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IGNAZ JAN PADEREWSKI

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Ignaz Jan Paderewski

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I

EARLY LIFE

The professional critic is rather at a disadvantage in dealing with an idol of the public. His occupation compels him to find a reason for his appreciations; he may not be enthusiastic without measure, for his nature makes him see both brilliancy and flaws in the rarest gems of art; indeed, the flaws act as a foil to the brilliancies. And so it comes about that the professional critic is often at loggerheads with the verdict of the public, or appears to be so. The public has hailed Paderewski as the greatest of living pianists. The critic may feel that in many respects he is, but cannot, if he would, endorse that enthusiastic verdict without clauses of limitation, and if he be not a master of his craft his verdict will seem all limitations and but very little enthusiasm. One recognises the greatness of Paderewski, but at the same time the mind thinks of the subtle Chopin-playing of Pachmann, the noble Beethovenish moods of d'Albert and Lamond, the clearness and demoniac brilliancy of Busoni's technique in Liszt, the grace of Pugno's Mozart-playing, the ruthless force of Rosenthal and the magical deftness of Godowsky. These pianists have their specialities in which not even a Paderewski can surpass them and in some cases cannot equal them. On the other hand, he possesses that curious magnetism which always enchains the attention of the public. It cannot be explained; yet the critic must admit its existence in the case of Paderewski or stultify himself. If sensitive to the poetic appeal of music he must feel, too, that at its best the pianist's playing has a glamour and an individuality which are to seek in the performances of many pianists who possess greater technical ability, and that all his interpretations are informed by a sincere musical nature.

It may seem absurd and unnecessary to insist on this in the case of a great virtuoso, for assuredly in piano playing, as in acting or singing, the nature of the artist counts for everything. But the word artist has become so vulgarised that it has lost its meaning, and we are inclined to separate technical ability from innate musical genius and to judge performers rather by what they can do than by what they think and feel. This is naturally the attitude of the specialist in forming an opinion on the respective merits of different players. It is not possible to dogmatise about poetic feeling or insight: we have to take these qualities for granted. On the technical side there is a standard by which we may judge apart from any question of taste. Yet in the end the specialist who may go into raptures over the beauty of tone which Pachmann has made his god, or may be hypnotised by the wonderful fingers of a Godowsky, has to fall back on the inexplicable in attempting an appreciation of such gifted artists as Joachim, Ysaye, Sarasate, or Paderewski. Technical standards do not avail. And the curious point is that the great artist, the musical executant who can think his own musical thoughts, compels our admiration even though we may criticise his playing in technical detail.

Paderewski is one of the few players who has that effect on all kinds of music-lovers. There are many reasons why the pianist should have made the effect he has. There are many reasons why he should be exceptional. For one, he was a public pianist by after-thought; at a comparatively early age, when other artists are theorising about life he was living it in earnest, and, above all, he was a Pole, a member of that extraordinary nation which has given birth to Chopin, Tausig and many minor stars in the musical firmament. Paderewski is a Pole to his finger-tips. He has the fire, the dreaminess, the power of fantasy of that race. It comes out in his playing and especially in his compositions.

Podolia, the province of South-west Russia in which he was born on November 6, 1860, is a fertile district, of which the Polish population is quite considerable. The pianist's recollection of his

childhood on his father's farm in this garden of Russia must be full of pleasantness. The father seems to have been a man of pronounced character. A gentleman farmer of position he was also an ardent patriot. Three years after the birth of his son he was "suspect" and was banished to Siberia. His exile did not last long, but the iron had entered into his soul, and although he lived until 1894 he was broken in spirit and his chief pleasure in life was centred in the growing reputation of his son. The pianist did not inherit his musical talent from his father but from his mother, who died when he was still a child.

It is difficult not to be sceptical of the anecdotes related of the childhood of celebrated musicians. But no doubt some of these stories have a basis of truth, and certainly musical talent shows itself at a very early age. It is said that young Ignace, long before he could play, would climb to the piano-stool and attempt to produce as beautiful a tone as possible. Of the ordinary early tuition he appears to have had none, his mother having died when he was a child. A travelling fiddler gave the boy a few lessons on the piano, but it may be imagined that they were not of a very complete kind. Later on an old teacher of the instrument was engaged to pay a monthly visit to the farm, and he taught the boy and his sister to play simple arrangements of operatic airs. This early life spent away from strong musical influences saved Paderewski from the usual prodigy period in the career of pianist, for it was not until he was twelve years of age that he went to Warsaw where he was able to have regular music-lessons at the Conservatoire. There he studied harmony with Roguski and the piano with Janotha, the father of Natalie Janotha. In those days Paderewski did not show any particular bent towards playing the piano but rather towards composition (he had begun to compose in the old days on the farm) and general musical knowledge. His first public appearances were not so much as pianist as a composer who played his own music. He was then sixteen years old and it would be interesting to know how the immature pianist impressed his Russian audiences. That his technique was of the weakest may be judged from the fact that he afterwards confessed that all the pieces he played were really his own, inasmuch as when he could not manage the difficult passages he merely improvised.

