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Do they Still Hate Horowitz? The “Last Romantic” Revisited

Kenneth Hamilton

“You mean he was better than Liberace?”¹

The pianism of Vladimir Horowitz has attracted idolisation and abomination to a degree almost—if not quite—unparalleled in the history of musical performance. Decades before the artist’s death in 1989, his playing had become a quasi-religion for many pianists, and for others an example to be shunned at all costs: a demonic temptation leading to the deadly, if financially rewarding, sin of brilliant superficiality. Critical opinion was similarly torn. Horowitz could hardly be ignored, but he could easily be condemned, most prominently and notoriously by Michael Steinberg in the 1980 edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. “Horowitz is an extraordinary pianist” admitted Steinberg, “capable of uncanny speed and force, with a highly individual, metallic tone, and with outstanding control of articulation and dynamics”. But his criticism was equally severe: “He conceives of interpretation not as the reification of the composer’s ideas, but as an essentially independent activity; in Schumann’s *Träumerei*, for example, he places the high points anywhere except where Schumann placed them. It is nearly impossible for him to play simply, and where simplicity is wanted, he is apt to offer a teasing *affettuoso* manner, or to steamroller the line into perfect flatness...Horowitz illustrates that an astounding instrumental gift carries no guarantee of musical understanding.”²

Steinberg’s strictures were a reflection of those that had dogged Horowitz for most of his career. In fact, they were almost a clone of composer/critic Virgil Thomson’s brutal hatchet-jobs from the 1940s. According to Thomson, Horowitz was “a master of distortion and exaggeration...free from respect for the composer’s intentions”. A listener previously unacquainted with the music “might easily have been convinced that Sebastian Bach was a musician of the Stokowski type, that Brahms was a type of flippant Gershwin who had

¹ The reported response of an anonymous New York doorman on being told of the audience reaction to Horowitz’s 1978 Golden Jubilee concerts, quoted in Harold C. Schonberg, *Horowitz: His Life and Music* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1992), p.256

² Stanley Sadie, ed.: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, Macmillan, 1980), Vol.8, p.723. For a discussion of other very similar reactions to Horowitz, see Schonberg: pp.166-7

worked in a high-class night club, and that Chopin was a gypsy violinist ”.³ And in response to another recital: “[Horowitz] never states a simple melody frankly...the only contrast to *brio* that he knows is the *affettuoso* style”. Still, at least Thomson always loved Horowitz’s Liszt, and could hardly complain about his way with his own virtuoso transcriptions. “When a man can play hard music like that so satisfyingly, one regrets that he should spend so much of the evening worrying standard repertory, he commented, like a despairing teacher about a wayward but talented pupil.⁴

It was not surprising that after several decades of this sort of thing, and following the posthumous reissue of numerous Horowitz recordings, Richard Taruskin should have wondered “Why Do They All Hate Horowitz?” in an article for *The New York Times*—a trenchantly witty take-down of Steinberg, his fellow critic Tim Page and others of that ilk.⁵ He concluded that Horowitz “thought we were mature enough to revel along with him in his artifice. His was the most self-aware, most sophisticated kind of art, and he did us the honor of assuming we were as sophisticated as he was, and as aware of his awareness. He made no mistake where the naïve listeners and the professionals were concerned. But there will always be that lower middle class”.⁶

An unrepentant reply from Tim Page soon appeared in the letters page of the *Times*, closing with “rightly or wrongly, I continue to find Horowitz one hell of a piano player but a less than fully satisfying musician”.⁷ And from Steinberg? As far as I know, he published no response, yet one did belatedly appear in a letter that unexpectedly arrived on my doorstep in 2008, prompted by the publication of *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, which Steinberg had just read.⁸ Towards the end of a relaxed rumination on matters pianistic, he wrote:

“I suppose I ought to say more about Horowitz and that Grove entry. I have changed my feeling and my mind about so many things over the years, and I keep coming back to H to see if I can hear what a lot [of] other people hear, but it doesn’t work. These musically

³ Review from 7th March, 1942 of a Carnegie Hall concert in Tim Page, ed.: Virgil Thomson, *Music Chronicles, 1940-1954* (New York, The Library of America, 2014) (no page numbers in the internet edition)

⁴ Review from 9th April, 1946 of a Carnegie Hall concert in Tim Page, ed.

⁵ Reprinted in Richard Taruskin: *The Danger of Music, and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008), pp.30-36

⁶ Taruskin, pp.34-35

⁷ Letter to *The New York Times* of 19th December, 1993: <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/12/19/arts/l-vladimir-horowitz-skip-the-handsprings-780093.html>

⁸ Oxford University Press, 2008. Michael Steinberg’s letter was dated 27th February, 2008.

unmotivated explosions and bits of *coitus interruptus* get in the way, and I just hate that frenzied clatter. I love Charles [Rosen's] remark about Rosenthal and other pianists of that generation that "they played like gentlemen". Meaning, I think, that they made the impossible sound easy, whereas H...always seems to be making the point that this is impossible, nobody can do this, but *I can do this*. But then most (most, not all) of Hofmann baffles me too, and so does the unlistenable Glenn Gould." There's no accounting for taste—and the musical world is undoubtedly richer for that.

But of course, musical taste was only one factor in the polemics swirling around Horowitz. Irreconcilable attitudes to the aesthetics of musical interpretation was another, as was blatant jealousy of his success, and revulsion against the seemingly mindless sycophancy accompanying that success. One could add the preposterous publicity, the jarringly loud gales of applause included in the live recordings—and even retained on discs that turned out to be not-so-live, but rather heavily edited after the event.⁹ Moreover, Horowitz, for all his renown, seemed to be remarkably thin-skinned, and hypersensitive to the point of paranoia to the repeated suggestion that he was a great pianist but a mediocre musician, a kind of piano playing idiot savant. Unlike Liberace, he was not "crying all the way to the bank" in the face of calumny. Hence, I assume, the strangely tortuous formulation "a great pianist-musician" that appeared on some of his later publicity. One does wonder whether any child has ever declared the desire to be a famous "pianist-musician" when they grow up.

