

Interview: Norbert Brainin



'LaRouche drew my attention to the scientific side of music'

The following interview was conducted in Washington, D.C. on June 6, the day that Norbert Brainin, together with pianist Günter Ludwig, performed a concert that featured Mozart's Sonata in E-flat major, K. 481; Brahms's Sonata in A major, Op. 100; and Beethoven's Sonata in G major, Op. 96. Brainin also demonstrated the Saraband and Double from J.S. Bach's unaccompanied violin Partita No. 1, at today's prevailing higher tuning as well as at the classical pitch of C-256. The concert was recorded by National Public Radio.

Norbert Brainin was the first violinist, with the famed Amadeus Quartet until the death in 1987 of violist Peter Schidlof. He teaches at the London and Cologne conservatories and gives master classes around the world, while continuing his work as a concert artist.

The interview was conducted by Kathy Wolfe and Hartmut Cramer.

EIR: Professor Brainin, in 40 years with the Amadeus Quartet and now the Amadeus Trio, you did hundreds of recordings and concerts all over the world. Why have you come from Europe just for this special June 6 concert in Washington?

Brainin: I have come to draw attention to the imprisonment of Mr. Lyndon LaRouche, to the injustice of it all, to help in this way, and to cheer up his friends in their fight for his release.

EIR: How long have you known Mr. LaRouche, and how did you come to know him?

Brainin: I have come to know Mr. LaRouche actually through the music. We used to talk music together, and he drew my attention to the scientific side of music, namely, the tuning, which most people just take for granted, the way it is, or use it in an arbitrary manner. He pointed out that there is a *science* to this tuning, which is based on the human voice, and this puts an entirely new concept into our contemporary musical understanding.

EIR: What do you think, and what is the view in Europe generally, about the fact that Mr. LaRouche is in jail under such circumstances?

Brainin: Unfortunately the fact is hardly known in Europe as far as ordinary people are concerned. The media don't report on it at all. It is only people such as the Schiller Institute and their publications who really do this. This is a very sad fact.

EIR: And what do you think about the fact that he's in jail under such circumstances?

Brainin: Well, he's obviously innocent, and it is very obvious to people like me that the reason for his imprisonment is political. Without going into details—I don't want to enlarge on the ins and outs of the case—but it is very obvious that it is unjust and it is political.

EIR: Isn't this ironic in light of the freedom revolt in Eastern Europe?

Brainin: Yes it is rather, it is as though the boot were on the other foot!

EIR: You also gave a concert in Berlin, for the people of Berlin, in December 1989. Can you tell us why, and more about it?

Brainin: It was on my part a kind of rejoicing about the events that happened in the German Democratic Republic and other parts of Eastern Europe. It was an inspiration how the people of the G.D.R. conducted themselves in this revolution. It was like a breath of fresh air! I wanted to show my appreciation, and the Schiller Institute very kindly arranged this concert.

EIR: And what did you play?

Brainin: We played a Beethoven program, what else?

EIR: Do you see any hopeful parallel between the U.S. now, and the fact that the leaders of Czechoslovakia and Poland were in jail themselves just a few months ago?

Brainin: I leave this to your imagination.

EIR: You've just come from Prague, where a dramatist is President, and in Lithuania, a classical music teacher, a pianist, is President, and promoting Beethoven as the freedom

Beethoven thought of man as made in the image of God from the Christian and Jewish idea of God and man. He was absolutely imbued with this concept, and he regarded himself as working for God.

anthem for Europe. What do you think about the cultural level in Washington, as compared for example, with Prague, or other European capitals?

Brainin: Well, the cultural level in Washington is actually very high. After all they think of getting me to Washington to play for them, which is proof, in fact. You see the people of the U.S. respond to the challenge of freedom which is emanating from Eastern Europe, very much. But the government is a different story.

EIR: Next year, 1991, will be the bicentennial memorial for Mozart, who lived from 1756 to 1791. You know we also had the American Revolution from 1776 to 1789, and at that time Mozart and other European music was very popular here. What do you think of having celebrations of Mozart in America, to remind us of the kind of music we had during our own fight for freedom?

Brainin: It would be most appropriate to have that here. After all, in Europe there is going to be a lot of celebration in 1991 and I would say in the U.S., and it should certainly be furthered.

