

# Menuhins' concert 'cultural event of decade'

By Val McPherson

To Cather festival chairman Robert Knoll the Willa Cather centennial birthday concert is "one of the cultural events of the decade." For the Menuhin family, the December 7 performance in Lincoln will provide the opportunity to reunite and honor their friend Willa Cather.

Though Yehudi, Hephzibah and Yaltah Menuhin all live in England, their individual concert schedules rarely allow them to play together. Yehudi's son Gerald will fly here from Stanford University to be with his parents, as the demands of Yehudi's international following permit only an occasional visit to the United States.

The concert at Kimball Hall will feature Yaltah and Hephzibah playing the Mozart two-piano concerto, and Yehudi will perform a Beethoven violin concerto. The Mozart work seldom is performed because of its peculiar musical demands. Beethoven's violin concerto is the piece for which Yehudi is world famous.

The Menuhins will be accompanied by the University Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Emanuel Wishnow. They will begin the evening's entertainment with Weber's "Overture to Oberon."

The Menuhin family is one of the most famous musical families of the 20th century. Yehudi, born in New York City in 1916, was raised in San Francisco with his two younger sisters, Hephzibah and Yaltah, and it was there that he made his debut as a violinist at the age of seven with the San Francisco Orchestra.

After travel and study in Europe, he made his New York debut in January, 1926. In November of 1927 he made the historic appearance with the New York Symphony which so dazzled the critics and audience that Olin Dowse wrote in the *New York Times*, "It seems ridiculous to say that he showed a mature conception of Beethoven's concerto, but that is the fact." Yehudi was eleven years old.

From this point, Yehudi was celebrated as one of the leading violinists of his time. By 1932 he was recording albums with his sister Hephzibah. Their first recording won the national Priz du Disque in France.

Yehudi, Hephzibah and Yaltah were raised as prodigies, Hephzibah and Yaltah on the piano and Yehudi on the violin. Their early life, they say, was one of "enclosedness." It was a life characterized by family solidarity and intellectual discipline.

As children in New York, they became extremely



Hephzibah, Yehudi and Yaltah Menuhin

friendly with Willa Cather, who adopted them as "godchildren." They frequently went to her New York apartment where they read Shakespeare. Soon she had become their literary tutor.

The Menuhins say that Cather opened up a world of experience which had been closed to them in their environment of discipline, music and idealistic aspiration. She took them to concerts, to the park and on day excursions. To them, Cather was "Aunt Willa," and they were a family to her. In later years, when they came to New York on the world-wide tours which began in 1934, they immediately sought out their friend.

According to her biographer, Edith Lewis, Cather first "really came to know Yehudi, and he her" in the spring of 1931 and "there began one of those rare, devoted, and unclouded friendships...that lighted all the years that followed...she found the two little girls; Yaltah was about seven and Hephzibah a year or two older, endlessly captivating, amusing, and endearing."

Of his "Aunt" Willa, Yehudi later said, "She was the most wholesome person I've ever known, crystal-pure and simple and with a sharp intelligence. She was honest and straightforward, never shrinking

from saying things even if they hurt, so long as they were true things and spoken with affection. She had the strength of the American soil which she loved so much and understood so well."

During World War II Yehudi gave more than 500 concerts throughout the world. When the war was over, he was among the first to accept an invitation to play in Russia, and he arranged to bring Russian artists, including violinist David Oistrakh, to the West.

At this time he was called "America's best ambassador" by high officials in the State Department. Through the Cold War in the '50s, the Menuhins actively were engaged in bringing the East and West into musical contact.

In recent years the Menuhin family has been active in music education. In 1956 Yehudi began a small, informal music festival in Gstaad, Switzerland. As recognition for starting the annual festival which he still directs, the Swiss government has given him honorary citizenship.

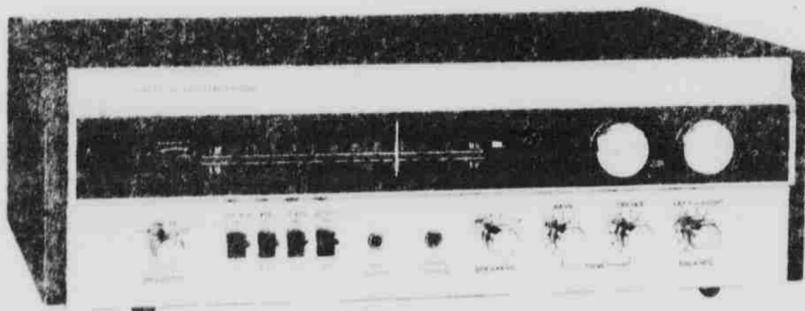
Yehudi became director of the Bath Festival in England in 1959. There he conducted a chamber orchestra which he subsequently took on tour in the United States and Canada. In 1966 Queen Elizabeth made him an Honorary Knight Commander of the British Empire. Three years later he founded a festival at Windsor where, in an unprecedented gesture, Queen Elizabeth allowed two rooms at Windsor Castle to be used for the concert, to mark Prince Charles' 21st birthday.

A series of films was made by Yehudi for BBC-TV which have been on Nebraska ETV. A school which bears Yehudi's name was founded by the Menuhins in Surrey in 1963. The school combines intensive musical study with the tutoring of academic subjects. Yehudi conducts the master classes when time permits.

In 1971 the Menuhins appeared in a New York Philharmonic Young People's Concert. Yehudi served as both narrator and conductor for the performance.

The Willa Cather centennial birthday concert was sold out two hours after tickets went on sale. Nebraska ETV will broadcast the concert live from Kimball Hall at 8 p.m. on Friday, December 7. University students who do not have tickets may be able to see the Menuhins live during their Friday afternoon rehearsal. The Kimball Hall box office reports a possibility that the 2:30 practice session may be open to students.

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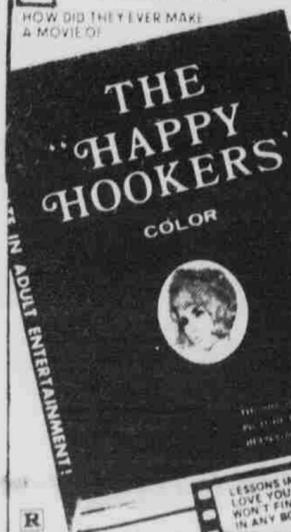
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