And yet, even Horowitz's most truculent adversaries tended to admit that the sheer impact of his playing could be overwhelming. The Emperor did have some clothes after all. It was not just the "stuttering rifle's rapid rattle" of the incisive octaves (Cziffra and Barere could clearly compete there) it was also the floating cantabile, the control of tone-colour, the exquisite nuances. Horowitz held a special fascination for fledgling concert pianists who hadn't ever heard a sound quite like that before, did not care whether others thought it "affected" or not, and just wanted to know how to do it too. Garrick Ohlsson reminisced, "I was...very much a Vladimir Horowitz imitator, as so many young pianists are, especially the Julliard-competitive type pianists...Of course, in those days I didn't have a very clear idea

⁹ Lawrence Glover, one of my teachers, once made a tape to teach us tyro concert-pianists a lesson about the vanity of worldly success. Entitled "Who Cares About Applause", it featured a live recording of a fairly awful piece of deliberately rebarbative contemporary music, followed by the apathetic applause of the handful of audience members, and a "live" Horowitz performance of Rachmaninov 3 with the usual exultant cheers almost drowning out the last notes. Except that the applause tracks had been swapped around...

what made Horowitz the pianist he was—that in addition to the pianistic mastery that went into, say, his thunderous bass sonorities, he used a carefully treated piano. I didn't know that, and nobody around me knew it, and there I was flailing away".¹⁰

As a student myself in the 1980s, my contemporaries and I went through the same rites of passage as Ohlsson's generation. I still remember the stunning impact of hearing, along with a fellow pianist who would later become a well-known performer of contemporary music, Horowitz's recording of Liszt's *Vallee d'Obermann* for the very first time. We were absolutely amazed by the sweepingly cinematic sonorities, and especially by the left-hand octaves at the apocalyptic conclusion. The effect was not just thrilling, it was positively cathartic, and—for us at least--inspiring. And of course, we too tried to work out how to imitate it, equally unaware of the specially voiced piano, and of the ability of specific recording techniques—mixing and close miking-- to create certain sounds. Trying to imitate Horowitz's cyclopean clash-of-the-titans sonority at the opening of the Samuel Barber piano sonata, I simply ended up "flailing around", as Ohlsson so aptly put it, thumping mercilessly until I noticed my teacher's horrified disapproval.

And of course, we did realize that Horowitz had made a few modifications to the score of *Vallee d'Obermann*, but we really did not care—the end justified the means, as far as we were concerned. As Paderewski said, "it is not a question of what is written, but of musical effect".¹¹ And I was pretty sure, even then, that the composer would not have cared much either, in contrast to more puritanical opinions like Alfred Brendel's:

"Liszt would surely have been the first to object to others meddling with his texts unless he had given the player an *ad libitum* authorisation...One wonders what he would have made of Horowitz's recorded performance of *Vallée d'Obermann*, which, among various changes, omits several bars of its stormy middle section."¹²

Having now read much more about Liszt's own teaching, I am even more convinced that he would not have cared. Aside from his own specific comments, and also aside from the question of whether we must always play "according to the composer's intentions", Liszt simply came from an era with a much more relaxed attitude to the letter of the score. The idea of a 19th-century pianist needing "an *ad libitum* authorization" before tinkering with the

¹⁰ Joseph Horowitz: *Arrau on Music and Performance* (New York, Dover, 1999), p.222 (first published 1982)

¹¹ Harold Bauer: *His Book* (New York, Norton, 1948), p.272

¹² Alfred Brendel, *Music Sounded Out* (London, Robson, 1991), p. 161

notes is more amusing than accurate.¹³ There were exceptions, of course. Clara Schumann was one of them. And as we shall see below, Liszt thought her dogmatism to be partly admirable but mostly just weird.

From the encounter with *Vallee d'Obermann* onwards, I was completely captivated by Horowitz's playing, if not—I hope—entirely uncritically. I was bored by his stiffly dutiful Beethoven (Horowitz sounded bored when he was playing it too) and both baffled and intrigued by the increasing willfulness, almost perversity, of some of the recordings from the 1970's. The apogee of eccentricity was reached in the early 80s, when excessive medication had clearly clouded his artistic judgement and his technique. A handful of interpretations from these decades (the 1st *Mephisto Waltz*, for example) were the closest Horowitz ever got to the electric eccentricity of a player such as Erwin Nyiregyházi, who also cut his own relentlessly individual path through the piano repertoire. I alternate between thinking that Nyiregyházi is one of the worst or one of the most wonderful players in recording history—his rendition of Liszt's first *Cypresses of the Villa d'Este* is unforgettably intense his *St Francis Walking on the Waves* a splashy plod-- but the magnificently careless crashes of his own arrangement of the *Faust* Symphony, and the undeniable sincerity and commitment of the playing, do remind me indelibly of 1970s Horowitz.

And we may well admire some vintages of Chateau Horowitz much more than the others. Just as any artist's playing changes over time, Horowitz's did too. He took several decades fully to become "Horowitz", the ideal Platonic form of which is exemplified in the most admired and in the most abominated of the recordings of his last two decades. Bound up with the playing style was the personality of the artist himself: wayward, neurotic, fragile, demanding. All of this fed mightily into the publicity, for it satisfied the Hollywood image of the inspired but willful musician, who could not be expected to be reasonable like everyone else, who was supposed to be strange; a Kapellmeister Kreisler *de nos jours*, whose performance of *Kreisleriana* was accordingly unparalleled.¹⁴ An artist who performed only on Sunday afternoons, only in certain halls, and only on a customized piano, whose contracts

¹³ See my *After the Golden Age*, pp.179-225. Also, on *Vallee d'Obermann* in particular, Elisabeth Maier and Renate Grasberger: *Annees de Pelerinage: Neue Dokumente zu August Goellerichs Studienzeit bei Franz Liszt und Anton Bruckner*, Teil 1, Wiener Bruckner-Studien 4/1 (Wien, Musikwissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2013), p.367

¹⁴ The manic Kreisler was a character in the novels of ETA Hoffmann, featured most prominently in *Kater Murr*. Robert Schumann's *Kreisleriana* is a double musical tribute--to Hoffmann, and to his fictional creation. In 2014 I broadcast a survey of all available recordings of *Kreisleriana* (there are dozens of them) on BBC Radio 3's *Record Review*. There is no doubt in my mind that Horowitz's interpretations are among the best ever issued, stamped by a vividly febrile intensity and distinctive eloquence.

