
MUSIC

Free the Piano Player

Terry Teachout

IT IS now widely acknowledged that classical music in America is in dire, even desperate straits. Critics, commentators, and managers have noted with alarm that concert audiences are aging steadily and that people under fifty seem disinclined either to attend classical-music events or to support the organizations that present them. Some presenters and performers have responded by seeking to change the time-honored institution of the solo recital in ways meant to make it less formal and more contemporary. Classical artists, for example, are now being advised to speak to their audiences from the stage, to play a fresher and wider-ranging mix of repertoire, even to employ up-to-date staging techniques.

Yet as anyone who keeps up with the programs in America's major concert halls is well aware, very few artists are taking this advice. Far more often than not, classical performers continue to come before

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the public dressed in more or less formal attire and to play two-hour-long programs consisting of three or four groups of pieces drawn from the standard repertoire and arranged in chronological order, never speaking a word out loud save to announce their encores.

Nor is this reluctance to break with tradition a function of age. The thirty-eight-year-old Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes, one of the most highly acclaimed classical performers of his generation, played a recital last month at Carnegie Hall that could have been given in 1968, or 1928: a Bach toccata, a Schubert sonata, Grieg's G Minor Ballade, and a group of Debussy preludes.

What few of today's concertgoers know is that there was once a time when classical recitals were very different—less straitlaced, more improvisational, and, above all, more populist in tone. But just as the playing styles of classical performers changed with the coming of modernism, so did the way in which performers learned to present themselves to the public. These changes are the subject of an important new book by Kenneth

Hamilton called *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*.¹

After the Golden Age is based on extensive research into the performance practices of the pianists of the 19th and early 20th centuries, a period known to record collectors as the "golden age" of classical pianism. Hamilton, a concert pianist and teacher at the University of Birmingham in the UK, offers the fruits of his labors in the hope that they will inspire performers to break with "the fusty rituals of modern concert-giving, in which the music is served up with the superciliousness of a sneering sommelier offering overpriced wine at a too-long-established restaurant." His style is dryly witty, his scholarship immaculate—and his conclusions challenging.

AT THE turn of the 20th century, a handful of classical instrumentalists began to make commercial recordings of their playing, and within a decade or two the practice had become commonplace among well-known performers. Several famous pianists born in the mid-19th cen-

¹ Oxford, 304 pp., \$29.95.

tury, including Josef Hofmann, Vladimir de Pachmann, Ignace Jan Paderewski, and Moriz Rosenthal, recorded fairly extensively, and many others, like Ferruccio Busoni, cut just enough 78's to give us a reasonably clear idea of what their playing sounded like.

Taken together, these recordings leave no possible doubt that golden-age pianism bore little resemblance to most of the playing heard in concert halls today. The main differences, all of which are discussed in detail by Hamilton, are these:

- Golden-age pianists generally treated the written score as a guide to interpretation rather than a definitive set of instructions. Many of them added unwritten embellishments of various kinds to the pieces they played. Vladimir Horowitz, the last major classical pianist to play with such textual freedom, recorded versions of works like Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 15 that deviated so dramatically from the score as to amount to substantially original compositions.²

- Even when these pianists stuck to the notes on the page, they played them with a rhythmic elasticity that is unknown today. Not only did they employ a wide and unusually flexible rubato, but many of them also indulged in what Hamilton calls "asynchronous" playing, in which the individual notes in a melodic phrase are struck slightly before or after the bass notes accompanying them. The purpose of this custom (which was popularly known as "breaking hands") was to make the melody stand out in higher relief and give it a "singing" quality, in much the same way that a soprano might sing the melody of an aria in a freely improvisatory manner while the orchestra in the pit accompanies her with rhythmic strictness.

- Golden-age pianists put a higher premium on bravura and spontaneity than on precise execution, and as a result many of them played far more wrong notes than would

now be considered acceptable by critics and audiences. Nineteenth-century listeners had other priorities. When the British composer Charles Villiers Stanford heard Johannes Brahms play his Second Piano Concerto, he observed that the composer "took it for granted that the public knew he had written the right notes, and did not worry himself over such little trifles as hitting the wrong ones. . . . [T]hey did not disturb his hearers any more than himself."

NOT ONLY did 19th-century pianists play differently from their present-day counterparts, but the style of their public performances differed as well, and in equally significant ways.

