

A BRAHMA OF THE 'KEYBOARD— LEOPOLD GODOWSKY

By JAMES GIBBONS HUNEKER

IN a half-forgotten study of Flaubert's masterpiece, "L'Educatio Sentimentale," which he rightly calls "A Tragic Novel," George Moore compares the great Frenchman to Brahma "creating the passing spectacle of life to relieve his eternal ennui." * * * Now, Leopold Godowsky is not Brahma, and he has never suffered from ennui, thanks to his tremendous capacity for work; yet I can't help picturing him as a sort of impassive Asiatic deity seated before the keyboard of his instrument calmly surveying the eternal spectacle of music and its many masques. All schools, all styles he knows, but upon this vast knowledge he has no desire to make any personal comment. Passionless, passionate, objective and subjective, his crystal-clear comprehension of the musical universe has made him apparently assume the attitude of an omniscient spectator, though he is neither one nor the other. Louis Ehlert asked Karl Tausig—probably the greatest of all piano virtuosi—why he did not offer up a small sacrifice to the human needs of the masses. The Pole replied: "I am not sentimental; neither my life nor my education intended me to be so." Ehlert persisted. "How would it be if you were to give us an historical representation of the sentimental?" he suggested. Tausig shook his head and shrewdly smiled. He never made concessions to public taste, and he was called inhuman, cold, objective. His master, Liszt, was the reverse, overflowing with the milk of human music, spontaneous and prodigal in his play. Tausig the obverse of the medal; yet I believe that Liszt and Tausig were the piano Dioscuri, and not Liszt and Chopin. Chopin as a pianist has a niche all his own.

In an article several years ago and in the magazine section of THE TIMES I wrote that Leopold Godowsky is a pianist for pianists, as Shelley is a poet for poets. But everybody reads Shelley nowadays, and no doubt compare him unfavorably with the ear-splitting verse of the cacophonous young poets of the hour. Leopold Liebling took exception to my ascription, and I fancy he is right; every musical person listens to the alluring playing of Godowsky quite impervious to the fact that there are aspects of his art which will always escape them. In his playing he is transcendental. This doesn't mean that he is frostily objective; he is human, emotional, and has at his finger ends all styles. It is the fine equilibrium of intellect and emotion that compels our admiration. No one plays Chopin like Godowsky, no, not even that tricky kobold, Vladimir de Pachmann. Paderewski is more emotional, Josef Hofmann extorts a richer, a more sonorous tone from the wires; nevertheless, Godowsky is a Chopinist in a class apart. He doesn't drip honey in the nocturnes as does Ignace Jan, Premier of Poland; he can't thunder the polonaises like his friend Jozio from Cracow; but these qualities he gives us in his own scale of tonal values. He is a powerful man with muscles that are both velvet and steel. When he wishes he, too, can sound the orchestral note; but, then, he seldom wishes this. His feeling for the limitations of the piano recalls the words of Rafael Joseffy: "I'm not a brass band"; Joseffy, who, in his abhorrence of a smeary touch produced his legato with the aid of the pedals, and what an aristocratic floating touch was his! What poetry! What atmosphere!

Setting aside his Chopin interpretations, which we take for granted as he is Slavic, have you heard Godowsky play Mozart, or the neglected Haydn; or Schubert, or Schumann? Of his Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms I shall not write. I can only repeat—all schools are at his beck, and if they are "perfect pictures, perfectly framed and hung," as Joseffy said of his beloved master, Tausig, there is also the personal equation, for me, full of magic. Sensationalism, the pianistic fracas, posing for the gallery, all the bag of cheap tricks this great pianist eschews. He is master of the art of playing the piano beautifully. His exquisitely plastic phrasing, artistic massing of colors, above all the nobility of his conception—little wonder I call him a Brahma of the keyboard, as far-fetched as the simile may sound. To Godowsky all other pianists could go to school, if for nothing else but the purity of his style, his kaleidoscopic tintings, his polyphony. And it must be admitted that pianists I have spoken to about him admit his power. He does not boast the grand manner of Josef Hofmann, yet Hofmann is reported to have told his manager that he enjoyed listening in a room to Godowsky more than playing to crowded and enthusiastic multitudes at his own concerts. Truly a fraternal and noble sentiment! If it comes to sheer sensationalism, then Godowsky easily leads them all, Rosenthal not excepted. I refer you to his paraphrases of Chopin, Weber, and Johann Strauss, and the supreme ease with which he conquers them. Brahma, indeed. Although as he plays he looks more like Buddha under his Bodhi tree conjuring beautiful sounds from sky and air and the murmuring of crystalline waters.