demanded blackout blinds and kitchens installed in his hotel suites, who brought along a personal chef to prepare his exclusive diet of Dover sole and boiled chicken, and who insisted on the provision of a certain type of water. An artist who would repeatedly retire from public performance when his sensitive system was overstrained, then engineer a triumphant “comeback” concert à la Paderewski: a “Historic Return to Carnegie Hall”. An artist likely to cancel—of course—at the last minute. A colleague of Horowitz joked that he should take out an advert: “Vladimir Horowitz Available for a Limited Number of Cancellations”.¹⁵

And presiding over the neurotic genius’s otherwise obsequious court was his wife Wanda, waspish and sharp-tongued daughter of Toscanini, the Xanthippe to Horowitz’s unlikely Socrates, pampering him, but also taking him down a peg or two, and in the process supplying almost as much fodder for publicity as he himself. She may well have been one of the few reliable sources of honest opinion that he had in his later years, surrounded as he seems to have been by worshippers at the shrine. In the recital/documentary *The Last Romantic* (1985), Horowitz finishes a performance to be greeted by a member of the production team enthusing “wonderful—there was so much colour—each note!”. “Even the wrong ones?”, Wanda unforgettably replies.¹⁶

Faking it?

But the most cunning way to belittle Horowitz was not to condemn the sparkling nuances of his playing, to lament his eccentricities or supposed lack of “depth”—rather it was to criticise his technique, especially the iconic octaves. Glenn Gould, whose wilfulness easily matched Horowitz’s, but whose sense of irony and humour was significantly more sophisticated, was in the vanguard here. Gould’s thoughtful biographer Kevin Bazzana wrote:

¹⁵ Schonberg, p.170

¹⁶ To be fair, it is the job of the production team, among other things, to put artists at ease, and to do whatever is necessary to allow them to give of their best. In many cases, this does regrettably mean that everything, no matter how questionable, has to be declared wonderful. Diplomacy trumps honesty every time.

“Horowitz was in many ways Gould’s antithesis as a pianist, and to Gould he represented everything that was wrong with the standard concert repertoire, with Romantic pianism, with concert life. Gould rarely had a bad word to say (out loud) about a colleague, but Horowitz was an exception. On that subject he was grudging, petulant: about Horowitz’s famed octave technique, for instance, he once said “He *fakes* them”. But he protested too much.”¹⁷

Claudio Arrau could not resist an attack on the same target. Teresa Carreno, he claimed, had much better octaves: “Her octaves were *fantastic*. I don’t think there’s anyone today who can play such octaves. The speed and the power.” “What about Horowitz’s octaves?”, interjected the interviewer. “Horowitz never plays octaves for a long stretch-- after a while he gets stiff. Carreno would play Liszt’s 6th Hungarian Rhapsody without cuts, and in the end you thought the house would come down, would cave in from the sound.”¹⁸ Horowitz did make cuts in the 6th Rhapsody, as Arrau well knew.

The incipient stiffness in Horowitz’s approach to the keyboard was a recurrent topic, supposedly preventing him from playing Chopin’s “Winter Wind” Study, op.25.no.11 successfully in public, although it did form part of the repertoire for his last, unfinished, recording sessions.¹⁹ The catalogue of “what Horowitz could not do properly” also included his trills, possibly first criticised in print by Virgil Thomson, and sporadically thereafter. “His trills were never much good”, Charles Rosen once said to me. And finally, there was the sometimes surprising fragility of the technique, especially (inevitably) in his final decades, when he would oscillate between the captivating and the catastrophic without warning, like the elderly Anton Rubinstein.

But as Bazzana points out with Gould, there was a hint of the (perhaps psychologically necessary) tearing down of idols in all this. A *Nietzsche contra Wagner* narrative. As a teenager, Gould had been as bowled over by Horowitz as all the others: “I think I was probably attracted by the sense of space that very often infiltrated his playing...the way in which, sometimes very unexpectedly, an alto voice or a tenor voice would appear that you weren’t aware of...it suddenly gave a sense of a three-dimension

¹⁷ Kevin Bazzana: *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould* (Toronto, McClelland and Stuart, 2003), p.101

¹⁸ Josef Horowitz, p.90

¹⁹ Glenn Plaskin, *Horowitz: A Biography* (New York, William Morrow, 1983), p.32

aspect to his playing.”²⁰ And he had even briefly taken Carl Czerny’s Variations on Rode’s *La Ricordanza* into his repertoire, after hearing Horowitz’s exquisite 1944 disk— Horowitz’s personal favourite of all his recordings, and a rendition, like his Moritz Moszkowski performances, that seems to force even his most dedicated critics to reach for superlatives, partly because they are so self-evidently superb, and partly because no-one really cares much about how Czerny and Moszkowski ought to go. There are no guardians of the great tradition for these composers.

Predictably, the contagious magic of these interpretations was also turned against the performer—he was first-rate only in second-rate music—just as the teasing out of hitherto hidden inner voices, a fondness hardly unique to Horowitz, although undertaken by him with unusual subtlety, could be regarded as an act of self-indulgence, drawing attention to the player, rather than “the music itself” (whatever that might exactly be).²¹ As Arrau lamented about Josef Hofmann, a sinner in a similar fashion: “You know, Hofmann and his pupil Shura Cherkassky, and others- at a certain moment they *discovered* inner voices. As if nobody had ever noticed them before...I always got so angry when I heard Hofmann or Shura bringing out so-called inner voices that didn’t have much importance. I thought, why are they doing it? Just to amaze. Just to attract attention.”²²

Yet the young Gould had obviously not noticed this submerged counterpoint. It was a revelation to him, if not to Arrau. It did not take long for Gould to exorcise the ghost of Horowitz from his repertoire, but there remained a certain anxiety of influence. Inevitably, Horowitz’s publicity, and his unsurpassable sense of self-importance, was a target especially ripe for ridicule. In a *Glenn Gould Fantasy*, from his Silver Jubilee Album, Gould mercilessly pillories Horowitz’s “Historic Return to the Carnegie Hall” with “Glenn Gould’s Hysteric Return”—a gala performance on an oil-rig in the Arctic Ocean.²³

²⁰ Bazzana, p.102

²¹ Donald Francis Tovey was an eloquent standard-bearer for this attitude, writing in 1920 to Gustav Holst that “Some day I hope to conduct a performance of [*The Hymn of Jesus*] which shall stand in the relation to the music as the music stands to the poem; i.e., a performance that just is the thing itself.” See Mary Grierson: *Donald Francis Tovey* (London, Oxford University Press, 1952), p.217. Grierson herself praises Tovey’s conducting of Haydn’s *Creation* as “just the work itself” (Grierson, p.279). We might also note—perhaps with some mirth-- that Tovey’s conception of “the thing itself” did not necessarily equate with the composer’s own performance. He criticised, for example, Brahms’s playing of his own piano music-- not on account of sloppy technique, but on stylistic grounds. The judge’s decision may have been final, but the judge was Tovey, not the composer.