EIR: You were born in Vienna before World War II. Can you tell us about your early musical training? Were your parents in music?

Brainin: My family was not musical at all. My first teacher was a cousin, but he was not a trained musician. He played the violin as an amateur and gave violin lessons to pay for his studies as an architect. He taught me for about a year.

EIR: How old were you?

Brainin: I was seven. I could have started when I was four, and if I had, I could have been a *Wunderkind* [child prodigy], that is, I would have been able to play concerts by the time I was 10. But in any case I did show musical talent. I sang very well in tune and with great expression, and I remembered the music and the words. In any case, Yehudi Menuhin had come to play the year before, 1928 or '29, on a European tour, at age 12 or 13, and it was a tremendous sensation and my parents thought, "Maybe the boy has talent."

It was too late to become a *Wunderkind*, but I did start and made progress in the normal way.

The funny part is that when I started out my first lesson, I knew I was going to be a violinist! I thought, "That's it!" Somehow, many boys know what they want

to be. Many of them want to become train engineers and never make it, but I wanted to become a violinist and I did become one.

EIR: Today in the U.S. we have very little classical music training in some schools, and the children watch a lot of TV instead. Can you give us some detail on how children were trained in music in Europe when you were young?

Brainin: It was mostly privately. They did teach music at schools on the level of *Gesangsunterricht* [singing instruction] in the schools, but that was about it. When it came to instrumental study, it was all private. If they were considered talented enough, they would go to the accredited state music conservatory.

EIR: What about the general level of culture at home?

Brainin: Amongst the middle classes there was a comparatively high level of cultural awareness, but the working class was very uninformed in such matters, although I must say that the best musicians eventually always came from the lower classes just the same.

EIR: So you studied from 1929?

Brainin: From 1930 onwards in Vienna. I left Vienna when I was 15.

EIR: Why?

Brainin: Because of the Nazi persecution of the Jews, of which I was one. I came to England. I was very lucky to come to England, because I was supposed to go to England to study with Carl Flesch in that year; but the fact that I managed to get to London under the circumstances of the Anschluss was a miracle, really, to come to a strange country where there were teachers such as Flesch and later Max Rostal to teach me. Imagine if I had not had this great luck, to be able to go where I did. I would probably not have become a musician.

EIR: The Amadeus Quartet you later founded has become known for interpreting especially the German masters such as Beethoven. Now in 1938, when you had to leave Austria, did you think about that?

Brainin: No, I started to play quartets at 12, but I had an idea that if I ever were to play, I had a certain sound in mind, in my mind's ear. . . .

EIR: At what age did you play the first quartet?

Brainin: Twelve. I remember because it was the Mozart D minor quartet K. 421 of which I knew precisely nothing and I couldn't even read my part, so it didn't make any sense to me, it was quite terrible, but it was a beginning.

EIR: And at that time you already had a certain tone in your inner ear?

Brainin: Yes, I had something, actually what was later labeled as the "Amadeus sound"—it was pretty near to that.

EIR: What was your view about German music during this crucial time?

Brainin: This was *the* classical music, German or not German, that's not the point! When we speak of Beethoven—you say German composers like Beethoven—there are no German composers like Beethoven really, because Beethoven is so far above—I have the greatest difficulty when thinking of Beethoven's music, to think of him as a German composer! Because he's so far above—so universal!

The fact is that even the English, who were fighting against Germany in the last war, adopted the well-known motif of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as their time signal on the radio, which was ta-ta-ta tá! ta-ta-ta tá! And those who worked in the underground armies of Europe, their motto was also this ta-ta-ta tá! It was all Beethoven!

You don't have to be German to be for Beethoven, or for Schiller! Actually when I come to think of what is really German, I don't think of Mozart, I don't think of Beethoven, I don't think of Haydn, not even of Brahms—but, of Mendelssohn! Mendelssohn is for me real German music, which is of a period which was looking forward, a period of German revolution, really, looking forward—*Zuversicht* [self-confidence]. It's only in Mendelssohn real German, established German! But Beethoven is a different thing altogether.

EIR: You said there is something universal in Beethoven's music, which speaks to all mankind? Can you elaborate on that?

