

## Janos Starker, Master of the Cello, Dies at 88

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Janos Starker, one of the 20th century's most renowned cellists, whose restrained onstage elegance was amply matched by the cyclone of Scotch, cigarettes and opinion that animated his offstage life, died on Sunday at a hospice in Bloomington, Ind. He was 88.

Indiana University, where he was a distinguished professor of music, announced his death.

Sam Falk/The New York Times Janos Starker in 1964. The cellist was known worldwide for his teaching as well as for his performances and recordings.

A Hungarian-born child prodigy who later survived internment by the Nazis during World War II, Mr. Starker appeared, in the decades after the war, on the world's most prestigious recital stages and as a soloist with the world's leading orchestras. He was part of a vaunted triumvirate that included Gregor Piatigorsky (1903-76) and Mstislav Rostropovich (1927-2007), collectively the most celebrated cellists of the day.

He was also widely known through his more than 150 recordings, including one of Bach's six suites for solo cello for which he won a Grammy Award in 1998.

Mr. Starker played several magnificent cellos during his career — including the "Lord Aylesford" Stradivarius of 1696, a 1707 Guarnerius and a 1705 instrument by the great Venetian maker Matteo Goffriller — but he nonetheless managed to resist the seductions of the instrument to which cellists can fall prey.

The chief hallmark of his playing was a conspicuous lack of schmaltz. Effusive sentiment is an inherent risk of the cello, with its thundering sonorities and timbre so like the human voice. He also shunned the dramatic head tossing and body swaying to which many cellists incline.

"I'm not an actor," he said in a 1996 interview with the Internet Cello Society, an online fraternity of cellists and devotees. He added, with characteristic candor, "I don't want to be one of those musicians who appears to be making love to himself onstage."

Unlike many acclaimed string players, Mr. Starker used a lean, judicious vibrato — the minute, rapid variations in pitch by the left hand that can enrich a note's sound but can also border on the histrionic. Excessive vibrato, he said, was like "a woman smearing her whole face with lipstick."

While the musical style that resulted was too dispassionate for some critics' taste, others praised Mr. Starker's faultless technique; purity of tone; clean, polished phrasing; and acute concern with the composer's intent. His style was especially well suited to the Bach suites, canonical texts for the instrument, which he recorded on several occasions.

"The technical aspects of Mr. Starker's playing are so wholly merged in the solution to problems of interpretation and style that the listener tends to forget how much technical mastery the cellist has achieved," Raymond Ericson wrote in The New York Times in 1962, reviewing a recital at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "The pitch is unerringly right, the tone is mellow without being mushy, difficult leaps and runs are manipulated with the easy unobtrusiveness of a magician."

Though Mr. Starker eschewed romantic mannerisms, he did not stint Romantic works: he gave many well-received performances of the Dvorak concerto, the lush, haunting B minor staple of every concert cellist's arsenal.

Nor did he neglect 20th-century music: he was considered one of the foremost interpreters of his countryman Zoltan Kodaly's sonata for solo cello, composed in 1915 and so technically demanding that it is sometimes described as having been written by a fiend.

In these works, too, his restrained approach differed greatly from the ripe romanticism of Rostropovich and Piatigorsky.

"What I'd like to see is a little more humility and dignity displayed toward our art, and less self-aggrandizement," Mr. Starker said of Rostropovich in a 1980 interview with People magazine. "Slava is more popular, but I'm the greater cellist."

That was merely one of his abundant opinions on all manner of things, including conductors (Mr. Starker had enduring, well-publicized feuds over musical matters with Eugene Ormandy and Herbert von Karajan) and other eminent cellists.

Conductors, he once said, "are the most overrated people in music";

And here is Mr. Starker on Jacqueline du Pré, the expressive English cellist whose career was cut short by multiple sclerosis: "She was an incredibly gifted cellist and a beautiful artist, but I believe she accelerated her own destruction because she expended so much energy in her performances";

Opinion was but one area in which Mr. Starker allowed himself joyful immoderation; cigarettes and alcohol were others. He adored Scotch and by his own account consumed it with abandon. For much of his life he smoked 60 cigarettes a day, though in old age he reduced the number to 25.

He once walked out of a scheduled performance of the Elgar Concerto with the South Carolina Philharmonic because he was barred from smoking his accustomed preconcert cigarette backstage.

Unlike many world-renowned musicians, Mr. Starker made teaching a major facet of his career. In 1958 he joined the faculty of what is now the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, where he taught until shortly before his death.

His presence there turned Bloomington into a Midwestern mecca for cellists; among his former students are the prominent soloists Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi, Gary Hoffman and Maria Kliegel.

"I personally cannot perform without teaching, and I cannot teach without performing," Mr. Starker told The Chicago Tribune in 1993. "When you have to explain what you are doing, you discover what you are really doing";

With his bald head and menacing eyebrows, Mr. Starker looked ferocious, and by all accounts he could be ferocious in the teaching studio. He was so adamant about his students' need for all-consuming commitment that he was once enlisted by Bobby Knight, Indiana's long-serving, combustible basketball coach, to give a like-minded pep talk to the team.

Janos Starker was born in Budapest on July 5, 1924, the son of Sandor and Margit Starker; his father was a tailor. (The European pronunciation of the family name is SHTAR-ker; after moving to the United States, he pronounced it STAR-ker.)

Before he turned 6, Janos was given a cello; by the time he was 8 he was giving lessons to younger children. He entered the Franz Liszt Academy of Music, making his recital debut at 11; at 14 he played the Dvorak concerto with a symphony orchestra on a few hours' notice.

As a young man, Mr. Starker was the principal cellist of the Budapest Opera and the Budapest Philharmonic.

The Starkers were Jews. Near the end of World War II, Mr. Starker and his parents were dispatched to an internment camp on an island in the Danube outside Budapest. All three survived the war, though his two older brothers, Tibor and Ede, disappeared; Mr. Starker said he believed the Nazis had shot them.

After the war, Mr. Starker worked as an electrician and a sulfur miner before making his way to Paris. There, in 1947, he recorded the Kodaly sonata; that recording won the Grand Prix du Disque, France's most prestigious award for recorded music, bringing him international fame.

In 1948, Mr. Starker was brought to the United States as the principal cellist of the Dallas Symphony by its music director, Antal Dorati.

Afterward, he was principal cellist of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in New York. (In his 2004 memoir, "The World of Music According to Starker," Mr. Starker recalls the day his seat in the orchestra pit was changed so he would not be distracted by any attractive women onstage.) He was later principal cellist of the Chicago Symphony.

Mr. Starker's first marriage, to Eva Uranyi, ended in divorce. He is survived by a daughter from that marriage, Gabriella Starker-Saxe; his second wife, the former Rae Busch; her daughter, Gwen Starker Preucil, whom he adopted; and three grandchildren.

His other recordings include works by Schumann, Brahms, Dvorak and Bartok.

To those who called his concert demeanor aloof, Mr. Starker had a potent antidote. Inspired by a suggestion from the theatrical producer Joseph Papp, he created a touring show, "A Special Evening With Janos Starker";

On those evenings, Mr. Starker, armed with a chair, his cello and other essential props, took the stage. There, between

musical numbers, he regaled the audience with tales from the classical-music battlefield, interspersed with sips of Scotch and companionable clouds of smoke.

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