It must be nearly twenty years ago, almost eighteen, that I entertained Vladimir de Pachmann in my Dream Barn on Madison Avenue at Seventy-sixth Street. The tenth floor, a room as big and as lofty as a cathedral. Alas! where are such old-fashioned apartments today? After eating a duck, a kotchka, cooked Polish fashion, and borsch, beet soup, with numerous Slavic side dishes, preceded by the inevitable zakuska—those ap-

petite-slaying bonnes bouches—De Pachmann fiercely demanded cognac. I was embarrassed. Not drinking spirits, I had inconsiderately forgotten the taste of others. De Pachmann, who is a child at heart, too often a naughty child, cried to heaven that I was a hell of a host! He said this in Russian, then in French, Italian, German, Polish, Spanish, English, and wound up with a hearty Hebrew "Raca!" which may mean hatred, or revenge, certainly something not endearing. But the worst was to come. There stood my big Steinway concert grand piano, and he circled about the instrument as if it were a dangerous monster. Finally he sniffed and snapped: "My contract does not permit me to play a Steinway." I hadn't thought of asking him, fearing Chopin's classic retort after a dinner party at Paris: "Madame, j'ai mangé si peu!" Finally I saw the hole in the millstone and excused myself. When I returned with a bottle of abominable cognac the little man's malicious smile changed to a look of ecstasy, and he was not a drinking man ever, but he was accustomed to his "petit verre" after dining and was ill-tempered when deprived of it. Such is human nature, something that Puritans, prohibitionists, and other pernicious busybodies will never understand. And then this wizard lifted the fallboard of my piano and, quite forgetful of that "contract," began playing. And how he did play. Ye gods! Bacchus, Apollo, and Venus and all other pleasant celestial persons, how you must have reveled when De Pachmann played! In the more intimate atmosphere of my apartment his music was of a gossamer web, iridescent, aerial, an aeolian harp doubled by a diabolic subtlety. Albert Ross Parsons, one of the few living pupils of Tausig, in reply to my query, How did Joseffy compare with Tausig? answered: "Joseffy was like the multicolored mist that encircles a mighty mountain; but beautiful." So Pachmann's weaving enchantments seemed in comparison to Godowsky's profounder playing.

And what did Vladimir, hero of double-notes, play? Nothing but Godowsky, then new to me. Liszt had been his god, but Godowsky was now his living deity. He had studied, mastered, and memorized all those transcendental variations on Chopin studies, the most significant variations since the Brahms-Paganini scaling of the heights of Parnassus; and I heard for the first time the paraphrase of Weber's "Invitation to the Valse," a much more viable arrangement than Tausig's; also thrice as difficult. However, technique, as sheer technique, does not enter into the musical zone of Godowsky. He has restored polyphony to its central position, thus bettering in that respect Chopin, Schumann, and Liszt. I have called attention elsewhere to Godowsky's solo sonata, which evokes images of Chopin and Brahms and Liszt—only in the scherzo. Instead of exhuming such an "ungrateful," unplanistic composition as Tchaikovsky's Sonata in G, pianists of calibre might more profitably introduce the Godowsky work. He is too modest or else too indifferent to put it on his program. It "lies" so well for the keyboard, yet there is no denying its difficulties, chiefly polyphonic; the patterns are intricate, though free from the clogging effects of the Brahms sonatas. De Pachmann delighted his two auditors from 10 P. M. to 3 A. M. It is safe to wager that the old Carrollton never heard such music-making before or since. When he left, happy over his triumph—I was actually flabbergasted by the new music—he whispered: "Hein! What you think! You think I can play this wonderful music? You are mistaken. Wait till you hear Leopold Godowsky play. We are all children, all woodchoppers, compared with him!" Curiously enough, the last is the identical phrase uttered by Anton Rubinstein in regard to Franz Liszt. Perhaps it was a quotation, but De Pachmann meant it. It was the sincerest sentiment I had heard from his often insincere lips. We were all three surprised to find a score of people camping out on the curved stairway and passages, the idealist, a colored lad who ran the elevator, having succumbed to sleep. This impromptu Godowsky recital by a marvelous pianist, for De Pachmann was a marvel in his time, must have made a grand hit with my neighbors. It did with me, and when Godowsky returned to New York—I had last heard him in the middle nineties of the previous century—I lost no time in hearing him play in his inimitable manner those same works. A pianist who can win the heartiest admiration of such contemporaries as De Pachmann and Joseffy and Josef Hofmann—I could adduce many other names—must be a unique artist. And that Godowsky is.

