

GERLE, Robert

# Stringing It At Two-For-One

## Violinist Turns Conductor... And Loves It!

by h. donald spatz

It was a formidable program.

It began with the **Toccata For Orchestra** by Louise Talma and the **Prayers Of Kierkegaard** by Samuel Barber, followed, after intermission, by Copland's **Fanfare For The Common Man**, the **Colum** for chorus and orchestra by Felix Powell (a first performance) and the **Variations On America** by Charles Ives. It featured June Lillienstein, soprano, and Samuel Gordon, tenor, together with the massed choral groups of several high schools plus the UMB (University of Maryland Baltimore County) Concert Choir and Community Symphony Orchestra. It was an all-American Bicentennial program, presented to a capacity audience at the Lyric Theater this past November 23. And it marked one of the most recent appearances on the podium of Robert Gerle.

What's this? Robert Gerle, the violinist, conducting?

One and the same.

Born in Hungary, Gerle received his musical training initially at the Franz Liszt Royal Conservatory in Budapest, where his teachers included Leo Weiner and Zoltan Kodaly. Winner of both the Jacques Thibaud Violin Competition (Paris) and the International Music Competition (Geneva), he found himself launched at an early age as a concert artist of worldwide fame, playing regularly throughout Europe, South America and, ultimately, the United States. Following his first appearances with the

Budapest Philharmonic as a child, critics said that Gerle had "evoked the spirit of the great violinists of the 19th century, performers who are legendary figures today," and his artistry blossomed as he played with such orchestras as the Lamoureux, the Royal Philharmonic, the BBC, and the Philharmonics of both Vienna and Berlin.

He has recorded extensively, with five of his concerti listed by **The New York Times** as "the best concerto recordings." For Decca, Westminster and Columbia, Gerle has played the Barber and Delius violin concerti, Berg's **Concertino**, the Concerto for Violin and Winds by Kurt Weill, Hindemith's **Kammermusik**, the complete Hungarian Dances of Brahms, plus Haydn, Vieuxtemps, Vivaldi, Kodaly, Bartok and

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Dohnanyi, to give you a sprinkling. In addition, with his wife, the distinguished pianist, Marilyn Neeley, he has recorded the Beethoven sonatas, and with Albert Fuller, the Bach sonatas for violin and harpsichord.

It should be mentioned that as you read these words, Gerle and his wife will again be in Hungary for an extended series of engagements, and in March he will go to Texas to give the world premiere of the Ross Lee Finney violin concerto with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Louis Lane conducting.

Behind these more or less normally hectic activities of the busy concert artist lies an incredible past. A mere lad during the war, he was in hiding in Budapest when the Russian avalanche swept over Hungary. Fearing for his life when he was discovered by enemy troops, he was clutching his sole possession, his beloved violin. A Red Army officer said, very well, if this man is a musician, let him prove it, let him play. Gerle then gave what was certainly the most important performance of his life. With trembling fingers, he launched into the Tchaikovsky concerto, and thanks to the fact that even the Russian troops knew and loved music, his life was spared.

Later, en route to a forced labor camp and assigned to a cattle car which was already jammed beyond capacity, there was no place to sit except on a coupling between two railroad cars. Even then, he was tightly clutching his violin, and here too, the Russian's inherent love of music brought him "special treatment." Red soldiers held his legs to keep him from falling while he tucked his fiddle under his chin and played for them.

On a later occasion, with the hideous days of war behind him, Gerle was en route from America to play a series of concerts in England. He was on a BOAC jet, along with a television production crew whose assignment was to create a series of commercials for the airline. When the TV people learned Gerle was on board, they asked him to play a mini-concert in flight. He did, the music was taped and later broadcast. Robert Gerle was probably the first, and still very likely the only violinist ever to play a recital at an altitude of 35,000 feet over the Atlantic!

Why, one wonders, does a man with so all-embracing a career as a solo artist, now turn to conducting?



Robert Gerle does not intend to abandon the violin, which is, by the way, the priceless "Hubay" Stradivarius, dated 1726. They have done too well together. But he will spend more time on the podium in the future, and from the looks of the press, he will be welcome there. New headlines are appearing: "The best conductor who appeared here this year . . ." (Rio de Janeiro), "Gerle conducts stunning concert . . ." (Columbus, Ohio), "Gerle shines as conductor . . ." (South Bend, Indiana), and more.

Gerle enjoys a challenge, he always has. He has met many in his lifetime and conquered all. When you study his pleasant but firm features, listen to his faintly accented but assured speech, (he has long been an American citizen) you remember that Hungary had traditionally spawned great musicians and great conductors. The list is long, and growing. Robert Gerle, the violinist, is already at hand. Robert Gerle, the conductor, is now adjusting his white tie and tails, stepping into the spotlight.



Robert Gerle: After a widely acclaimed career in the first row, he's ready to exchange his bow for a baton.

Gerle is not without a solid footing for his second career. He had his initial study with the baton at the Conservatory in Budapest, and later he worked with Ingolf Dahy at the University of Southern California. In 1971, he was assistant to Maestro Charles Bruck at the Pierre Monteux School of Conducting.

The artist gives two reasons for the venture onto the podium. For one, he explains: "It's easier to obtain a violin than to acquire an orchestra." But eight years ago, he found what he had wanted for so long. While on the faculty of Ohio State University he became conductor of the school's orchestra, proceeding quickly to establish what is generally conceded to be a truly prestigious orchestral program.

"Secondly," he explains, "while wanting to conduct all my life, I have learned the violin repertoire, and played it, several times over. Now I have the challenge of learning and performing the wider, broader repertoire of the orchestra. I love challenge. This is the greatest one of my life."