

Yehudi Menuhin and the Menuhin Festival Gstaad

A Lifelong Bond with the Saanenland

As a world-renowned violinist, conductor and humanist, Yehudi Menuhin left an indelible mark on the history of music. His exceptional humanity, artistic versatility and insatiable curiosity shaped not only his career but also his outlook on life. By founding the Menuhin Festival Gstaad in 1957, the future Honorary Citizen of Saanen created a place where musical excellence, friendship and the nurturing of young talent remain at the heart of the festival to this day.

Amid the inspiring tranquillity of the Bernese Alps, Menuhin found the ideal setting for his vision of a festival that would bring together artists of different generations and foster cultural exchange. More than seventy years later, those ideals continue to define the Menuhin Festival Gstaad.

With Daniel Hope, this story comes full circle. The Festival's Artistic Director has been part of the Menuhin Festival family since 1975. His mother, Eleanor Hope, served for many years as Yehudi Menuhin's manager, and since making his Gstaad debut as a young violinist in 1992, Daniel Hope has remained a regular presence at the Festival. Today, he carries Menuhin's artistic and humanistic legacy into a new era.

A Cosmopolitan Spirit

Yehudi Menuhin was born in New York in 1916 to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents and grew up in San Francisco. Introduced at an early age to music, discipline and hard work, he was soon recognised as an exceptional talent. Throughout his life, he remained a true citizen of the world—an artist, humanist and explorer, constantly seeking new musical, cultural and personal encounters.

"When Can I Play with Vibrato?"

In 1922, the young Yehudi Menuhin gave his first public performances at student concerts. A year later, his greatest wish came true when he began studying with Louis Persinger, Concertmaster of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra.

On 29 February 1924, Menuhin captivated audiences for the first time as soloist with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. Further appearances quickly followed, including performances at San Francisco's Scottish Rite Auditorium and New York's Manhattan Opera House. In March 1926, he made his acclaimed debut with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra under Louis Persinger, performing the violin concertos of Édouard Lalo and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

Plans for him to study with the celebrated Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe ultimately did not materialise. Instead, following his successful Paris debut, Menuhin became a pupil of the Romanian

master George Enescu, who would become both an artistic mentor and a father figure. Enescu invited the Menuhin family to Sinaia, where the young violinist was introduced to Romanian folk music and the rich traditions of Romani musicians—an experience that would leave a lasting impression on his musical imagination.

The Pivotal Year: 1927

In November 1927, Yehudi Menuhin gave his first concert at New York's Carnegie Hall. Performing Beethoven's Violin Concerto with the New York Symphony Orchestra under Fritz Busch, he took another decisive step towards an international career. More concerts followed, together with his first recording for Victor Records.

After a successful tour of the United States, his patron Henry Goldman presented the gifted young violinist with the celebrated "Prince Khevenhüller" Stradivarius in 1928. Menuhin took the instrument with him on his second European tour, which included Paris and many of the continent's leading musical centres.

The Legendary Berlin Concert of 12 April 1929

On 12 April 1929, at just thirteen years of age, Yehudi Menuhin made music history. Appearing with the Berlin Philharmonic under Bruno Walter, he performed the violin concertos of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms in what became one of the most celebrated concerts of the twentieth century, firmly establishing his reputation as a child prodigy of extraordinary musical maturity.

The occasion was made even more memorable by his first meeting with Albert Einstein, who was deeply impressed by the young violinist.

Following the advice of George Enescu, the Menuhin family subsequently entrusted Yehudi's musical education to Adolf Busch, one of the foremost representatives of the German violin tradition.

Studies with Adolf Busch in Basel

Between 1929 and 1931, the Menuhin family spent extended periods in Basel. In his book *The Menuhin Saga*, Yehudi's father, Moshe Menuhin, describes these years as a formative period marked by rigorous study and inspiring musical encounters.

During the winter months, Yehudi appeared at London's Queen's Hall with the London Symphony Orchestra under Fritz Busch and made his first recordings for His Master's Voice (HMV). Despite his youth, he was already emerging as one of the most sought-after violinists of his generation.