When he isn't teaching or playing with orchestra or in recitals Mr. Godowsky spends his leisure in pedagogic work. There is a widespreading education scheme which has St. Louis as headquarters, the name of which I've forgotten, though the name doesn't much matter, as musicians the country over know it. For this Mr. Godowsky is editing the classics and romantics of piano literature. He is also composing the most charming music imaginable for the earlier and middle grades of students; music that has genuine musical values, with technical. Imagination and instruction blended. Pegasus harnessed to the humbler draught horse. If you think of Schumann's various albums for the young you may surmise the spirit of the Godowsky curriculum. I have been reading through his Miniatures for four-hands, (Carl Fischer, New York,) three suites,

twelve numbers in all, in which the treble is for the pupil of extreme simplicity yet demanding attention to the melodic line, and amply developing the rhythmic sense. With their fanciful titles, tiny mood-pictures, these Miniatures are bound to attract all teachers of the instrument. Leopold Godowsky is a master pedagogue, as well as a master of masters among virtuosi. He belongs to the race of such giants as Paganini, Liszt, Tausig—and he is "different."

As a seasoned old teacher, though I haven't given a lesson for over two decades, I always take an interest in any device that may lighten the intolerable burden of the pedagogue. Robert Schumann said that one can't learn music from the dumb; but that bit of wisdom was prompted after his disastrous failure with a silent keyboard on which he strained his tendons and put one of his hands out of kilter. Notwithstanding his dictum in which lurks a modicum of truth, dumb pianos, practice claviers, are a boon to the student, not to mention his suffering neighbors. Elementary drill is possible, and monotonous repetition need not assault the eardrums. But the use of such inventions should be moderate. An hour with the Bach Inventions or the immortal Forty-eight Preludes and Fugues, is worth a wilderness of all other keyboard practice. Music for brain, soul, and fingers! The other afternoon I enjoyed a novel seance with Emilliano Renaud, a concert pianist and teacher, during which he showed me his Disk-Phone piano method, whose motto is: A tireless teacher—a help to the tired teacher. I had often heard of the Cortina method of teaching languages by gramophone, and the success of that undertaking is unquestionable. More and more pupils are in evidence every year. But music? The inventor asked me to become for the nonce a pupil, and I soon found myself going through the rudimentary drill, which formerly sent a shudder down my spine. The Emilliano Renaud course is divided into three parts, elementary, intermediate, and preparatory advanced. Repetition is the core of all pedagogy, and in this case with a gramophone disk you have a teacher who never wearies. At will you may repeat a passage as many times as you please. The sounds are clear, rhythms set forth with precision.

A piano teacher need not be dispensed with; indeed, he will find in this method for preparatory training an invaluable aid, one that works while he sleeps, like the little pellet in the advertisements. There is a guidebook of duplicate instructions. Nothing is left to chance, every movement is indicated, every objection forestalled. The student is bound to develop a sense of self-help. For ambitious beginners in city and country this Disk-Phone method must appeal. It is the reverse of Schumann's "learning from the dumb," it is the vital voice of an accomplished teacher. Of the method no less an authority than Ignace Jan Paderewski has written to Mr. Renaud, under date of Nov. 1, 1918: "The invention seems to me to be as ingenious as practical, and I believe it will be most helpful to students of piano playing and teachers as well." And Premier Paderewski has always been chary of indorsing anything. I agree with him, merely making the mental reservation that the human element should not be overlooked by the pupil. I am still prejudiced in favor of viva voce instruction, of which this is the nearest approach. Yet what a lot of dry, tedious technical preparation may be dispensed with if this method is intelligently used. There is no royal road to Parnassus, but there may be short cuts, and it is always the first steps that count.