Miss Szumowska, a pupil of Paderewski's, has related a curious anecdote of their first tour. Paderewski "had announced a concert at a certain small town, but, on arriving, found that no piano was to be had for love or money. The general was perfectly willing, on being applied to, to lend his instrument; but when the pianist tried it he found, to his dismay, that it was so badly out of repair that some of the hammers would stick to the strings instead of falling back. However, it was too late to back out. The audience was assembling and in this emergency a bright thought occurred to the pianist. He sent for a switch, and engaged an attendant to whip down the refractory hammers whenever necessary. So bang went the chords and swish went the whip, and the audience liked this improvised duo more, perhaps, than it would have enjoyed the promised piano solo."

The young pianist evidently did not consider that his musical education was complete, for at the end of the tour he returned to Warsaw and studied for two years at the Conservatoire there. At the age of eighteen he was appointed a professor of music and after a year he married. All the world knows that his wife died a year later, leaving him an invalid son in whose existence, until his death a little while ago, the pianist was wrapped up. It was not a very bright beginning of his professional career, for his earnings at the Warsaw Conservatoire had meant comparative privation for his wife and himself. In some natures, perhaps, this early tragedy would have killed ambition but hardly in an artist. Without holding with the comfortable sentimentalists that grief is as necessary to the artist as rain to the flowers, it may be asserted that concentration on work is the natural result of life going awry. This is not, as the sentimentalists imagine, peculiar to genius of the artistic type, but is common to all men who are not invertebrate.

Paderewski himself has disclaimed the pretty stories which made the death of his wife the impetus to his after career as pianist. "I was a professor at the Warsaw Conservatoire," he told an interviewer, "and I had to work awfully hard. Previous to this I had made a concert tour in Russia. In Warsaw I gave lessons from morning to night. It was not interesting. In fact, it was slavery. One day I asked myself why I followed such an arduous profession, and so I decided to go to Leschetitsky in

Vienna, and become a performer, since in that way I should work hard a few years and afterwards have a life of ease, to be idle, or devote myself to composition as I pleased." As a matter of fact, Paderewski did not go from Warsaw to Vienna, but first paid a visit to Berlin, where he studied composition with Kiel and afterwards with Heinrich Urban. He was able to hear much more music than was possible in Warsaw and in every way his musical education was being rounded off. At twenty-three years of age he was appointed professor of music at Strasburg. That appointment may be considered the turning point of his career, not because the professorship in itself was anything very brilliant, but because it brought him into contact during a vacation with the celebrated Polish actress Mme. Modjeska. She was practically the first to recognise in the dreamy young pianist something out of the common. She has described him as "a polished and genial companion; a man of wide culture; of witty, sometimes biting tongue; brilliant in table talk; a man wide awake to all matters of personal interest, who knew and understood the world, but whose intimacy she and her husband especially prized for the elevation of his character and the refinement of his mind."

The effect such a friendship had on the young artist may be well imagined. It is probable that even in the Warsaw days Paderewski had the dream of being able to take up the career as virtuoso, but it might have remained a dream, for a young man of twenty who has not blossomed forth as a recital pianist is hardly likely in the ordinary run of things to make any great name for himself as a public pianist. All the players of genius have been prodigies, or would have been had there existed a market for musical wonder-children in their day. Paderewski is the exception. That he had the ambition of making a career for himself as virtuoso even during the Warsaw days may be admitted, but it is probable that had he not been encouraged by his brilliant countrywoman, Mme. Modjeska, he would not have taken practical steps to realise the dream.