²² Joseph Horowitz: p.40

²³ Bazzana, p.411-12

But did Horowitz really fake it? It depends on what you mean. The octaves were undoubtedly spectacular, although Horowitz naturally gave himself a break when he could, shortened some passages (as Arrau pointed out), and availed himself of the usual facilitations (the occasional note taken by the other hand, or one omitted entirely, to maintain an optimum wrist position). Almost every player resorts to this sort of thing from time to time. And it was not just in octave passages. In his last years, Horowitz demonstrated his modifications for Liszt's Transcendental Study *Feux Follets* ("which would ease its difficulty") to David Dubal.²⁴ Dubal did not go into detail, but it is easy for professional pianists to work out what such facilitations might consist of. In fact, at the whirlwind speed now regarded as proper to the piece (Liszt himself recommended a "very comfortable" tempo²⁵), and with the typical action-weight of the modern Steinway, some unobtrusive reconfiguration is routine.

And sometimes, counter-intuitively, a facilitation can sound like an enhancement of the difficulty, at least to non-pianists, or even to pianists not intimately familiar with the piece in question. Arrau was no doubt once more hitting out at Horowitz when he remarked, with an exaggeration rarely found in his performances, that it was "ten times easier" to play the concluding chromatic scale of Chopin's 1st Scherzo in alternating octaves than to play it as laid out in the score.²⁶ In a similar fashion, Horowitz's thrillingly spectacular recompositions of such pieces as Liszt's 2nd, 15th and 19th Hungarian Rhapsodies, the Mendelssohn/Liszt *Wedding March*, the Liszt/Saint-Saens *Danse Macabre*, the Mussorgsky *Pictures at an Exhibition*, and his own *Carmen* Fantasy (which is pretty clearly a Rachmaninovian refurbishment of Moszkowski's transcription of the *Chanson Boheme*) show a mixture of genuine complications and *de facto* facilitations, designed to celebrate the strengths and hide the weaknesses of his technique like a bespoke-tailored glove.

This is no criticism. Only very stupid or very inexperienced pianists deliberately parade their flaws before an audience. As every piano professor knows, many students fall into the latter category, unwisely offering up for audition pieces that they are keen to play, but not quite ready to. Artur Schnabel ruefully recounted his first meeting with Paderewski, when he fell flat on his face trying to get through the Brahms's *Paganini* Variations, "which I had

²⁴ David Dubal: *Evenings with Horowitz* (Amadeus Press, Prompton Plains, New Jersey, 2004), p.262

²⁵ Richard Zimdars: *The Piano Masterclasses of Franz Liszt* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1996), p.21

²⁶ Joseph Horowitz, p.122

not yet completely mastered, just for the sake of impressing him with the difficult passages. And I was punished for it, for I missed many of them”.²⁷ Rubinstein, luckily, found Paderewski to be gracious and forgiving. Canier concert pianists, however, such as Liszt and Thalberg, would have known better than deliberately to head for such thin ice. Their fantasies were specifically written to suit their own style—which is why we can tell a lot about the mechanics of their techniques from their music. The same is true for Busoni’s numerous recompositions, which often appeared under the guise of “editions”, but were in fact much more invasive than that innocent term might imply.

Horowitz himself was not only a canny operator, but something of a pianistic magpie. The Liszt/Horowitz 2nd Hungarian Rhapsody, for example, is an encyclopedia of the performance history of the piece. The original Rhapsody never featured in Liszt’s regular repertoire, written as it was in 1847, shortly before the official cessation of his concert tours. This is a rather important point, as he was in the habit of revising and tidying up technically tricky passages of works he played frequently, customarily issuing the fruits of his experience as a second, third or even fourth edition. Although some “Hungarian style” variants for the Rhapsody were given in the Liszt *Pädagogium*, and two alternative cadenzas suggested (all largely ignored by subsequent performers)²⁸, no advice is found on how to tackle the specifically pianistic problems of the piece. Judging from early recordings, one passage in particular was found to be all too hazardous, namely the wide leaps in the left hand at the climax of the *Friska*.²⁹

At this climactic moment, combining accuracy in the widely-leaping left hand with suitably swift scales in the right is a tough problem, especially in an era of paranoia about wrong notes. In live performance, pianists playing the text as written either risk the odd misfire in the bass, or simply resort to a more moderate tempo. Yet the passage absolutely demands a hectic, heedless panache. No doubt with this in mind, the left hand was simplified by Josef Hofmann on his two recordings (1922-23), although Liszt’s basic texture was retained³⁰. Moriz Rosenthal undertook a more radical revision for his disk, made around

²⁷ Artur Rubinstein, *My Young Years* (New York, Knopf, 1973), p.75

²⁸ Lina Ramann’s *Liszt Pädagogium* (Wiesbaden, Breitkopf und Härtel, 1986). Originally published in 1902, this is a fascinating compendium of notes and variants for the performance of the composer’s piano music, mainly collected from students who attended his masterclasses in the 1880s.

²⁹ P.14 in the *Franz Liszt Stiftung* Edition (Leipzig, Breitkopf und Härtel, 1926), edited by Peter Raabe. This edition also includes the cadenzas and variants from the Liszt *Pädagogium*.

³⁰ VAI/IPA 1047. Only one of Hofmann’s recordings is more-or-less complete. The other is a radically abridged version designed to fit on one side of a 78rpm disc. He nevertheless plays the passage under discussion in both

1930³¹. Noticing that it was easy enough to use the chromatic tag-end of one of the other themes as a (pianistically much less dangerous) left hand part, he replaced the leaping bass with thunderous, but thankfully more secure, thematic combination. Horowitz adopted a more percussive variant of Rosenthal's approach in his rewriting of the Rhapsody, along with harmonies clearly derived from Rachmaninov's cadenza, another contrapuntal combination equally clearly borrowed from d'Albert's, and several witty strokes of his own. If we were to be pedantic, the result is the Liszt/d'Albert/Rosenthal/Rachmaninov/Horowitz 2nd Hungarian Rhapsody.