The solo recital, as Hamilton reminds us, was invented by Franz Liszt in 1839. Prior to that time, pianists and other instrumentalists appeared in "variety" concerts that included other artists. Even after Liszt was (in his words) "boundlessly impudent" enough to begin playing programs that featured him exclusively, the variety concert continued to hold sway. Only toward the end of the 19th century did it become normal for pianists to perform alone rather than with assisting artists.

No less distinct from today's standard was the recital repertoire of Liszt's day. In a letter to a friend, Liszt described the program of one of his first solo recitals:

1. Overture to [Rossini's] *William Tell*, performed by M.L. [i.e., "Monsieur Liszt"]
2. *Reminiscences des Puritains* [i.e., Bellini's opera *I Puritani*]. Fantasy composed and performed by the above-mentioned!
3. Etudes and fragments, by the same to the same!
4. Improvisations on given themes—still by the same.

Nor was there anything unusual about this program. In the 19th century, virtually all concert pianists

doubled as composers and regularly programmed their own works, be they good, bad, or indifferent in quality. It was customary for them to offer "reminiscences" and "paraphrases" based on themes from the popular operas of the day, and customary as well to improvise in public, sometimes on themes submitted by members of the audience. Liszt actually encouraged his listeners to deposit written suggestions in an urn located in the lobby of the concert hall, whose contents he would then peruse on stage before choosing one or more on which to hold forth.³

It was not until the mid-19th century that concert pianists began to replace improvisations and operatic paraphrases with large-scale works by composers other than themselves, and they often performed individual movements rather than complete works. By the 1880's, pianists like Busoni, Anton Rubinstein, and Hans von Bülow were offering "historical" programs broadly similar to (though usually much longer than) the chronological programs that are now the concert-hall norm. Even then, though, most pianists packed the second halves of their programs with lighter pieces that nowadays would be more likely to be offered as encores—if at all.

In order to perform so large and varied a repertoire, 19th-century pianists frequently played not from

² Horowitz's 1950 recording of the Fifteenth Rhapsody, also known as the *Rákóczy March*, is available on *Horowitz Encores* (RCA Victor Gold Seal 7755-2-RG). The recording, like the others mentioned below, can be purchased online by viewing this article on COMMENTARY's website, www.commentarymagazine.com, and it can also be downloaded directly from iTunes. (Other recordings available from iTunes are marked with an asterisk.)

³ At an 1838 concert in Milan, one member of the audience submitted not a musical theme but a written question: "Is it better to marry or remain single?" Instead of attempting to improvise on this "theme" at the piano, the quick-witted Liszt responded by telling his delighted listeners, "Whichever course one chooses, one is sure to regret it."

memory but from the printed page, a practice that is now thought to be amateurish. They also “introduced” the various pieces on their programs by playing brief preludes, sometimes composed by themselves or others (Chopin’s 24 piano preludes may have been intended for this purpose) but more often improvised on the spot. In addition to using modulatory chordal sequences to bridge the tonal gap between pieces composed in tonally distant keys, 19th-century pianists “preluded” in order to quiet noisy audiences and ease them into a receptive mood. While these transitional passages were rarely included on studio recordings, Josef Hofmann can be heard preluding on many of the live recordings he made in the 30’s.⁴

As for the members of 19th-century audiences, they thought nothing of applauding not merely between movements, but in order to pay tribute to a particularly well-played passage in the middle of a piece. By the same token, Liszt frequently greeted his listeners in the lobby and chatted with them between pieces. “A concert then,” says Hamilton, “was indeed far more like a modern jazz or pop gig than the sometimes quite astonishingly frigid trotting-out of the standard repertoire we call a recital.”

TO LISTEN to recordings made by pianists born in the 19th century is to be struck by their extreme individuality, bordering at times on outright eccentricity. It is a powerful musical flavor—one that some present-day listeners, perhaps not surprisingly, find overpowering. As I have written of Vladimir de Pachmann:

The elaborate idiosyncrasies of his playing will no doubt mystify [modern] listeners . . . in much the same way that they might be puzzled by the rhetorical excesses of a performance by Edwin Booth or Sarah Bernhardt of a play by Shakespeare or Racine.

Such excesses, however, were taken for granted in the 19th century; indeed, they were in a very real sense what romanticism was all about.⁵

Such excesses are rarely encountered in 21st-century concert halls, where audiences sit in (relative) silence and listen to programs consisting mainly of performances of the classics that, in comparison with the recordings of a Pachmann or a Moriz Rosenthal, are straightforward to the point of sober-sidedness. But to what end? Hamilton, for one, claims to have written *After the Golden Age* out of

a deep unease with the sheer routine and funereal boredom of some piano recitals I have attended. . . . Whatever disadvantages early-romantic concerts had, they were often more informal and sound simply like a lot more fun, for both performers and audiences.