Brainin: Yes, it is the love and propagation of freedom, really, of which there was none, when Beethoven lived, when Mozart lived. It is in everything which Beethoven did—it was *always* freedom! The Eroica [Beethoven's Third Symphony] was supposed to be about freedom. You know he dedicated this to Napoleon, then changed his mind and tore up the dedication [when Napoleon crowned himself emperor], but it was still revolutionary, and forward-looking, and freedom-loving. So was the Ninth Symphony. This is exactly it!

EIR: What was the image of man of a composer such as Beethoven?

Brainin: Obviously he thought of man as made in the image of God, as is traditional in the Bible, from the Jewish and

Christian idea of God and man. He was absolutely imbued with this concept, and he regarded himself as working in this direction, he regarded himself as working for God.

EIR: Would you consider especially the quartets by Beethoven to be written this way, as you studied them over the years?

Brainin: Yes, the quartets are very important, perhaps the most important expression of Beethoven over the years. There are three distinct periods which found expression in the quartets. The first part, the Op. 18 quartets, are in high classical style, in the style of the late Mozart quartets, which are called the Prussian Quartets because they were written for the King of Prussia; the style was virtuoso chamber music.

Then there was Beethoven's middle period, which you can say is the Rasumovsky quartets Op. 74. It's difficult to place the quartet Op. 95; you can say it belongs to the last period or the middle period.

But the last six quartets, 127, 130, 131, 132, 133, Grosse Fuge, and 135, they are the result of quite a special development in Beethoven's mind. It is the expression of his spiritual development, which put him far above all other artists which we know. Perhaps if you say that up to the last years of his life there were many artists who were his equals, such as Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, Brahms, Schiller, Shakespeare, Dante, painters of the Renaissance, they were on a par with Beethoven—but from then on, he's clearly on his own! There's no one who can touch him in his artistic expertise and his power of expression, to say things to us which no one else ever said before.

EIR: Please tell us a little about how you founded the Amadeus Quartet.

Brainin: With regards to Beethoven?

EIR: No, the history of the quartet.

Brainin: I wanted to play quartets always. I was trained as a solo violinist, I always thought of a solo violinist's career, but I thought it would be a good idea to play quartets, because it belongs to the general education of the musician and I enjoyed it.

The fact is, after I started, very soon after I started to rehearse and to work seriously on this, it blotted out everything else which I ever did. I had no time and no energy to think of anything else. It occupied me completely, the study of playing the quartets and learning the repertoire. Eventually I just became a player of quartets. This is absolutely necessary. I dedicated my life to it. Anybody who ever embarks on a career of playing quartets, if he's not able to do this, or willing to do this, he drops out! There are many cases of quartets which have personnel changes when they find that they can not go on. The same could have easily happened to the Amadeus Quartet, but I would say by the grace of God we managed to avoid this.



Kathy Wolfe

During a visit to the Smithsonian Institution's old instruments collection in Washington, D.C. on June 6, Norbert Brainin tried out the 1709 "Greffuhle" Stradivarius violin, accompanied by Günter Ludwig on a fortepiano built by Conrad Graf in Vienna around 1830.

We had a way of working which was very open, and very honest.

EIR: "Terribly honest," you said once.

Brainin: Yes, yes, terribly honest! It was indeed. Every rehearsal could have ended in a dissolution of the quartet, in such a spirit was it conducted. It was "no holds barred!"

You see, it is important in a quartet, in a group of this sort, that everybody has to do his utmost to contribute to the group, and if there are any discrepancies, which there always are, he has to put forward his point of view as strongly as possible, and try to convince the others of his point of view, and the others have to do the same.

This obviously could end in disaster, but not if you're very honest. You have to be honest enough to eventually accept another point of view than your own, if you are honest and you can see it.

The question of compromise does not come into this at all! There should never be a compromise! It never was with us. It was always conviction, proper conviction which we shared. We shared our opinions, genuinely shared our opinions, and this gave us a great unity.

I always thought that the questions which we discussed were obviously of a secondary nature—I call it secondary nature by hindsight, because if you were able to solve a problem, it would turn out to be a problem of a secondary nature—but, if you were unable to solve a problem, it would have turned out to be of a fundamental nature, a fundamental discrepancy. If you could not solve that, you would come apart, you would leave. . . .

