

Marcel Gazelle and the Culture of the Early Yehudi Menuhin School

Ian Pace

Originally posted on blog *Desiring Progress* on May 7th, 2013, at <https://ianpace.wordpress.com/2013/05/07/marcel-gazelle-and-the-culture-of-the-early-yehudi-menuhin-school/>

The recent broadcast from Channel 4 News, following a painstaking investigation, has resulted in the late Belgian pianist Marcel Gazelle (1907-1969), the first Director of Music at the Yehudi Menuhin School, being named as a serial abuser of young girls. In particular, the brave testimony of Irita Kutchmy, who chose to allow herself to be filmed and named, brings home the horror of this. No criminal charges are possible since Gazelle died in 1969, but the ease with which he appeared to be able to continue his activities unchecked, and the length of time during which they have remained secret, should give room for reflection.

But who was Marcel Gazelle? His is not a particularly familiar name today, and plenty of musical dictionaries omit him. Yet he was of very great importance both to Menuhin himself and to the school he founded; Menuhin described Gazelle as ‘among the dearest and most valued of my friends and colleagues’, and wrote in his autobiography that ‘few men have played a greater part in my history than Marcel’. Gazelle also played a pivotal part in the whole ethos of the school at which he worked; Menuhin described him as ‘the school’s foster father’. As no book, article or website appears to give a particularly comprehensive view of his life and work, here I draw upon a range of sources in an attempt to provide such a thing and explain his crucial role in the early years of the school, and a wider picture of the culture of the place at this time.

Marcel Gazelle was born in Ghent in 1907. He studied at the conservatory in the city, working with Marcel Ciampi (who also taught Menuhin’s sister Hephzibah) from 1928, after finishing his Premier Prix. Gazelle at this stage already developed serious problems of tendonitis, which may have affected his inability to sustain a solo career. He appears to have first met Menuhin around 1933, when they began to play together. In autumn 1934, Menuhin undertook a major twelve-month tour of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, before returning to Europe. For this tour Menuhin replaced his sister Hephzibah as his pianist with Gazelle, cementing their working relationship. Clearly Menuhin enjoyed the practicalities of playing and touring with Gazelle, later writing that he found him from the beginning ‘a born solver of difficulties, painlessly dispatching in the early days the problems of travel, luggage, timetable, rendezvous’.

At some point in the late 1930s, Gazelle married the French violinist Jacqueline Salomons, a childhood friend of Menuhin who had worked together with him and George Enesco in chamber music sessions from 1931, though according to Yaltah, the younger sister of Menuhin, this was a rather forced marriage brought about by match-making activities on the part of their mother Marutha Menuhin. Gazelle's first major teaching position was at his own alma mater, the Ghent Conservatory, where he began at some point before the war. He was now playing and recording regularly with Menuhin; by 1939 their recordings including works of Sarasate, Dvorák-Kreisler, and Brahms-Joachim.

According to the account by Menuhin, Gazelle was caught in Belgium at the time of the German invasion of May 1940, but managed somehow to smuggle himself out as part of the retreat from Dunkirk, escaping to London where he joined the Free Belgian forces. Jacqueline escaped the occupation independently and found her way to Lisbon, only managing to become reunited with Marcel in London in 1942. During the war years Gazelle played various concerts in the UK, including an appearance with the London Philharmonic Orchestra under Anatole Fistoulari in December 1943, a concert with Jacqueline at the Wigmore Hall on February 12th, 1944, and a solo recital at the Wigmore Hall on September 30th, 1944. Gazelle also played in a piano quartet in London during this period, together with Maurice Raskin and Rodolphe Soirin and Léonard Ardenois. His playing was described in 1944 as demonstrating 'an ease and a coolness which nothing can disturb'; another critic wrote that 'his technique was equally polished' as that of Menuhin.

Gazelle and Menuhin were reunited in the spring of 1943, after Menuhin had travelled back to London, and the two performed all over Britain soon afterwards, including concerts at factories, at military installations, at concert halls for wartime charities, and for Free French forces in the Royal Albert Hall. They also produced a series of 78 rpm records, including Bach's *Air on a G String* and Schubert's *Ave Maria*, for wartime listening.

A few days after Gazelle's Wigmore recital, Menuhin and Gazelle travelled to Europe (where the Allied landing had taken place earlier that year), reaching Brussels on October 2nd. They gave concerts in both Brussels (at the Palais des Beaux-Arts) and Antwerp, and were invited to a dinner in the latter city. in a building close to the vacated Gestapo headquarters. After Antwerp was deemed unsafe, the two returned to Brussels, then hitchhiked their way on an American plane to Le Bourget, on the outskirts of Paris, before being taken in a jeep to the centre of the city. Here the two booked into the Ritz and were reunited with old musician friends including Gazelle's old teacher Ciampi. They made it back to London (in a plane which had to make a forced landing in a field in Kent due to electrical failure) in time for Menuhin to make it to the BBC wartime studios in Bedford to broadcast the Bartók Second Violin Concerto.

