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"Hot With Chutzpah"

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Philosophy and Literature

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 21, Number 2, October 1997

pp. 381-391

10.1353/phl.1997.0027

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

“Hot With Chutzpah”

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Keep in mind that we’ve seen it all before—the antic personality, the platform shenanigans, the moaning and chatting, the knackered technique, the circus atmosphere, even the frisson of mental illness.

Glenn Gould, too, was a lovable crank who wore gloves in summer and had a Linus-blanket obsession with his favorite piano chair and played with hands flailing, nose to keys, with obligato croaks and hums. Rudolf Serkin wretched and stomped and gaped like a sea bass when he played. Percy Grainger was so hardy and fearless physically that he would sometimes walk or jog from concert to concert. Vladimir Horowitz enjoyed a winking complicity with his fans, but was also a world-class neurotic who had his own brushes with mental breakdown. The Hungarian pianist Ervin Nyiregyházi, another highly-strung prodigy, managed to sabotage a promising career in the 1920s, and for decades preceding his brief comeback in the 1970s never owned a piano, and **[End Page 381]** rarely played one. And was there ever a more eccentric pianist than Vladimir de Pachmann, who by the turn of the century was notorious as a kind of clown prince of classical music? He would mug and chatter and lecture and pantomime his way through concerts, fiddle endlessly with the piano bench, stop in the middle of a piece to praise his own playing or deride someone else's; once, at a Godowsky recital, he rushed on stage, kicked Godowsky off the bench, and began to play, explaining that no, no, the piece must go like *this*. Richter's pencil spot-lights in darkened halls; Michelangeli's patrician aloofness; Landowska's and Tureck's high-priestess routines—the list goes on and on, and these are just the pianists. The history of classical-music performance—even (perhaps *especially*) at the highest level—is full of clowns and crazies and trained-seal acts. David Helfgott shouldn't shock us; he should get in line.

The Helfgott phenomenon is new in one respect, however: never has such a successful musical career been built on performances of such transparent and undisputed inadequacy. Helfgott's wranglers and apologists miss the mark when they accuse "elitist" critics of mean-spirited carping, of resenting his popular success, of being deaf to his music because put off by his manner. I have had a little experience with critical responses to unorthodox musicians (having just written a book about Gould) and it has shown me, in fact, how remarkably tolerant critics can be when it comes to forgiving the foibles of an exceptional performer. Cortot's sloppiness and memory lapses, Gould's groans,

Horowitz's teasing, Richter's fistfuls of wrong notes, Nyiregyházi's textual infidelities and digital lapses (like Helfgott, he repeated favorite passages at whim, and his technique was if anything more badly neglected for longer periods of time), not to mention the appalling sound quality of many early recordings—I have known critics to overlook anything if the reward is great music-making. We do well to remember that de Pachmann's clowning and his often scandalous tampering with revered scores, while they certainly drew tut-tutting both amused and annoyed, did not lead to his critical banishment—far from it: he was widely considered the leading Chopin player of his day. Take, for example, the following appreciation of de Pachmann's art, from a 1933 obituary in the *Times* of London:

While Pachmann's reputation was one of extravagance, the artist had a passion for economy. There must be nothing wasted in piano-playing. Latterly the eccentrician might often obliterate the artist, perhaps **[End Page 382]** through three-quarters or more of a recital programme. The careful listener and watcher would, however, be rewarded by a few moments, perhaps a single étude or prelude of Chopin, which could only be described by the word perfect. Ten minutes of such playing of Chopin, in which everything needful to be said was said through a touch on the keys of pearl-like smoothness, a control which was without a hint of strain, a naturalness in expression which made all the intellectualists seem mere fumblers—this was the reward...



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