It is easy to sympathize with this statement, which flies in the face of the critical orthodoxy that has prevailed throughout the past half-century. Here, for instance, is the critic Michael Steinberg taking issue with Vladimir Horowitz:

He conceives of interpretation not as the reification of the composer’s ideas, but as an essentially independent activity. . . . Horowitz illustrates that an astounding instrumental gift carries no guarantee of musical understanding.

Significantly, Steinberg’s remark was made not in a newspaper review but in the article about Horowitz that he contributed to the 1980 edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

One need not regard Horowitz as a paragon of interpretative virtue to see Hamilton’s point and to feel dissatisfaction with the not-infrequent blandness of the “international style” (as I have called it) that came to dominate classical perfor-

mance after World War II. Indeed, in partial and welcome rebellion against the still-prevailing norm, a number of younger pianists, including Marc-André Hamelin and Stephen Hough, now perform a repertoire ranging from 19th-century encore pieces to 21st-century concertos in a manner informed both by golden-age performance practice and by the international style.

Might we also profit by casting a colder eye on the social formality that continues to shape the experience of concertgoing? Again, Hamilton thinks so. “A little less reverence and a bit more entertainment would do us no harm today,” he writes.

I agree again—up to a point. I would not want to live in a musical world denuded of the high seriousness that allowed a pianist like Artur Schnabel to devote the last part of his life to playing nothing but Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert; nor would I care to see the time-honored institution of the classical concert turned into (say) the high-brow counterpart of reality TV. At the same time, though, I would not want to live in a musical world that consisted only of Schnabels. It is possible to admire Schnabel *and* Horowitz, Dinu Lipatti *and* Rosenthal, Murray Perahia *and* Glenn Gould. Those who think otherwise are at risk of falling victim to the soul-numbing priggishness that drains the life out of art.

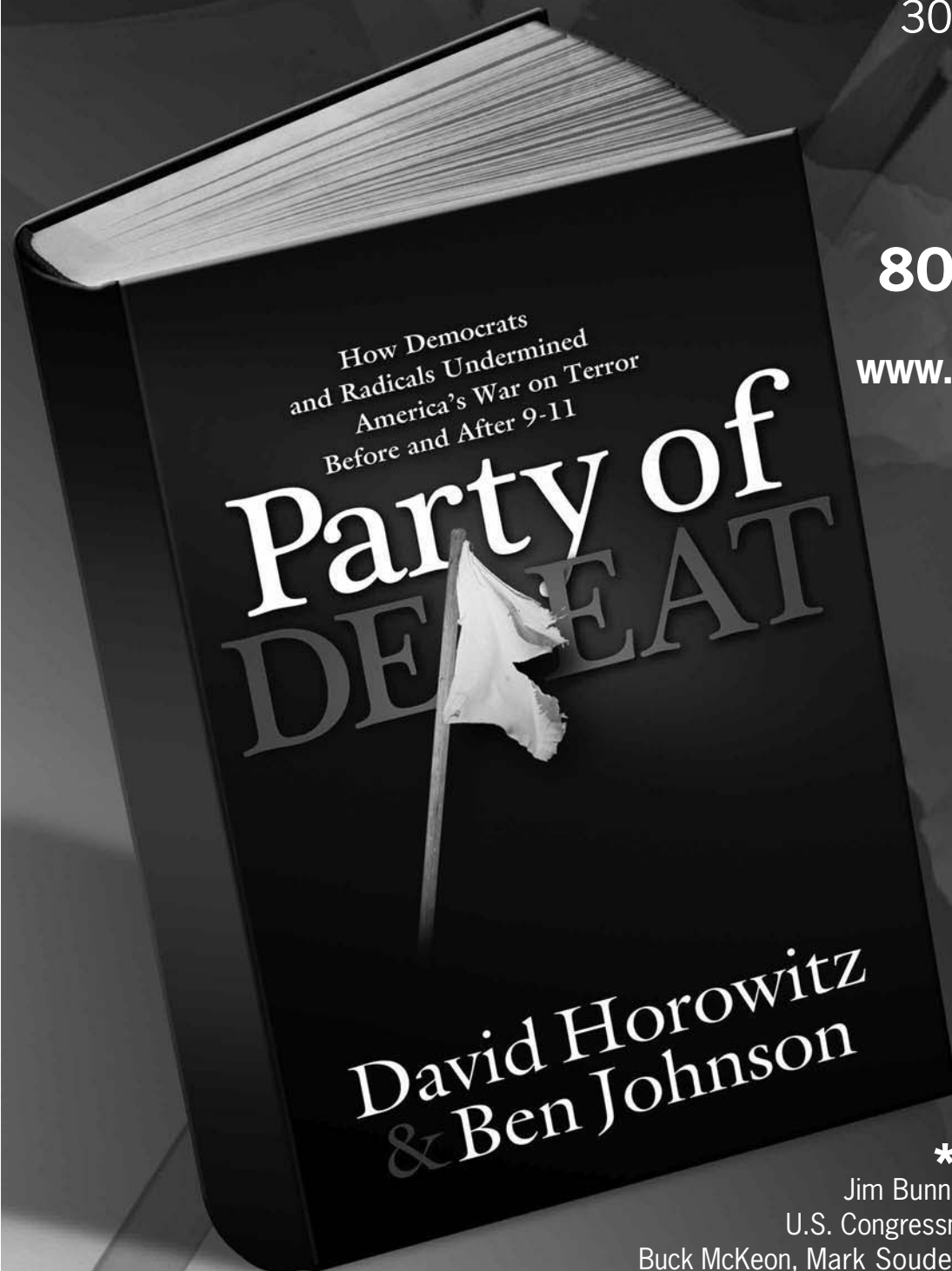
⁴ Though now extinct, the practice of preluding lasted well beyond Hofmann’s time. Dinu Lipatti, who was born in 1917, can be heard playing a brief modulatory prelude linking the end of the Bach B-flat Partita to the beginning of the Mozart A Minor Sonata on a live recording of a recital that he gave at the Besançon Festival shortly before his death in 1950 (EMI Classics 562 819-2).*