EIR: Do you think this sharing of opinion came because you shared the same cultural background or the same fate during the war?

Brainin: Yes, naturally it would help. You see the reason a quartet starts together, is because they like each other, they like the way they play, they like the way they make music together. But you don't know what is to come. There could be personal problems. The reason why some quartets come apart or change personnel is very rarely a musical one; it is always a personal one, which turns up later, but we were spared that sort of thing, and we carried on for 40 years.

And we were still making progress, you see, this is why we were still really together—40 years is quite a long time after all. We were all in our sixties when poor Peter Schidlöf died, and if he had't done so, we would still be playing.

EIR: Can you elaborate on the specifics, where were your colleagues; this was war!

Brainin: Yes, it was war. It started in internment, actually; we were interned. The British government in their wisdom decided to intern all German refugees, of which I was one.

EIR: Most of them were Jews?

Brainin: Most, but not all. I know quite a number who were not. But Jew or not Jewish, there was not one spy amongst them, not one Nazi. Not one! Or traitor, not one of the German-speaking ones.

I met Peter in internment, and we made friends, and then later on we were parted and came to different camps. And Peter met Siegmund Nissel there.

I was released first, because the government put out a White Paper in which certain categories of people were delineated to be released, and one of them was if you were under 18, which I was at the time, so I was released without any further ado. But nevertheless I spent two and a half months in internment, and my colleagues were there just over a year. They wanted to get rid of them. The category under which Peter and Siggie were released was “eminent artists” or something, which they clearly were not—they were hardly out of school—but it sufficed, and they were released under this heading.

EIR: And then you studied together?

Brainin: Yes, I told my violin teacher Max Rostal that I’d met this very gifted young violinist in internment and perhaps he could please teach him when he comes out.

I also met a very important man in internment, Dr. Ferdinand Rauter. He was from Klagenford. He was non-Jewish, a fantastic musician, a pianist. His best known work was that he accompanied the famous folksinger Inge Lund, who was from Iceland. She’s a great artist. I think she died last year. She sang folksongs of all nations and he edited them and made up the accompaniment. I played with him quite a lot during those years; I enjoyed playing with him very much and I’m still in contact with his family.

EIR: So then you had Siegmund Nissel and Peter Schidlof also studying with Max Rostal?

Brainin: Yes, they came to study with Max; as a matter of fact, Rauter was also a friend of Max Rostal and he told him about these two boys, so we all studied together.

We all had to do what was called “war work,” something for the war effort, because we were classed as “friendly enemy aliens.” Some of them went into the army, but there was only one part of the army which people such as us could join, the Pioneer Corps. I didn’t want to do that, so I opted for war work. I went to a training center to be trained as an “unskilled machine tool fitter”—that was my title. Sometimes I think they would have won the war more quickly without me! Near the end of the war I was made redundant and went back to studying.

EIR: And how did you get to know the ‘cellist of the quartet?

Brainin: The cellist’s wife, Susan Rosza, is Hungarian; she also studied with Flesch and then with Max Rostal. She wasn’t his wife then; they were engaged, and it was through her that we met Martin.

It was actually in ’46, but then we really started right at the beginning of 1947, in January, that we really studied and worked together. We worked for about a year, exactly a year, before we made our debut at Widmore Hall in January 1948.

EIR: And this was a great success?



Norbert Brainin and the Smithsonian Institutions’ old instrument curator Gary Sturm discuss some fine points about Stradivarius violins, which are constructed to sound best at a tuning of middle C=256 to cycles per second.

Brainin: Yes, it was a great success, and we were immediately offered engagements here, there and everywhere. Usually it was when others dropped out. It was almost always a question of having to play a certain program, which meant we had to learn it. At the time we gave our recital at the Wigmore Hall, we were only able to play five pieces—three of which appeared on the program!

So everything we learned, we learned after that, we worked day and night in those days, and for very little money! Of course that is in the nature of things. With the help of God, we did better and better. It took about 10 years before things became better.

EIR: You said you wanted to come to support Mr. LaRouche and protest the fact that he’s in jail. Wasn’t there also some special musical reason for this Washington concert?

Brainin: Yes, the specific reason was to play this concert in the scientific tuning which was really brought into being again, resuscitated if you like, by Mr. LaRouche, and which is scientific because it is based on the *Beschaffenheit* [constitution] of the human voice.