These rewritings undeniably make a stunning effect, seem more difficult (occasionally they even are) but at other points are paradoxically easier to play securely. Horowitz's version, fabulous though it may be, is a lot less cruel on the wrists than Liszt's original. Predictably, Horowitz multiplied figuration that suited his technique, and rewrote parts that did not (his wrists and arms tended to stiffen up rather quickly, as noted above). There is no reason to think, with a Brendel-like Puritanism, that Liszt would have disapproved of any of this (though he may have expressed surprise at some of Horowitz's confected harmonies). In fact, when Liszt himself heard d'Albert's elaborate cadenza, he was mightily tickled by it.

Admittedly, revisions such as these go only some way to dealing with the problem of the increasingly heavy action-weight of the concert grand. Players have been battling with this for nearly two centuries, caught in the contradiction that they tend to want a bigger sound, but do not want to pay for it with a heavier action. Yet the laws of physics cannot be denied. Though it is possible to modify the action to make it as light as possible within its parameters, thicker strings under greater tension need heavier hammers, which means a heavier action.³²

The problem is acute, considering that so much of our standard repertoire was originally written for flimsier instruments. Despite the major differences between Érard's double-escapement action and the Viennese action of the 1850s, both had a lighter touch and a shallower fall of key than the usual modern grand, making many virtuoso challenges

performances. We can also hear Jorge Bolet simplifying the left-hand writing of the Rhapsody on the soundtrack of the Liszt biopic *Song without End*.

³¹ Pearl GEMM CD9963. This does not, interestingly enough, feature in his edition of the piece. In that, it is not the passage in question but the subsequent few bars that are the subject of his rewriting.

³² I'm leaving aside here the thorny question of what exactly contributes to a pianist's perception of "heaviness" in the action, which is not just an issue of weight.

far less arduous. This is true whether we are talking about Liszt's Erard, Chopin's Pleyel, Robert Schumann's Graf, or Brahms's Streicher.³³

Liszt, his technical wizardry notwithstanding, disliked the gradual increase in action-weight as the piano became larger and more sonorous. By the late 1840s he was complaining to Erard about exactly this issue³⁴. Clara Schumann, trained on the lighter Viennese/German action, found the Parisian Erards almost unplayable.³⁵ Even later in the century, Brahms's Paganini Variations were undoubtedly a less daunting prospect when played on contemporary Viennese instruments, despite Brahms's admiration for Steinways. Many subsequent pianists requested adaptations customized to their own technique. Paderewski demanded modifications to lighten the action of his American Steinway. Rosenthal always preferred the more accommodating Bechsteins.³⁶ Josef Hofmann, whose hands were barely able to stretch an octave on a normal keyboard, had Steinway construct for him a keyboard of slightly narrower dimensions, with a faster, more responsive action, on which he could more easily perform impressive feats of prestidigitation, and could cleanly manage a ninth.

Hofmann's and Paderewski's examples were particularly valuable for Horowitz, for the unique "Horowitz sound" did not just need Horowitz, it needed a Steinway with suitably customized action and hammers. Josef Hofmann, who had an inventive genius uncommon in concert pianists, had himself worked with Steinway in the development of his lighter, swifter, "accelerated action", which Horowitz much admired. "It was wonderful", Horowitz said, "much better for repeated notes than the standard instruments".³⁷ He requested a version of this for his own pianos. And the brilliantly penetrating, metallic sound? It came from specially hardened hammers. To control their effect required not just great concentration and dexterity, but also extensive use of the *una corda* pedal. This had been pioneered by Paderewski, one of Horowitz's heroes (he had a photo of him up on his living

³³ For Brahms's Pianos, see Camilla Cai: Brahms's Pianos and the Performance of His Late Piano Works, in *Performance-Practice Review*, 2/1, Spring 1989, pp.58-72 and, for a rather different view, Styra Avins: *Performing Brahms's Music: Clues from his letters*, in Musgrave and Sherman, ed: *Performing Brahms* (CUP, 2003), pp.11-14

³⁴ Adrian Williams: *Franz Liszt: Selected Letters* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998), p.256

³⁵ Eva Weissweiler, ed., trans. Hildegard Fritsch and Ronald L. Crawford, *The Complete Correspondence of Clara and Robert Schumann*, Vol.2 (New York, Peter Lang, 1996), p.53

³⁶ Rosenthal's attempts to avoid recording on the heavier Steinways is amusingly chronicled in his letters to the producer Fred Gaisberg. See Bryan Crimp: *Dear Mr Rosenthal...Dear Mr Gaisberg* (London, Travis & Emery, 1987)

³⁷ Schonberg, p.127

room wall, next to Rachmaninov and Toscanini—the holy trinity) with the Erards he used in Europe. As Arnold Dolmetsch reported, “Paderewski will not play upon a piano the hammers of which have not been specially hardened for him. His skilled fingers can be trusted to soften and sweeten the tone when he wants it; but nothing can put life into that blurred dullness consequent upon soft hammers, which helps to cover so many of the sins of the ordinary player.”³⁸

Despite Dolmetsch’s protestations, one suspects that, as with Horowitz, it was not only Paderewski’s fingers that sometimes softened the tone, but also the *una corda*. Pianists have been in denial about their use of the *una corda* since the time of Czerny, employing it frequently while simultaneously claiming that a virtuous pianissimo is produced solely by the fingers. The *una corda* is evidently a thing unclean, a disgraceful artifice. Piano manufacturers nevertheless keep including the feature on their instruments, for they fortunately know better to listen to what pianists do, rather than what they say. The whole story makes an amusing psychological study.

Horowitz even tinkered, from time to time, with the tuning, insisting that the treble D#s of his instrument be screwed sharper-- effectively out of tune-- to achieve an apocalyptic climax in Scriabin’s *Vers la Flamme*. Extreme action indeed—but also evidence of a colouristic imagination that continues to induce wonder and astonishment. And finally, the piano had to be in the right place in the right hall. In his last decades, Horowitz would only play publicly in halls whose acoustics would allow the piano to project with potentially shattering immediacy, on stages with sound baffles behind the instrument. Where the ideal conditions did not exist, he would either refuse to play, or have the acoustics specially customised (he had a baffle installed on the stage of the Met). The cherry on the cake was the positioning of the piano on the stage, to which Horowitz was (justifiably) hyper-sensitive. He had spent so much time in the Carnegie Hall forcing the stagehands to move the Steinway back and forth, that they eventually hammered three nails into the floor to mark the position of the piano’s legs, to save them from having to repeat the ordeal. It did not work—with each new concert, Horowitz would insist on undertaking the *via crucis* once again, before eventually settling on the position where the nails had been all along.³⁹

³⁸ Arnold Dolmetsch, *The Interpretation of the Music of the 17th and 18th Centuries, Revealed by Contemporary Evidence* (London, Novello, 1915), p.430.

