

**L**iszt and Leschetizky played and taught during a golden age of piano performance, preserved by the playing of their students who, in turn, became masters.

# MASTER

## PUPILS

**N**o lover of fine music, nobody interested in piano playing, can afford to miss *Master Pupils*, a series of 13 programs presented by Denis Condon, featuring the pupils of Franz Liszt and Theodor Leschetizky. You will hear playing by master pianists of a kind rarely encountered today: this is a repository of a lost tradition of true 19th-century performance.

Between them, Liszt and Leschetizky taught just about every important pianist of the late 19th and early 20th century. The pupils of Liszt included Eugene d'Albert, Conrad Ansoerge, Arthur Friedheim, Arthur de Greef, Alfred Reisenauer, Giovanni Sgambati, Rafael Joseffy, Frederic Lamond, Hans von Bulow, Jose Vianna da Motta, Sophie Menter, Moriz Rosenthal, Carl Tausig, Isaac Albeniz, Alexander Lambert, Emil von Sauer, Alexander Siloti, Bernhard Stavenhagen and Constantin von Sternberg.

The roster of Leschetizky pupils was equally impressive: it included Fanny Bloomfield-Zeisler, Alexander Brailowsky, Richard Buhlig, Annette Essipoff, Frank la Forge, Ignaz Friedman, Ossip Gabrilowitsch, Katharine Goodson, Mark Hambourg, Mieczyslaw Horszowski, Edwin Hughes, Ethel Leginska, Benno Moiseiwitsch, Elly Ney, Ignace Jan Paderewski, John Powell, Ernest Schelling, Artur Schnabel, Arthur Shattuck, Martinus Sieveking, Josef Slivinski and Paul Wittgenstein.

Beethoven taught Carl Czerny, and Czerny taught both Liszt and Leschetizky. Both 'schools' are, therefore, descendants of the Beethovenian approach to the keyboard: the orchestral sound, the extremes of dynamics, the soaring melodic line. While modern pianists and scholars often cast aspersions on the style of Beethoven playing by these descendants of Ludwig, these pianists are playing within their own

tradition. Regrettably, Liszt did not live long enough to leave any record of his playing, but Leschetizky survived until 1915 and there are some recordings.

These performances are marked by great textual freedom, rhythmic elasticity, addition of notes, occasional changes of harmony: in other words, a very free, creative kind of playing unacceptable today. Yet, Leschetizky was playing music of his tradition. What do scholars make of that fact?