Two days after VE Day Gazelle performed in the National Gallery together with violinist Maurice Raskin. Menuhin and Gazelle continued to perform and record together regularly in the post-war era (Gazelle generally undertaking Menuhin's European tours, with Adolph Baller accompanying the violinist in America), including a trip to South Africa in 1950, and of India in 1952. Gazelle continued to teach in Ghent; one of his students then was American pianist and teacher Phyllis Bergquist Billington, who was in Belgium as a Fulbright Scholar in the early 1950s. Gazelle and his wife gave the world premiere in 1958 of the Violin Sonata No. 2 by the Polish-born, Dutch-naturalised composer Ignace Lilién (1897-1964), and Gazelle himself premiered the Piano Concerto of Jules-Toussaint de Sutter in 1960.

During a concert tour of the Soviet Union in 1962, Menuhin visited the Central School for Young Musicians in Moscow; his wife Diana would come to write:

‘However the morning we spent there held a current of anonymity and drill that was disturbing. Dear little monsters aged four or five or six, their pigtails pinned to the crowns of their heads, whipped their way through Chopin and Liszt and all the showy composers with a cool competence that was at once admirable though alarming. Later we heard older boys and girls who had graduated to more serious but still dramatic works, showing their paces with a skill and perfection of execution that also left one baffled. Especially perplexing was the weird withholding of all names either of the performer or – particularly – of the teacher. These were gifted and well-tooled machines, part of the state's organization and property for home consumption and export. Hephzibah remained silent; Yehudi was obviously more determined than ever to bring to the West his own version of such training.’

Menuhin believed that up until the 1970s ‘the Soviet Union led the world’ in terms of musical education, despite his having been fiercely critical of Soviet musical policy in the early post-war era and had some altercations with Russian and Czech military policy in the same era. In the spring of 1963, he sent Gazelle, together with violinist Alberto Lysy (1935-2009) to visit the Moscow school, in order to bring back an impression of how the children's days were organized in a manner which could provide a blueprint for their own plans. Menuhin said that the Moscow Central School was the ‘working model’ for his own, but in his autobiography described the differences between the two as follows: in Moscow there were 300 students, whereas he began with 15 (this would grow to 32 in 1965, 36 in 1969, 38 in 1972, 62 by 1983); Moscow trained soloists, whereas Menuhin wanted to produce musical all-rounders who could also work in teaching, chamber groups or orchestras – he noted that a society supposedly so founded upon the collective geared its musical education towards producing individual performers.

The Yehudi Menuhin School was the second such specialist music institution in the UK, the Central Tutorial School for Young Musicians (later to become the Purcell

School) having opened in 1962 (Chetham's would become a specialist music school in 1969, Wells' Cathedral School in 1970, and St Mary's Music School in 1972, with Menuhin as patron). The Menuhin School was opened in September 1963, using premises in London acquired by pedagogue Grace Cone for her Arts Educational Trust; music lessons and all bedrooms were at the Prince of Wales Hotel (now destroyed), whilst academic lessons were held at the Trust's classrooms near Piccadilly. The first committee included the Marchioness of Cholmondeley, Lady Fermoy, Sir Miki Sekers, the Countess of Strafford, Lord Mottistone, Mr Paul Paget and others. In 1964 the school transferred to new premises within a fifteen-acre parkland in Stoke d'Abernon, twenty-five miles south-west of London. Charitable donations and proceeds from auction of various donated works of art by the likes of Oskar Kokoschka and Henry Moore enabled the mortgage on the property to be almost completely settled within seven years. In the autumn of the second year a BBC2 masterclass featured a lesson with a seven-year old Nigel Kennedy, who had just joined the school that year.

Menuhin himself initially selected many of the students himself, of which around a third were girls. The initial fees were £450 per year. The school taught just five instruments: violin, viola, cello, double bass and piano. Menuhin called upon Frederick Grinke, who was a professor at the Royal Academy of Music for recommendations for teachers. The early teachers included Gazelle and Barbara Kerslake on piano, George Malcolm on harpsichord, Grinke himself, Robert Masters, Alberto Lysy, Jacqueline Gazelle and Margaret Norris on violin, Lionel Tertis on viola, Christopher Bunting, Maurice Gendron and Myra Chahin on cello. Peter Norris (who remained at the school for a long period), husband of Margaret, taught chamber music and worked on aural training. Visiting teachers would include Marcel Ciampi and Nadia Boulanger, and others who came to visit included Stéphane Grappelli and Ravi Shankar. The first headmaster was Anthony Brackenbury, who had come from teaching classics at Bryanston, then as head of sixth form studies at a London comprehensive for two years.