⁵ “Romancing the Score” (COMMENTARY, July-August 2003). In fact, Bernhardt made four commercial recordings in 1910, one of which is an excerpt from Racine’s *Phèdre*. They can be heard at www.cylinders.library.ucsb.edu.

Golden-Age Pianism: A Sampler

- Vladimir de Pachmann (1848-1933) recorded throughout the second half of his long career. *Pachmann: The Mythic Pianist* includes a 1923 version of Chopin's popular "Raindrop" Prelude in which the right-hand melody and left-hand accompaniment are extensively desynchronized (Arbiter 129).*
- Ignace Jan Paderewski (1860-1941), after Liszt the most popular pianist of the golden age, recorded Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata in 1937, toward the end of his life. The first movement, an aural *vade mecum* of the "broken-hands" style of the 19th century, is included in a Paderewski anthology that also contains shorter pieces by Chopin, Liszt, and Schumann (ASV Living Era 8555).
- Of all the many pupils of Franz Liszt, Moriz Rosenthal (1862-1946) recorded most frequently and representatively. His playing can be heard on *Moriz Rosenthal, Vol. 2*, which includes a capricious, rhythmically free 1929 performance of Liszt's piano transcription of Chopin's song "The Maiden's Wish," so heavily embellished and otherwise altered as to constitute an essentially new arrangement of the original song (Pearl GEMM CD 9963).
- Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) disliked the process of recording and left behind issued takes of only nine pieces, all done in 1922 and now available as part of *Busoni and His Legacy*. His versions of Chopin's A Major Prelude and "Black Key" Etude offer a uniquely vivid glimpse of turn-of-the-century performance practice: Busoni plays the prelude twice, then modulates into G-flat for a textually free interpretation of the etude (Arbiter 134).
- Josef Hofmann (1876-1957) was the only great pianist of his time to leave behind a large number of live recordings, including a 1937 recital now available on CD as *The Complete Josef Hofmann, Vol. 2: The Golden Jubilee Concert*. Hofmann's now-restrained, now-explosive playing can be heard to especially fine effect in the performance of Chopin's G Minor Ballade that he gave as part of this recital. Like most of the other pieces on the program, it is prefaced by Hofmann's own improvised "preluding" (VAI Audio VAIA/IPA 1020, two CD's).*
- Alfred Cortot (1877-1962) made many memorable Liszt recordings, including a 1926 performance of the "Rigoletto" *Concert Paraphrase* that is legendary for its headlong abandon—as well as for the fistfuls of wrong notes that Cortot tosses off with the utmost panache (Pearl GEMM CD 9396).

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