration of the evening, but I did manage to make it to my eight o'clock class the next morning. The concert will always remain at the top of my list of wonderful musical evenings.

After World War II, I heard Jascha Heifetz in concert several times, but to me he never again reached the same level of excitement, perfection, and warmth that we experienced in the spring of 1942.