A Remarkable Rise to International Fame

The early 1930s were characterised by an extraordinary schedule of international concerts. While the family was living in Ville-d'Avray, near Paris, Menuhin made a series of landmark recordings, including Max Bruch's First Violin Concerto with the London Symphony Orchestra under Landon Ronald and Edward Elgar's Violin Concerto, an interpretation still regarded as one of the definitive recordings of the work. Together with his teacher George Enescu, he also recorded Bach's Double Concerto with the Orchestre Lamoureux in Paris.

By this time, Yehudi Menuhin had become one of the highest-paid musicians of his era. Following Hitler's rise to power in 1933, he refused, on principle, to perform in Germany. Other milestones included celebrated duo recordings with his sister Hephzibah, Beethoven's Violin Concerto with Arturo Toscanini and the New York Philharmonic, and numerous radio broadcasts throughout the United States.

Yet behind these remarkable achievements lay increasing personal pressures. The immense expectations placed upon the young artist, together with the constraints of family life, gradually took their toll.

1935: First Artistic Crisis

An extended world tour that took Menuhin to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and across Europe led to a profound personal and artistic crisis. Physical tension, technical difficulties and the relentless demands of an international performing career began to affect both his playing and his wellbeing.

Even an eighteen-month retreat to Los Gatos, California, brought only temporary relief. Although these years included significant artistic successes—among them the acclaimed first performance of Robert Schumann's Violin Concerto in 1937—his inner restlessness remained. Gradually, the young virtuoso began to distance himself from the close control of his family in search of his own artistic and personal path.

Nola Nicholas and a New Beginning

In 1938, Yehudi Menuhin fell in love with the Australian Nola Nicholas, the daughter of a prominent business family. Their relationship quickly blossomed, and the couple married later that year.

The marriage also marked an important turning point in Menuhin's personal development. He began to free himself from the influence of his parents and to build an independent life of his own. At the same time, he soon discovered how difficult it was to reconcile family life with the demands of an international solo career.

A Symbol of Humanity

War and a Commitment to Humanity

The outbreak of the Second World War transformed Yehudi Menuhin's life. While his young family initially remained in Australia, he embarked—following the United States' entry into the war—on an extraordinary series of performances for Allied troops.

Between 1941 and 1945, Menuhin gave nearly 500 concerts for soldiers across Europe, North America and the Pacific. For countless men and women, his music became a symbol of hope and humanity during one of history's darkest chapters. It was during these years that the humanitarian ideals which would define the rest of his life began to take shape.

An Ambassador for Peace

The demands of constant wartime touring placed an increasing strain on family life. Despite every effort, Menuhin's marriage to Nola Nicholas came to an end shortly after the war.

At the same time, his reputation grew far beyond that of a virtuoso violinist. Increasingly, he came to see music as a universal means of bringing people together across national, cultural and political boundaries. This conviction would become the guiding principle of his life's work.

Diana Gould – A Partner for Life

In September 1944, Yehudi Menuhin met Diana Gould, who would become his lifelong companion. At a pivotal moment in his life, she provided stability, encouragement and remarkable wisdom.

Following his divorce from Nola Nicholas, Yehudi and Diana married in London in 1947. Together they built a family life that would support him throughout the decades that followed. Diana became an indispensable partner—not only personally, but also in the many artistic, educational and humanitarian initiatives that shaped Menuhin's career.

Music in the Service of Reconciliation

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Yehudi Menuhin made a profound gesture of reconciliation by performing, together with Benjamin Britten, for survivors of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The concert remains one of the most powerful examples of music's ability to restore hope and affirm our shared humanity.

That same year, Menuhin performed at the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco. His first visit to Moscow also brought about his meeting with David Oistrakh, the beginning of a lifelong friendship between two of the twentieth century's greatest violinists.

The post-war years firmly established Yehudi Menuhin as an artist whose influence extended far beyond the concert stage. He regarded music as a universal language capable of building bridges between nations and cultures.

A New Family, A Broader Vision

With Diana Gould, Yehudi Menuhin began a new chapter in his life. Together they had two sons, Gerard and Jeremy. Alongside his international performing career, he devoted increasing energy to humanitarian and social causes.