II

FROM WARSAW TO PARIS

In the fact that a young professor of music, who was not without note in his own circle, should have decided to give himself up to several years of arduous study, we may perhaps find some indication of Paderewski's tenacity of purpose. In 1886, at the age of twenty-six, he placed himself under Leschetitzky's guidance, and for four years he studied with the famous professor and his wife, Madame Essippoff. It is not too much to say that Paderewski has made a brilliant name for his teacher as well as for himself. Of course, Leschetitzky had a big reputation as a teacher long before his famous pupil went to him, but it was not a world-wide reputation, as it now is. Every season we hear pianists in London who proudly emblazon their programmes with "pupil of Leschetitzky"; they are as numerous as the many "pupils of Liszt," and in many cases have as much right to the description. The difficulty is to decide (from the many articles written by his self-styled pupils) what is the method taught by this Viennese magician and it is almost as difficult to draw any clear conclusion from their playing. A consistent and illuminating account of the great teacher and his methods has been given, however, by Miss Hullah in a volume of this series. Leschetitzky has not any hard and fast methods. Mr. Henry C. Lahee, in his "Famous Pianists of To-day and Yesterday," has this to say of the great teacher: "Leschetitzky's method is that of common sense, and is based on keen analytical faculties. He has the genius for seizing on what the finest artists do in their best moments, observing how they do it physically, and, in a sense systematizing it. He has his own ideas of how to train the hand for all that it requires, but he never trains the hand apart from the ear. He has no 'method' except perhaps in the technical groundwork – the grammar of pianoforte playing – and this is taught by his assistants. So long as the effect is produced, he is not pedantic as to how it is done, there being many ways to attain the same end."

In general it may be said that the Leschetitzky pupils have "style." The fault of the school, if one may judge by its exponents, is a desire to be brilliant and startling at all costs. In the case of a player who has no musical individuality of his own, and has acquired technical facility out of all proportion to his musical endowment and general education in the art, the Leschetitzky tuition seems to make for hardness and a perverse brilliancy. Of course Paderewski himself would have been a remarkable player no matter under whom he had studied, but the surety and firmness of technique which Leschetitzky evidently knows how to impart were just what he required. It must not be forgotten, too, that when Paderewski went to Vienna he was practically an artist, an all-round, well-educated musician, who, from the first, had been interested in the historical as well as the poetic side of his art. In addition, need it be said that he was a man of uncommon mind far removed from the type of virtuoso who inspires his soul from the keys of the pianoforte. No teacher and no method can produce the pianist of "genius." The platitude is excusable in the face of the absurd things which have been written concerning the effect of Leschetitzky's teaching.

That Paderewski gained much from it is clear enough from the fact that a year after going to Vienna he made his *début* there as virtuoso with much success, and from that time onward his progress was gradual until in 1888 he found himself the sensation of Paris. But it was by no means a case of the kind of artistic conquest which the popular novelist invariably describes when writing of musicians. The first recital at the Salle Erard in 1888 was, indeed, but poorly attended, and, except that no performer of genius ever makes his first appearance without his reputation having preceded him among the inner circle of his brother musicians, the *début* might have fallen as flat as the ordinary recital by an ordinary, unknown pianist. As it happened, both Lamoureux and Colonne, who were present, were so impressed by Paderewski's gifts that both made him an offer to play at the well-known orchestral concerts associated with their names. M. Lamoureux's offer, being made first,

was accepted, and the new pianist was thus given an opportunity of performing before an enormous audience. He made his mark immediately, and was invited to play at one of the Conservatoire concerts, a distinction which, no doubt, he fully appreciated. From Paris Paderewski naturally cast his eyes on London, but it was not until May 1890, that he gave his first recital here. Again his triumph was not immediate, in the novelist's sense, and there was certainly some uncertainty in his reception by the critics, but he did triumph in the end.

III

HIS DEBUT IN LONDON

The statement that the London critics did not recognise Paderewski's greatness is often made to their discredit, but a close examination of all that was written at the time does not bear out the accusation. It was rather that the criticism was a trifle too guarded, and that to some extent the journalists were prejudiced against the pianist through no fault of his own but because he had been described as "The Lion of the Paris Season." Also, although this may seem a trivial reason, the recital took place on one of those pleasant days of our May when rain and wind make conditions in London anything but merry. At any rate all who were present at that first recital agree that the audience was coldly critical. We do not accept the verdict of Paris on musical matters, and the average Englishman is apt to suspect charlatanism in a musician whose "wonderful aureole of golden hair" had been so sedulously advertised. There is no doubt the sensitive pianist felt this atmosphere keenly. He is always nervous when he begins his recital even to this day. "The mere fact of knowing a great audience waits on your labours," he once remarked to an interviewer, "is enough to shake all your nerves to pieces." There is no question that at the first recital he was not at his best, and that there was good ground for the accusation of "sensationalism" which was brought against him by several critics. But, at the same time, his other merits were amply recognised. To prove this I give some selections from the criticisms of the first recital. They should be documents of some interest to the historian of the future.

"The player's loudest tones," said the *Times*, "are by no means always beautiful, but the amount of fire and passion he gave to three of Chopin's most difficult studies and to certain passages in Schumann's Fantasia in C major produced a profound effect... It is in Chopin ... M. Paderewski is at his best, and here not so much in the sentimental side of the master's work as in his passionate and fiery moods." On the whole the "notice" had much of praise for the new pianist. The *Morning Post* contented itself with the expression of opinion that the pianist's reading of compositions by Mendelssohn, Handel, Schumann, Chopin, Rubinstein, Liszt and Paderewski was "by no means conventional, nor was it always entirely artistic."