³⁹ Carnegie Hall archivist Gino Francesconi entertainingly recounts the story here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWpGSJMDBFI>

So, was the “Horowitz sound” a fake? Only if you expected it to ensue entirely from his actual playing. It was unquestionably the product of his marvellous musical imagination, and “inimitable” largely because so many (inevitably expensive) components had to be brought together for its creation. Of course, all pianists make demands on their technicians, prefer pianos that have certain qualities and characteristics, and prefer some halls to others. Horowitz was at the extreme end of the spectrum, and had the opportunity to indulge his whims to the utmost. Liszt (who, according to Schumann, could “enchant on any old wreck of a piano”⁴⁰) and Sviatoslav Richter (who could not have afforded to be too precious in Soviet Russia) at the other.

And Horowitz always filled the hall. The promoters may have lost sleep over his preposterous posturing, but they never lost money, despite his eye-watering fee. It is true that with age and increasing insecurity, he began to overreach himself, to insist on ever brighter, uglier instruments to maintain his reputation as a *Jupiter Tonans* even as his strength was failing. This reached its noisy nemesis in the 1978 *Golden Jubilee* performance of Rachmaninov’s 3rd Concerto with Eugene Ormandy, for which Steinways acceded only reluctantly to Horowitz’ demands. Many audience members thought the piano sounded horrible. Age finally brought wisdom in the later 1980s: a gloriously extended Indian Summer. Horowitz finally accepted fate, and moderated both his repertoire and his performance style. But young pianists still tended to emulate the earlier Horowitz, and fell flat on their faces. Sure, they were not Horowitz, but they did not have Horowitz’s advantages either.

Live and Unedited?

But a handful of Horowitz’s recordings are indeed fakes, or at least tainted with questionable ethical status—even leaving aside the pseudo-Horowitz *Hexameron* recently posted on *YouTube*, which turns out to be Leslie Howard’s recording speeded up here and there.⁴¹ The most prominent problem is the “Historic Return” itself. Posterity has the advantage here, in that after the deaths of Horowitz and his wife Wanda, a whole host of

⁴⁰ Robert Schumann *Tagebücher*, Band II 1836-54, ed. Gerd Nauhaus (Basel, Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1987), p.25

⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIDlc34cW1Q> And the crowning irony is that Leslie Howard, as he once told me very emphatically, has never liked Horowitz’s playing.

recorded material became available for release, much of which would never have seen the light of day while they were alive. Horowitz had personally commissioned recordings of dozens of his concerts in the Carnegie Hall and elsewhere. Most are now available on CD, are genuinely “live and unedited”, and include many pieces he never recorded in the studio.⁴² As is to be expected, they feature some playing that is uniquely wonderful, and some that is uniquely awful, with the former significantly predominating until 1983, when Horowitz was suffering from the side-effects of an unwise medical regime. The Tokyo performances of that year were so dreadful that they were not included in the *Unreleased Live Recordings* box set, although they had actually been recorded—on audio and on film. A search of the internet will quickly turn them up: a pianistic car-crash both horrifying and mesmerising at the same time, but at least demonstrating that even when everything else was lost, Horowitz could still produce the most lusciously golden tone amongst the intermittent crashes and looming chaos.

An unvarnished version of the “Historic Return” has been available since 2003, finally allowing those who were not in the Carnegie Hall themselves on 9th May, 1965 to hear something similar to what the audience actually heard, rather than what the performer would have wished them to have heard.⁴³ Horowitz, understandably a bundle of nerves after many years of retirement, started by striking a prominent wrong note in the first bar of the first piece (the Bach-Busoni Toccata, Adagio and Fugue), and carried on in an equally shaky manner. Much of the playing sounds on edge. The dreaded leaps at the close of the second movement of Schumann’s op.17 Fantasy were completely out of control, the closing chords grandiloquently thundered out and then held on almost endlessly by the pedal, as if trying desperately to obliterate the memory of what had just gone before. Nevertheless, the third movement had its exquisite moments, and by the second half of the concert, Horowitz had mostly calmed down. By the encores he was on absolutely top form, especially with a glittering, unsurpassable performance of Moszkowski’s Etude in Ab.

Yet when the “live” recording of the historic event was issued, the worst of this had miraculously disappeared. Admittedly, a few wrong notes remained untouched, no doubt to encourage the impression that all was unedited. But for those who had attended the recital,

⁴² *Vladimir Horowitz at the Carnegie Hall*, Sony B00BT70J6S; *Vladimir Horowitz: The Unreleased Live Recordings, 1966-1983*, Sony B00RKSTMCC

⁴³ Sony B0000C8XJ9

sanitization was glaringly obvious in the Schumann- it was simply not what they had heard in the hall—not concert artist, but con artist.

Horowitz's future biographer Harold Schonberg, senior music critic of *The New York Times*, was in the audience. Soon afterwards, he acquired a copy of the recording. He contacted the Columbia Broadcasting Company to ask about the deceptive editing, and in response received a call from Horowitz himself. The mishap in the Schumann Fantasy, the maestro claimed, had been caused merely by heat and perspiration, and hence was "an act of God", later rectified for the recording. He refused to address the issue of misleading advertising, apparently thinking that the mention of God rendered further enquiry either superfluous or blasphemous.⁴⁴ But Schonberg at least received a reluctant acknowledgement that the recording had been doctored. Horowitz refused to admit even that to Howard Klein, another *New York Times* reviewer, who on querying the discrepancy between concert and disc was fobbed off with the words "well, they [Columbia records] tell me that's the way it was".⁴⁵

On reviewing a further *Horowitz in Concert* disc from 1967, again implicitly of live performances, Klein contacted Columbia once more, to be told that the tracks had been patched together from several concerts and rehearsals for concerts, but were not identical to any single live performance. He believed that this had musical as well as ethical consequences: "For, remarkable as the playing in this album is, the kind of direct communication Horowitz electrified his audiences with is only heard sporadically. Maybe the conglomerate performances lack the natural give and take of performance...Do the perfect parts make a perfect whole?".⁴⁶

The "live" illusion is reinforced on these discs, and with later albums sporting titles like *The Horowitz Recordings*, by the wild applause and manic cheering included at the end (possibly the only section not spliced together from various versions, although one never knows even here...). To be clear, the issue here is not the release of "composite" live performances—this, for better or worse, is not uncommon-- the issue is potentially deceptive advertising. I remember myself being puzzled as a naïve student listening to the thrilling, if bizarre, *Horowitz's Concerts* recording of the Liszt 1st *Mephisto Waltz*, and

⁴⁴ Schonberg, pp. 218-220.