He spoke out against apartheid in South Africa, championed dialogue between cultures and participated in numerous charitable initiatives. His travels took him to India, where he met Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the legendary sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar—an encounter that profoundly broadened his musical outlook and deepened his appreciation of traditions beyond the Western classical canon.

A Citizen of the World

In the early 1950s, Yehudi Menuhin expanded his horizons far beyond the boundaries of Western classical music. On the recommendation of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, he met yoga master B.K.S. Iyengar in 1952. The encounter would have a lasting impact on his life. Yoga became a source of physical and spiritual balance, accompanying him throughout his demanding international career.

At the same time, he discovered a deep passion for teaching. In 1954, he began working with young violinists at Nadia Boulanger's renowned summer academy in Fontainebleau. Passing on knowledge and experience from one generation to the next became one of the defining elements of his artistic philosophy.

Returning to Europe – Gstaad Becomes a Second Home

In 1955, the Menuhin family left California to settle permanently in Europe. Alongside periods spent in London and Italy, Yehudi increasingly found himself drawn to the Saanenland. The tranquillity of the alpine landscape, the warmth of its people and the unique atmosphere of the Romanesque Church of St. Maurice in Saanen made Gstaad a place of inspiration and renewal.

Encouraged by local tourism director Paul Valentin and supported by close friends, Menuhin founded the first Menuhin Festival in 1957. What began as music-making among friends would, over the following decades, grow into one of Europe's leading classical music festivals.

For Menuhin, Gstaad became far more than a concert venue. It was a second home—a place where his artistic ideals and his belief in the power of music to bring people together found their fullest expression.

Festival Director, Educator and Visionary

The founding of the Menuhin Festival marked the beginning of a new chapter in Yehudi Menuhin's life. Alongside his international career as a violinist and conductor, he devoted an increasing share of his time and energy to nurturing the next generation of musicians.

In 1959, he also became Artistic Director of the Bath Festival in England. Four years later, he founded the Yehudi Menuhin School in Stoke d'Abernon, which remains one of the world's leading specialist schools for gifted young string players.

The Menuhin Festival Gstaad continued to evolve alongside these initiatives. While welcoming many of the world's finest soloists, conductors and orchestras, Menuhin consistently invited outstanding young musicians to Gstaad, encouraging them to rehearse, perform and learn alongside established artists. This dialogue between generations remains one of the Festival's defining principles and continues today through the Menuhin Festival Academy.

Music Knows No Boundaries

For Yehudi Menuhin, music was a universal language capable of bringing people together regardless of nationality, religion or cultural background. His curiosity extended well beyond the Western classical tradition to embrace musical cultures from around the world.

His collaboration with the Indian sitar master Ravi Shankar proved especially influential, opening a unique artistic dialogue between Eastern and Western musical traditions. Equally naturally, Menuhin welcomed jazz into the Festival through collaborations with artists such as Stéphane Grappelli.

For Menuhin, cultural exchange never meant abandoning tradition—it meant enriching it. His artistic openness reflected a profound conviction: that music has the power to build bridges, inspire understanding and connect people across cultures.

International Recognition

Alongside his musical achievements, Yehudi Menuhin became increasingly committed to promoting culture, education and international understanding. From 1969 to 1975, he served as President of the International Music Council of UNESCO, championing cultural dialogue around the world.

In 1970, the Municipality of Saanen named him an Honorary Citizen in recognition of his exceptional bond with the region. Numerous international honours followed, celebrating not only his achievements

as one of the world's great musicians but also his lifelong commitment to humanism and intercultural understanding.

Music as a Calling

Throughout the 1970s, Yehudi Menuhin expanded his commitment to young musicians and to international cultural dialogue. In 1976, he published his acclaimed autobiography *Unfinished Journey*, while the television series *The Music of Man* introduced audiences around the world to the history of music and its role in human civilisation.

Another important milestone followed in 1977, when Alberto Lysy relocated the International Menuhin Music Academy (IMMA) to Gstaad. The Academy quickly established itself as an internationally recognised centre of excellence for exceptionally gifted young string players, perfectly complementing the Festival's artistic mission.