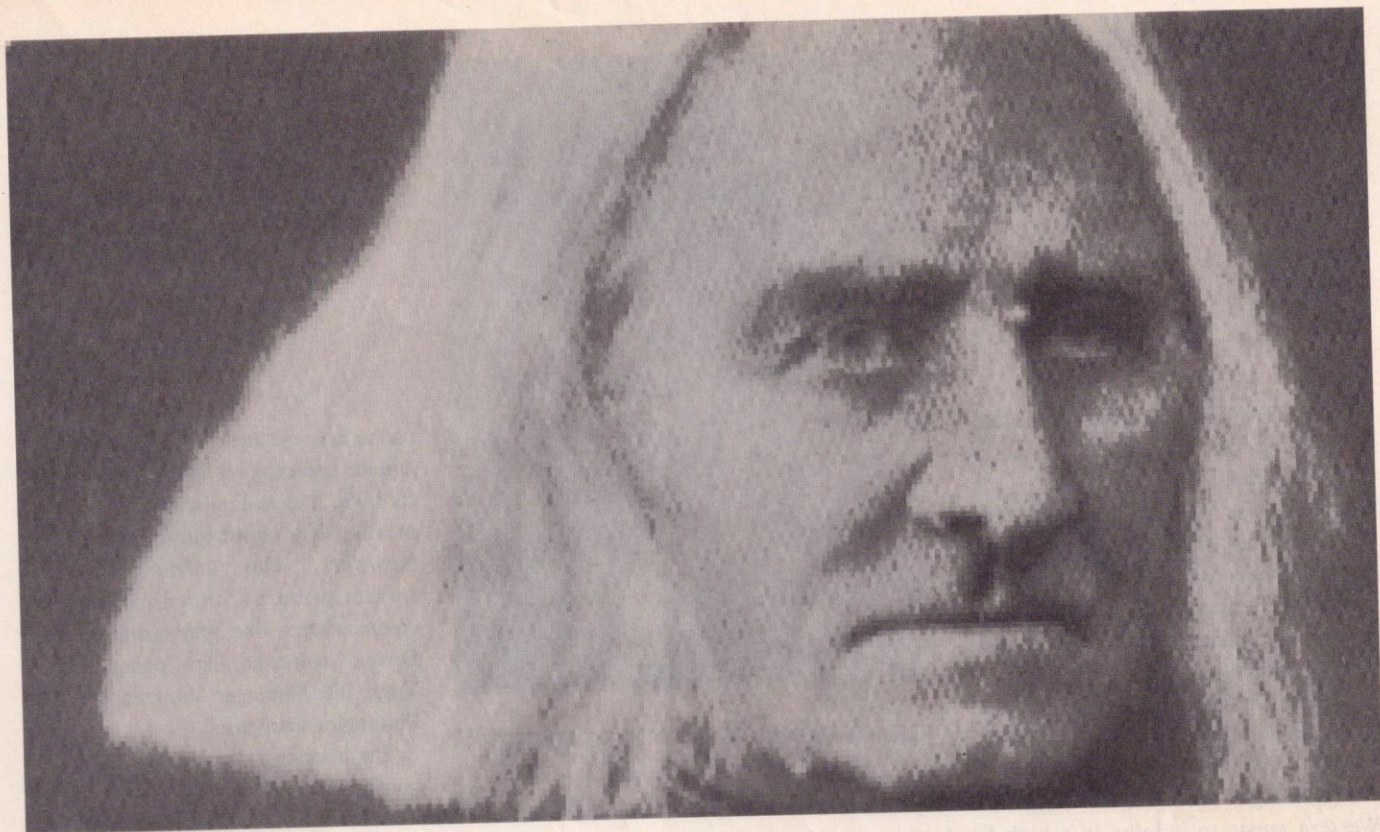
We have some rough idea of how these men taught from accounts left by their pupils, as well as observers in master classes. Liszt was obviously an inspirational force who taught either by direct example or else by a kind of poetic impetus, rather than direct and specific instruction. The teaching was at times sporadic, as he undertook many pilgrimages about Europe in pursuit of playing, conducting, composition, letter-writing and women, not necessarily in that order.

Although Leschetizky was much more of a systematic teacher, the Leschetizky 'system' is something of a myth. I used to collect all the various methods published by Leschetizky students, all ostensibly the one true account of the Master's approach. They were generally at variance, and many of them were downright silly, sometimes hilarious. It seems to me that Leschetizky was far too good a teacher ever to have had a method: he simply adopted an approach specifically tailored to each student's needs and defects.

It is also a mistake to think of Leschetizky as being an inferior performer. By all accounts he was a formidable pianist and simply elected to live a more settled life. He seemed to enjoy creative teaching, but was clever enough to vet students carefully. Apart from auditioning the prospective pupil, Leschetizky also asked three simple questions: Were you a child prodigy? Are you Slavonic? Are you Jewish? If the answer

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## FRANZ LISZT

was yes to all three questions, one had a good chance of becoming a Leschetizky pianist.

What are the predominant characteristics of the pianists featured in these programs? How do these differ from contemporary players? I suppose that the fundamental difference lies in the attitude to the printed page. Ferruccio Busoni, one of the golden age pianists, in his book *Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music*, summarises the problem, touching first on 'notation, the writing out of compositions...an ingenious expedient for catching an inspiration, with the purpose of exploiting it later. But notation is to improvisation as the portrait is to the living model. It is for the interpreter to resolve the rigidity of the signs into the primitive emotion...' Busoni then goes on to establish the artistic rights and duties of the performer; he accuses the 'law givers' of mistaking the notational signs for the music itself and attacks the erroneous idea of a single, 'correct' interpretation. Finally, he cites the case of the performer-composer (and we have some examples in these programs) who plays his own works differently, depending on the inspiration of the moment.