⁴⁵ Schonberg, p.219

⁴⁶ Schonberg, p.220

noticing a slightly disturbing change of acoustic in the frightening right-hand leaps near the climax of the piece. But fortunately, Horowitz still managed to hit each note spot on every time.

I suspect that all this was not just artistic vanity on Horowitz's part. The modern drive to be as perfect as possible affects all performing artists, who suffer under the implicit expectation that a concert should be like a CD, rather than the other way around. The widespread adoption of editing technology after 1945 intensified the pressure to produce performances as pristine as the note-perfect recordings now suddenly achievable. It was not always so. It is doubtful whether an Anton Rubinstein (who was wont to joke that wrong notes were merely "uninvited guests") or a Eugen d'Albert could have maintained a career today without a change in approach.

According to Paderewski, "Rubinstein's playing revealed a remarkable command of the instrument, and at the same time shortcomings in memory and technique as well...it could be dreadful- dreadful!".⁴⁷ With d'Albert things were slightly different. He neglected piano practice in favor of composition, yet felt that this did not require retirement as a pianist. He was right: the ensuing gales of wrong notes seemed only to enhance the effect of his cavalier enthusiasm. When Percy Grainger heard him in 1896, he was "enthralled by his slapdash English style... When I saw d'Albert swash around the piano with the wrong notes flying to the left and right and the whole thing a welter of recklessness, I said to myself 'that's the way I must play'. I'm afraid I learnt his propensity for wrong notes all too thoroughly."⁴⁸ Claudio Arrau- certainly about as different in temperament from Grainger as it was possible to be- took away a similar impression of d'Albert: "...he never practised...And yet his performance of the Liszt Sonata was still marvelous. Full of wrong notes, and missed passages. But the feeling was wonderful- coordinating the whole thing, with each idea coming out of the one before."⁴⁹ Arrau added that not only did audiences in d'Albert's day not mind the wrong notes, they often considered it a sign of genius.⁵⁰ After all, if one gives oneself entirely up to the muses, a certain loss of control is inevitable.

As late as 1949, just as the dawn of edited recordings threatened to change earlier attitudes, Arnold Schoenberg attempted to comfort a concerned Eduard Steuermann:

⁴⁷ Ignacy Paderewski: *The Paderewski Memoirs* (London, Collins, 1939), pp.112-3.

⁴⁸ John Bird: *Percy Grainger* (London, Paul Elek, 1976), pp.29-30

⁴⁹ Josef Horowitz, p.91

⁵⁰ Josef Horowitz, p.91

" I am so glad to hear from you that you have already recorded my piano music. I do not at all share your anxiety lest anyone should hear a wrong note. I am convinced that it has happened only a few times in the history of musical reproduction that some wrong notes did not get in. There is no absolute purity in this world... Let's leave this quasi-perfection to those who can't perceive anything else."⁵¹

As an old man, Horowitz eventually came to terms with his own wrong notes—the paranoia of the 60s and 70s had somewhat dissipated. "I don't want perfection", he declared on *The Last Romantic*, "I'm Horowitz, not Heifetz". In the genuinely live recordings, many of which provided raw material for later composite versions, the playing ranges from the magnificent to the mediocre to the quasi-catastrophic, but all the concerts have some pieces, or even just sections of pieces, that utterly captivate, that seem incomparable. And while we are admiring the multiple versions of well-known Horowitz warhorses, we can peruse some of the most hilariously sycophantic liner notes ever written, in which the artist, even posthumously, is still grovellingly referred to as "Maestro Horowitz". We can also note that although Horowitz did indeed, as he often said, "play differently every time" (it is genuinely impossible not to), he obviously had a general interpretative scaffold for every piece (again unsurprisingly), although specific nuances could be fascinatingly varied. The scaffold might be reconfigured with the years (the Liszt Sonata and Rachmaninov 2nd Sonata are good examples) but was usually retained during individual concert seasons.

From this wealth of material, we can more clearly comprehend what a volatile artist Horowitz was, and how essential that volatility was to the electric effect of his playing. And we can hear that Klein was correct; the genuinely live and unedited versions incontrovertibly have a heightened sense of spontaneity and risk, the apprehension that the artist is treading a virtuoso tightrope; that he may well fall off, with no benevolent editor on hand to save him, or us. It reminds us that a musician's range of expression is significantly limited if chaos, or the imminent threat of it, is out of the question.

A 1979 *Mephisto Waltz* from the Orchestra Hall in Chicago, for example, has some outstandingly limpid lyrical passages, but is otherwise underpowered compared with a

⁵¹ Erwin Stein, ed, Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser trans: *Letters of Arnold Schoenberg* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1965). p.277 Letter of 3rd October, 1949

performance in Washington a couple of weeks later. The latter is far less subtle, but more dashing, demonic despite, or perhaps partly because of, the splashes, crashes, fluffs and floundering throughout.⁵² One begins to understand the tricky choices that would have to be made to edit all this into an even semi-coherent whole. A 1968 Rachmaninov 2nd Sonata from Boston is equally stunning and also impressively accurate, although hectic and hyperbolic, especially in the finale. Unequivocally an overwhelming performance—but perhaps not suited for repeated listening? The Chopin Octave study from the Met in 1983 (Horowitz’s worst period) is catastrophic. Horowitz flails around, like d’Albert, with heedless abandon, yet the tone colours in the central section tell us that this is not a bad pianist-- just a great pianist playing badly.⁵³ Scriabin’s Study for the left hand is cool, beautiful and unsentimental in Chicago in 1979⁵⁴, while Moszkowski’s *Étincelles* was absolutely stunning in the same hall in 1975—witty, light, quicksilvered, arch, amusing, and accurate.⁵⁵ What a loss it would be if editing were to stifle the (almost) infinite variety here, even if it did show the door to a host of “uninvited guests”.