At first I was not convinced of this at all! What convinced me really was, in the summer of 1988, Mr. LaRouche came to visit me at my house in Italy, and after lunch I asked him to come to the music room, and I played Bach for him. Then Mr. LaRouche asked me to try and tune down my violin to the level of 432 Hertz [the tuning of A when C is tuned to 256 Hz], and play some of it again.

I admit that when we played quartets, I was always the one who wanted to play higher! It was Peter who wanted to play lower. But it is only when you get down to A-432 that you suddenly realize, "Aha! This is right! This is correct! It feels right!"

EIR: What was it that you played?

Brainin: It was the Adagio from Bach's G minor Sonata (No. 1) and I also played some of the Saraband of the D minor Suite.

EIR: Why did you choose these pieces?

Brainin: They are very good to hear and to play, and they show up the polyphony. I played at the lower tuning, and I realized suddenly: "This violin sounds much better! It resonates, and the tone blooms, and the bow takes the strings better, and the notes ring. Indeed, everything about playing is facilitated in some way, which makes for better expression and interpretation."

EIR: So, you discussed it.

Brainin: Yes, we discussed it, and the Schiller Institute took this up and organized a few concerts for me, together with a pianist, in this lower tuning, which is not very easy to do, because it's very difficult to find a piano, and indeed a piano tuner who will do this, because from the standpoint of a professional musician, it's not pragmatic to do.

But we did it, nevertheless and it's been very successful, always, people like it, although they may not notice the difference. And indeed after I play for a while, I forget about the tuning. I don't think about the tuning, I just think about how to play.

But if you compare, you will see that there are certain advantages to playing classical music particularly at this lower level of tuning, which was stipulated by Giuseppe Verdi for the performance of his operas, and which is *exactly* right for the human voice.

I admit that when we played quartets, I was always the one who wanted to play higher and higher and higher! It was Peter who wanted to play lower, never as low as 432—his ideal was 440, which is about as low as anybody goes these days, and which is better, yes, but it is only when you get down to 432 that it really hits the nail on the head, and you suddenly realize, "Aha! This is right! *This* is correct! It feels right!"

EIR: What about your inner ear? You said you played in the quartet for decades at a rather high tuning, but when you were young, how was it then?

Brainin: It was about A-440. A-440 is not even a semitone

lower. It's not the level of how much lower it is—it is the effect that it *feels* correct. For the voice, it is correct. It's like playing out of tune: You can play, but it doesn't sound quite right! But this actually *does* sound right, and for the voice it's right, as you say in America, it's "in the groove"!

EIR: Was the pitch perhaps lower in Vienna when you grew up? In many U. S. cities it was A-435 until 1945.

Brainin: Was it really? I didn't know that. That may well be right. Indeed, now I would say, I haven't checked up exactly on old records of Heifetz or Casals, but their tuning was evidently lower than we use today, and I have an idea that their success and their sweetness of tone was probably partly due to that—as well as to their talent, naturally, but it must have contributed greatly to their success.

EIR: Do you think it is just a matter of taste or convenience, what pitch we use for classical music? Or is there some science necessary for the pitch of classical music?

Brainin: Well, the scientific principle is really the human voice, and also, these instruments. For instance, I helped to do a scientific experiment in Cremona, with the help of Dr. [Bruno] Barosi, which showed conclusively that the violin which I used, which was a Stradivarius, sounded undoubtedly better at the lower tuning than at the higher tuning. There were more overtones, more resonance, more of everything that you expect to hear when you make music, at the lower tuning, than at the higher tuning. Quite undoubtedly. This is real proof. This experiment can be checked up on. You have the diagrams and the graphs and everything. It is quite self-explanatory.

EIR: You usually use this same Bach piece when you play at the lower and higher tuning. So is it that you not only want to show that it's more beautiful, but also because you want to make some sort of a scientific experiment with your concerts?

Brainin: I would not call it scientific at all, because we never measure anything in that. But what I did at various public concerts was to try and show people the difference and let them judge for themselves, without showing the scientific background really. The scientific background is usually pointed out in the program. What I'm doing is merely to let people judge for themselves which they prefer.