Busoni then propounds a philosophical notion: 'My final conclusion...is this: Every notation is, in itself, the transcription of an abstract idea.' That is to say, a musical work exists in absolute, pure form only in the mind of the composer; his act of writing it down is already a major act of transcription. A further transcription to a different instrumental medium (in these programs, the piano) is insignificant when compared with the initial act.

Performance then can also be regarded as a further act of transcription, 'and still, whatever liberties it may take, it can never annihilate the original'. This philosophy, that a work exists 'complete and intact...both within and outside of time...', explains much about

these pianists and their treatment of the printed text, which to us may seem cavalier.

Paderewski makes the following comment about tempo, probably anathema to most modern players: 'There is in music no absolute rate of movement. The tempo, as we usually call it, depends on physiological and physical conditions...There is no absolute rhythm. In the course of dramatic development of a musical composition, the initial themes change their character, consequently rhythm changes, and, in conformity with that character, it has to be energetic or languishing, crisp or elastic, steady or capricious. Rhythm is life.'

Paderewski and Busoni in words capture the essence of the performance style of the time: the great rhythmic freedom, the soaring space in the phrasing, the marvellous lyricism and unabashed emotionalism of the playing, often coupled with great delicacy. They played this way not because, as an arrogant piano-player once said to me, 'They didn't know any better', but because they had emancipated themselves from the tyranny of the bar-line, something that the contemporary player has yet to discover. The playing is rhythmic but not metronomic, another distinction often absent from more recent pianists. Phrases, not bar-lines, are the measuring sticks of the flow;

macro, not micro structures are in the foreground of the players' perceptions. Furthermore, there was no weighty history of prior recordings to compete against. The playing is, therefore, uninhibited, not yet obsessed with accuracy at all costs, unafraid to take artistic risks.

The treatment of the text is at variance, of course, with modern practice. Absent is the slavish adherence to what is on the page, the reticence to add or subtract. The pianists did not see themselves as self-effacing in deference to the composer; rather their role was to merge their personality with that of the composer and to create a new, individual

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whole. They knew that their audiences came to hear them, as well as the music they performed.

The text was a kind of blueprint of the finished edifice - the performance. But the text is not the music; it is bound by all the faults and limitations of our notational system. These pianists understood this and acted accordingly.

The repertoire was different, too. They played music of their own, with very few excursions into the past. We tend to forget that ours is the first century in the history of Western music to indulge in a high level of ancestor-worship. Their concerts were also more joyous, since they were not averse to including lighter pieces, which we would now regard as lollipops and view with a certain disdain. I suppose that the idea of a concert as pre-eminently an entertainment (which is not to say that it couldn't also be moving and profound) is a fundamental difference from at least some of our concerts, which seem hopelessly earnest.

These pianists also played a lot of transcriptions. This is an art-form that has fallen into disrepute, largely because of our highly moralistic outlook about things such as 'authenticity', 'the original', 'the composer's intentions' and similar lofty, but ultimately fairly meaningless, concepts. This is not the place to go into this question in detail, but many of the 19th-century greats regarded transcribing as an independent art in the highest sense of the word; it involved far more than the mere ability to transfer from one medium to another. In this field, composers such as Liszt and others made discoveries and created new sounds on the piano, undreamt of by earlier virtuosi.

The composers thus imbued the art of the transcriber (and performer, often the same person) with a new freedom and dignity and with added responsibility to cope with such freedoms. The transcriber



IGNACY PADEREWSKI IN HIS LATE TEENS

works) and Schubert (the songs) and various opera excerpts in transcription, rather than the original piano works by the same composers. The piano was seen as an instrument that encompassed the whole musical world, and included the symphony and the opera.

Here we have accurate records of how famous 19th-century musicians played their own music. Given our penchant for authenticity, and if these performances are as important as I maintain, why aren't they better known - even among professional musicians?

I would say that the problem is that the information style contained in these performances is largely unpalatable to the modern ear, so it is easier to pretend that they don't exist. It was undoubtedly an extraordinarily great age for piano playing and it could well be that we have never equalled the achievements embodied in these recordings. For anyone with an open mind and flushed-out ears, these programs may well prove to be a revelation. For

others, an annoyance, a reminder of what used to be.

#### LARRY SITSKY

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