Gazelle not only taught piano and co-ordinated musical activities in the school, but also, according to the book *Menuhin's House of Music*, took charge of solfège, sight-singing, transposition, theory, harmony and even some musical history, though one former student does not recall him giving lessons in any of these himself. He would spend about four days of each week during term time at the school, the remainder being spent at Ghent. His piano students at the school included Ronan Magill, Jacqueline Cole, Mike Stanley, and briefly Menuhin's own son Jeremy, who stayed at the school only for a short while before being despatched to Eton. Other students from the first year of the school's existence included violinists David Angel (now a member of the Maggini Quartet together with later student Michal Kaznowski), Mary Eade, Rosemary Furniss and Elizabeth Perry. In the second year they were joined by

various others including Marcia Crayford (who would come to teach at the school by 1969), Levine Andrade, Catherine Stevens (daughter of composer Bernard Stevens and violinist Bertha Stevens), Nigel Kennedy and then in the next few years by Colin Carr, Irita Kutchmy, Kathryn Stott, Michal Kaznowski and others. Various individuals have spoken about how they were made to feel that it would be an incredible honour to be studying piano with Menuhin's accompanist; Gazelle would be friendly and charming towards parents.

The daily schedules were gruelling. All students had to put in at least three hours' practice per day, and for their more regular education were divided into three age groups. Daily activities would start at seven o'clock each morning for the younger children, 6:30 for the over-twelves at least twice a week. Classes on general musicianship, including ear tests, dictation, identifying chords and modulations, and so on, would take place before breakfast. Then the youngest pupils would have lessons whilst older ones practised their instruments under adult supervision, followed by a mid-morning break in which Brackenbury would lead the older children in 'physical jerks'. There was a short but compulsory twenty-minute rest on beds after lunchtime, then the school day proceeded up until 6pm. Events happened practically every evening, which could be students playing, singing or acting, puppet plays, or once every week a concert given by teachers. Yoga teaching, and later *t'ai chi*, were prominent at the school due to Menuhin's enthusiasm for these practices; an Indian Mr Iyengar visited in the first year on three occasions to give yoga classes to the children.

Gazelle would allegedly enter the younger girls' rooms to wake them up and would touch them under their bed clothes as they lay there. The older girls suffered an even more intrusive wake up call. Several girls at the school during the 1960s have claimed that he groomed them and then sexually abused them repeatedly over several years, leading to lifelong severe mental and sexual problems and often an inability to go near the school again (an attitude shared by many others claiming to have suffered non-sexual, but severe psychological and emotional abuse at the same school). His activities were not talked about leading many to believe that they were the only ones to suffer that fate, only discovering relatively recently that others had also been abused. In lessons he would sometimes have his arm placed continuously around some girls, the smoke from his Gitane cigarettes wafting into their nostrils. He also instilled fear in many due to his temper, leading some to feel they needed to feign enjoyment of his 'attentions' in order to avoid his anger.

Gazelle is also alleged to have employed a technique which is eerily near-identical to that of which I have heard from other teachers in other institutions. This involved reducing students to tears regularly at the beginning of lessons, by cruelly berating them for how they played, completely undermining their confidence (obliviously to whether they might be ill or anything else), so as then to be able to take them on his

knee to comfort and cuddle them, thus exploiting vulnerability as a strategy for control.

Mental and emotional cruelty and manipulation were allegedly equally common from other teachers there. The cello teacher Maurice Gendron is claimed to have systematically reduced students to tears in practically every lesson, whilst projecting outwards the symptoms of his morphine addiction, and would quiz students on their sex life and masturbation habits (Kaznowski's account of Gendron's activities can be found [here](#)). Jacqueline Gazelle was remembered as pointedly staring at the floor when students would make the slightest slip in a concert, then refusing to say a word to them afterwards. Boys would queue up at the toilets before her lessons out of fright. She is remembered to have had ferocious tantrums and would throw their music on the floor and insult them mercilessly, almost taking pleasure in causing them distress – students would emerge from her lessons crying and shaking. Barbara Kerslake is recalled to have had a characteristic trick of slamming the piano lid down on children's hands whilst they were playing. Others' teaching would simply consist of picking up their instrument and playing something perfectly so as to shame the child by comparison. Humiliation of pupils was common, and they were made to think that those who had left because of the pressure were merely failures, an epithet they themselves dreaded. On the other hand, the school liked to parade those it saw as its successes in front of the media and visiting royals – there was even a point where students regularly appeared on Savile's *Jim 'll Fix It*. The idea that children need reassurance and help, rather than just criticism, appears to have passed various teachers by, though some have spoken fondly in particular of Margaret Norris.