Despite an exceptionally demanding concert schedule, Menuhin remained tireless in seeking new ways to support emerging talent and foster international musical exchange. His travels took him as far as China, where he was appointed Honorary Professor of the Beijing Conservatory and discovered several young musicians who would later study at the IMMA.

A Life Dedicated to Music and Humanity

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Yehudi Menuhin increasingly based himself in London while continuing his international activities as a violinist, conductor, educator and cultural ambassador.

In 1987, Queen Elizabeth II awarded him the Order of Merit, and in 1993 he was elevated to the British peerage as Lord Menuhin of Stoke d'Abernon.

That same year, he founded the International Yehudi Menuhin Foundation in Brussels to promote the humanistic values that had guided his entire life. Among its most enduring initiatives is MUS-E®, the internationally acclaimed educational programme that uses the arts to foster creativity, social inclusion and personal development. The programme's guiding principles were first developed during an international conference held within the framework of the Menuhin Festival Gstaad.

A Living Legacy

Yehudi Menuhin remained Artistic Director of the Festival until 1996. Over nearly four decades, he shaped its identity and transformed it into an internationally respected meeting place for outstanding artists and the most promising young musicians of their generation.

Until the end of his life, he devoted himself to peace, dialogue and understanding between cultures. Through the *Assemblées des Cultures*, he created a platform bringing together artists, political

leaders and representatives of civil society, reflecting his belief that culture can make a meaningful contribution to a more peaceful world.

Yehudi Menuhin died in Berlin on 12 March 1999 while on concert tour, only weeks before his eighty-third birthday. The musical world lost one of the twentieth century's greatest artists and humanists. Yet his legacy lives on—not only through his recordings and writings, but above all through the Menuhin Festival Gstaad, which continues to embody the values to which he dedicated his life.

Yehudi Menuhin – A Life in Milestones

1916

Born on 22 April in New York to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents.

1921

Receives his first violin lessons in San Francisco.

1927

Meets George Enescu and makes his Paris debut.

1929

Gives his legendary debut with the Berlin Philharmonic under Bruno Walter.

1935

Embarks on a world tour and experiences his first major artistic crisis.

1941–1945

Performs nearly 500 concerts for Allied troops during the Second World War.

1957

Founds the Menuhin Festival Gstaad.

1963

Establishes the Yehudi Menuhin School in England.

1969

Appointed President of the International Music Council of UNESCO.

1970

Named Honorary Citizen of the Municipality of Saanen.

1977

The International Menuhin Music Academy is established in Gstaad.

1979

Receives the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade.

1993

Created a Life Peer as Lord Menuhin of Stoke d'Abernon.

1999

Dies in Berlin on 12 March.

Quotes by Yehudi Menuhin

"I feel at home in Gstaad. It is here that I founded a small music festival in the wonderful church of Saanen."

"A way of life that excludes the unknown and the mysterious is not in harmony with life itself."

"Every moment of life is a new beginning, an ending and a beginning again—a point where threads come together before they separate once more."

"The right to silence, to clean air, pure water, meadows, forests and wholesome food should be enshrined in the constitution of every nation."

Reflections Along the Gstaad Philosopher's Trail

Stretching between Gstaad and Saanen, the Gstaad Philosopher's Trail honours Yehudi Menuhin, who was named an Honorary Citizen of the Municipality of Saanen in 1970. Twelve stations along the River Saane invite visitors to discover his reflections on humanity, nature and culture while exploring the enduring humanistic values that continue to shape the region today.

Menuhin Center Saanen

The Menuhin Center Saanen preserves the artistic and intellectual legacy of Yehudi Menuhin. Located in the historic Salzhüsi chalet in the heart of Saanen, its permanent exhibition traces the life and work of the world-renowned violinist, educator and humanitarian while telling the story of the Menuhin Festival Gstaad, which he founded in 1957.

More than a museum, the Menuhin Center is a place of inspiration. It keeps alive Yehudi Menuhin's vision of music as a force that brings people together, fosters dialogue between cultures and inspires future generations.

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