The *Daily Telegraph* contained the most important criticism of the new pianist. "Mr. Paderewski astonishes, and the good English public will run after him, no matter what the character of the astonishment may be... Mr. Paderewski is a monstrously powerful pianist, and herein lies his quality for the lover of marvels. The lover of music will sit at his feet on other grounds; but the main point is that the Polish artist appeals to both classes, and they comprise everybody... We do not pretend to much admiration for the Mr. Paderewski who astonishes. It was impossible to find any even for Rubinstein, when he appeared as a Cyclops wielding his hammers with superhuman energy, making the pianoforte shake to its centre, and not always hitting true and straight. That which was refused to the Moldavian Colossus is not likely to be secured by Mr. Paderewski, the less because he transcends his exemplar in fury and force of blow. It may safely be declared that no one present at St. James's Hall on Friday afternoon had ever before heard Mendelssohn's Prelude and Fugue in E minor so played – with clang and jangle of metal, and with such confusion of sound that trying to follow the working of the parts, resembled looking at moving machinery through a fog. It was the march of an abnormally active mammoth about the keyboard, while the wondering observer expected the pianoforte to break down at any moment." The critic (Mr. Joseph Bennett from internal evidence) had the same complaint to make of the performance of Handel's "Harmonious Blacksmith." "Plainly," the critic adds, "we do not like Mr. Paderewski as an exponent of physical force. The result of his labours may be marvellous but it is not music." After this castigation came praise. "There is another Mr. Paderewski whom we can well abide. He is gentle and pleasant, refined and poetic to a degree which makes him altogether charming. This, we suspect, must be the true Paderewski, the other

being, in the old demoniacal sense, 'possessed.' If so, is there no power to cast out the evil spirit?" As examples of the "true Paderewski" the critic praised the playing of some Chopin compositions and two of the pianist's own pieces.

The critic of the *Standard* was quite as severe on the "sensational" aspects of Paderewski's playing. "It was quickly manifest," he wrote, "that the performer was more anxious to astonish than to charm. His rendering of a Prelude and Fugue in E minor of Mendelssohn was utterly at variance with the traditional methods of interpreting the music of this composer, and in Schumann's Fantasia in C, op. 17, we were constantly met by surprises. The playing was marked by violent contrasts, the pace and tone being sometimes reduced far more than the directions given by Schumann seem to warrant, while at others the physical powers of the executant were exercised in a manner that resulted in much noise, but little music. The same exaggerations of style were perceptible in Chopin's Etudes in C minor and F, op. 10, and G sharp minor, op. 25. It must be said in M. Paderewski's favour that he plays fewer wrong notes than most pianists of his school, and, further, that his tone in *pianissimo* passages is bell-like and delicate. He is, in brief, a *virtuoso* of no common order, but that he is entitled to the higher rank of an artist is more than can be said, judging from yesterday's performance." In a criticism of the third recital the critic still complained of Paderewski's occasional exaggeration, but on the whole the notice was a shade more appreciative, although London was still left in doubt as to whether the pianist was "entitled to the higher rank of artist."

The *Daily News* thought that the leonine attributes with which Paderewski was accredited in "his own advertisements" were "fully exemplified in the Prelude and Fugue of Mendelssohn which opened the programme. Mendelssohn of all composers can least bear heroic treatment from the ultra vigorous among modern pianists, and the Fugue especially suffered." The critic admired the pianist's Chopin playing, but added that "he was most in his element in his own music." The pianist's talent was thus summed up: "In short, of M. Paderewski's ability there can be no question; and while audiences will probably prefer the exquisite delicacy and poetical feeling which he displays in his calmer moments to the extravagance in which he indulges when in the Ercles vein, it is obvious that his talent lies chiefly in his interpretation of the music of the modern and romantic schools, in which during the current London season he bids fair to create some sensation." The critic thought that Paderewski somewhat modified his super-abundant energy at the second recital, which seems to have been the general opinion, and naturally was not shared by Mr. G. Bernard Shaw, who had just begun to write musical criticism for the *World*. "There is Paderewski, a man of various moods, who was alert, humorous, delightful at his first recital; sensational, empty, vulgar and violent at his second; and dignified, intelligent, almost sympathetic at his third. He is always sure of his notes; but the licence of his tempo rubato goes beyond all reasonable limits." The "almost sympathetic" is distinctly good. With the exception of the *World* the weekly papers were not at that time remarkable for their musical criticism, but it may be mentioned that the *Saturday Review* ventured to state that no one who had heard Paderewski at the second recital would deny that "he is one of the most remarkable artists who has been heard of late years."

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