The tortuous environment caused children to run away, be expelled, shoplift, or even set the building on fire deliberately. Some children claimed to be being abused by a parent, and no-one believed them or cared. One member of staff is alleged to have had a public affair with another whilst the former's spouse and children were living on campus; another, whose family also lived on the premises, had an relationship with a young student on and off campus. Empty beds were the tell-tale sign that pupils were being 'tended to' elsewhere.

As mentioned above, Gazelle continued to teach at Ghent alongside his activities at the Menuhin School. The student of his during this time who would go on to achieve greatest prominence was the conductor Philippe Herreweghe who studied piano with Gazelle. Herreweghe would in a 2011 interview list his work with Gazelle as amongst the most important encounters in his life, alongside those with Gustav Leonhardt, Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Christoph Prégardien. Other of Gazelle's Belgian students in the late 1960s were the pianists Roland de Munck and Jan Rispens, pianist and composer François Glorieux, and Abel Mattheijs, professor at the Brussels Conservatoire. He made a recording on HMV in 1968 with violinist Robert Masters (to be his successor as Director of Music at the school) and cellist Derek Simpson of

Nikos Skalkottas's *Eight Variations on a Greek Folk Tune*. Gazelle died from lung cancer in February 1969, having smoked since the age of six or seven.

Menuhin's own knowledge of the activities of Gazelle and others at his school remain an open question – perhaps some further information could be found through research into correspondence at the Yehudi Menuhin Archive housed at the Royal Academy of Music. The school had been designed so as to function without his presence, and he was listed simply as a visiting teacher, though his influence was widely felt at all levels; when he would visit once or twice a term, all other activities were suspended so he could spend time with each pupil.

Menuhin said of Gazelle that 'from the beginning he fitted so easily into my family it was as if I had suddenly been given an older brother'. The 1969 book *Menuhin's House of Music*, with text by Delius's collaborator Eric Fenby, provides today for a grim read for those with some knowledge of what else was going on. Fenby wrote of Gazelle: 'Dedicated absolutely to his profession, he gives himself unsparingly in his teaching, expecting nothing but the best response; implanting disciplines where needed and imbuing confidence in all. Clearly he earns his pupils' trust and personal regard in return'. All of these comments need to be re-interpreted and re-assessed in light of the ominous allegations now coming to light.

The violinist Nigel Kennedy said ten years ago (quoted in **'Kennedy reveals abuse at music school', The Observer, Sunday September 28th, 2003**) that young girls were sexually abused during his time at the school, pointing out that he himself at age eight would be at the receiving end of a teacher's disaffections for being perceived as a rival for a girl. Kennedy did not name any perpetrators or victims, but carefully pointed out 'Maybe it's very close to religion, music. If you've got someone who's like a guru figure, you probably might think what they're doing is right'. Various of Kennedy's contemporaries from the time read this and were immediately aware to whom he was referring. Now Kennedy has been prepared to name Gazelle and make public his very mixed feelings about the school he attended.

As with the case of Michael Brewer, and allegations about Malcolm Layfield, Ryszard Bakst and Chris Ling at Chetham's, it is maybe to be anticipated that we will hear about how these are 'historic' cases, which could never happen today. I very much hope this is indeed the case, but from former pupils at the Menuhin School alone I have heard a range of disturbing allegations about various types of abuse during the 1980s and 1990s. All allegations do need to be treated as such and properly investigated, and all alleged perpetrators should rightly be considered innocent until they are proved guilty. But overwhelming numbers of allegations point to a situation whereby children at specialist music schools are in a position of high vulnerability to abuse and cruelty, in which this is often accepted as being par for the course within such training, and in which such abuse is covered-up, or pressure put on victims to

stay quiet, in order to protect the reputations of both teachers and institutions. All aspects of the working, teaching and administration of these institutions needs urgent investigation and reappraisal. Major studies of musical education were produced for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in 1965 ('Making Musicians') and 1978 ('Training Musicians'). Another thorough survey taking seriously everything else which has transpired or is in the process of transpiring is needed as soon as possible.

With immense thanks to all of those who have spoken to me about abuse at the Menuhin School and elsewhere, some of which (with permission) has informed the above, and others who looked at this piece before publication. And to everyone working for change in musical education.

[Some small edits made, 9/5/13 and 11/5/13. With many thanks to several former YMS students, and also to Didier Gazelle, who sent me corrections of a few factual matters]

[UPDATE: Michael Kaznowski has spoken at length about Maurice Gendron in a powerful article in the *Independent*, which can be read [here](#). A documentary about Gendron can be viewed [here](#).]