Usually the judgment is overwhelmingly for the lower tuning, but it is by no means unanimous. I understand that it is advantageous for the recording purpose to play higher, because the sounds register better this way, and this is probably the real reason why the pitch has gone higher, and higher, and higher, and higher.

But the higher pitch affects the interpretation of classical music, particularly with the strings, because the higher tuning means that more pressure is exerted onto the instruments, and your bowing is different, you have to press more, in fact the bow, generally speaking, goes more quickly when you tune high; therefore, you tend to play faster than you would even like to! But when you tune lower, you are inspired to play slower, which is good for some things, of course because your articulation is greater and the clarity is greater this way. It *does* affect the interpretation.

EIR: Kepler wrote that the musical system has some principles which are in harmony with the natural, physical laws of the Solar System. What do you think of this idea?

Brainin: I would say that the idea is obviously correct. Music is made by the composers of the classical period who certainly have this principle in their veins, but I'm not sure whether they have actually studied it in a scientific way, I would not know about that. But in general, I would say "yes" to your question.

EIR: There are distinctions between classical music and modern music. Is one distinction that these classical principles can not be found in modern music?

Brainin: Yes, that is definitely so. In some, maybe, but by and large, no, their principles, if they have principles, are different from the classical ones, and may or may not be in keeping with the laws of the universe. Some people feel this. With me it is a feeling, I have a feeling, but I am not trained in a scientific manner to pronounce upon it or to tell what the difference is exactly.

EIR: But the way you play music, it shows!

Brainin: It certainly does! I hope it does!

EIR: Can this mean that classical music is perhaps more scientific than modern music or other kinds of music such as jazz or rock?

Brainin: Yes, classical music is certainly more scientific, but I *would* not put jazz into the same pot. Jazz is an art form based mainly on the principle of variation—extemporization and variation. Jazz music is made according to very serious laws. It is *not* to be confused. . . . It is true that at one time rock or pop music borrowed from jazz, but that is not the fault of jazz. Some of the great artists of jazz certainly know a lot about music and indeed it pertains from classical music.

EIR: What about tempo? Certain people, especially Herbert

von Karajan, think that we always have to play a piece in the same time. What do you think about that? You had the experience playing the same quartet over a period of 40 years.

Brainin: From my experience, I do remember playing a movement of a certain quartet, a recording. As you know, when you record you have to play several times, about four times, you're lucky if you can do it in three, and it is essential that you have a continuity of tempo. This we did very well, and it facilitated our recording technique tremendously. We were able to play the same piece four times in exactly the same tempo, if we played it in one afternoon.

But you would notice a difference over a period of 20 years! There is a change, there is a change in interpretation. Day to day, the differences are very slight, but over a longer period of time, it is quite obvious that you do change. One hopes that it is progress, that you progress, that you get better. Be that as it may, there is certainly change.

EIR: How do these changes come about, is it an expression of development?

Brainin: Yes, it's the development, I would say. Maybe, I hope it's spiritual development, if there is a change of tempo, which there doesn't have to be, then it is as a result of some spiritual development.

EIR: If you look at the various recordings you did, can you recall that they reflected a certain development?

Brainin: Undoubtedly, definitely in fact.

EIR: Can you say, then, that music is not a matter of feeling or of sentiment, but a matter of principles?

Brainin: Yes, it's a matter of principles and of know-how or awareness of these principles. Of course, you do have to feel it—that is how it manifests itself, in feeling. But when you do it, you have to do it according to certain principles; you have to know certain proportions, when you phrase a phrase, you have to know how this phrase is situated in the larger context of the whole work. All these things one has to know and see in one's mind's eye. My job as an interpreter is to see that.

I am not a scientist myself, but I can see the science, how it works, and I can see how, what should be done to bring it out, what has to be done in order to do justice to this scientific element in the music. I do know, yes. But I would not be able to talk about it in a scientific manner.

I know that some people *can* talk about it in a scientific manner, in particular Mr. Lyndon LaRouche. He can certainly talk about it in a scientific manner, and I appreciate this greatly, but I myself cannot.

EIR: You prefer playing?

Brainin: Yes, I play, and I'm very happy to say that Mr. LaRouche seems to like my playing, so he must think that I do things correctly, according to his scientific mind.