“The Last Romantic”?

By the mid-1980s, according to his agents, Horowitz had become “The Last Romantic”, the only surviving scion of a noble breed, a last living link with Rachmaninov, a historical artefact in his own right.⁵⁶ But fifty years earlier, when there were plenty of Romantics still around, he had actually sounded like “a modern pianist” to his future wife Wanda.⁵⁷ The cleanliness, precision and rhythmic thrust of much of his playing, the relatively rare use of asynchronisation and additional arpeggiation⁵⁸-- all heard to splendid effect in his

⁵² Sony CD 88843054582—30-31

⁵³ Sony CD 88843054582—48-49

⁵⁴ Sony CD 88843054582—32-33

⁵⁵ Sony CD 88843054582—19-20

⁵⁶ Horowitz himself did not like this description, an invention of his publicists, and joked that he felt like the last of the Mohicans instead.

⁵⁷ Schonberg, p.136

⁵⁸ For an analysis of these techniques, see my *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.139-178

1930 recording of Rachmaninov's 3rd Concerto and the 1932 Liszt Sonata-- would no doubt have made that seem obvious. One only has to compare Alfred Cortot's (1877-1962) more flexibly nuanced, if splashier Liszt Sonata of 1929 to immediately notice the difference, or indeed to listen to Horowitz's own 1977 recording—much less rigorous, more wayward, more capricious, with an emphasis on inner voices that, as Arrau would have said, Horowitz had “discovered” in the intervening decades. We are, naturally, also listening here to the difference between youth and age, but a tempting conclusion is that the old Horowitz seemed like a Romantic not so much because he was an elderly survivor from the end of that era, but, perhaps counter-intuitively, because his playing had itself become more Romantic with the years. His was an acquired, not a vestigial, Romanticism.

Even by the early 1960s, Horowitz—then retired from the concert stage, but still recording— had not assumed his later status as a hardy survivor from the good old days. In 1961, the pianist and critic Abram Chasins- composer of the once famed piece of Chinoiserie *Rush Hour in Hong Kong*- produced the second edition of his well-known reminiscences *Speaking of Pianists*. Here captivating memories of great performers of the past jostled with more sober assessments of the younger generation of contemporary players, including Sviatoslav Richter, Emil Gilels and even a promising newcomer called Maurizio Pollini. The book was justly popular. Chasins, no dilettante himself, had known personally a surprising number of 20th-century master-pianists and was in a prime position to evaluate their styles, strengths and weaknesses. Horowitz, a friend of Chasins, was treated admiringly, even at times gushingly, but he could not equal the impact of what Chasins, rightly or wrongly, thought of as the genuinely great players of the late Romantic era, in particular Josef Hofmann (Chasins's own teacher), Sergei Rachmaninov and Leopold Godowsky. He declared with regret: “...no one who lives in the real world, no one who has observed the course of piano-playing, expects or demands today the luminous standards of individuality and conceptual grandeur of other days when pianistic giants roamed the earth.”⁵⁹

It was not just a question of playing style. Horowitz's actual programming practices were modern, at least in terms of length and density of repertoire. His recitals were fairly skimpy for a late Romantic- around the present-day “average” of C.40-45 minutes per half-- little more than a warm-up for Anton Rubinstein, or a group of encores for Paderewski. Paderewski, by far the most popularly successful pianist of the post-Rubinstein generation,

⁵⁹ Abram Chasins: *Speaking of Pianists* (New York: Knopf, 1961/2), p.152

had persevered with the programming approach of his pupillage, namely the Rubinstein/Hans von Bülow style marathon concert, even if their own teachers' generation had scarcely approved of such gargantuan offerings. Liszt was for once united with critics like Eduard Hanslick in despairing at the length of von Bülow's programmes: "At least a dozen pieces, among which several sonatas or suites, each with three or four movements, and which he played in 140 concerts during six or eight months in America. At this rate Fasolt and Fafner would have killed themselves, without any assistance or ceremony".⁶⁰ Wagner's comment on von Bülow was more concise: "Completely unbelievable!"⁶¹

Paderewski's famous "comeback" concert at the Carnegie Hall on 22nd November 1922 (after several years forsaking the piano for politics) was of a routine 3-hour length, and included seven substantial encores. These encores were played after an already Herculean offering consisting of Mendelssohn's *Variations Serieuses*, Schumann's op.17 Fantasy, Beethoven's *Appassionata* Sonata, Chopin's first Ballade, G-major Nocturne, Bb-minor Mazurka, and third Scherzo, and Liszt's *Au bord d'une Source*, *La Leggerezza* Concert-Study and E-major Polonaise. Audience and critical reaction was ecstatic, but it was a test of endurance as much as artistry.

By the 1930s such marathons were becoming rarer, and competed with concerts that put fewer demands on pianist and audience. Horowitz was at the forefront of the new trend. A Zürich programme in December 1935, for example, found him playing "only" the Bach/Busoni: Toccata, Adagio and Fugue, a Haydn Sonata, Franck's Prelude, Aria and Finale, Schumann's Toccata, and a Chopin sequence: the Barcarolle, two etudes, the 4th Scherzo, a Mazurka and the inevitable Polonaise in Ab. When he gave his own Carnegie Hall "comeback" concert in 1965, over forty years had passed since Paderewski's similar venture. Horowitz's programme, as we have seen, also featured the Schumann op.17 Fantasy. But it was by far the longest item, preceded by the trusty Bach-Busoni Toccata, Adagio and Fugue, and followed by the Scriabin 9th Sonata and Poem in F-sharp. The concluding Chopin consisted merely of a Mazurka, etude and Ballade. Four relatively modest encores

⁶⁰ Edward Waters, ed., William Tyler, trans. *The Letters of Franz Liszt to Olga von Meyendorff* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1979) p.175 (Letter of September 7th, 1876). Fasolt and Fafner, the giants from Wagner's *Ring*, understandably came immediately to mind. Liszt had attended the premiere of the complete cycle in Bayreuth only a few weeks before.

⁶¹ Cosima Wagner: *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack (Piper Verlag, München, 1982), Vol 3, p.210

(Debussy's *Serenade for the Doll*, Scriabin's *Etude in C sharp minor*, Moszkowski's *etude in Ab-major*, and Schumann's *Träumerei*) rounded off an evening of music similar in layout, but not much longer than half the length of his great predecessor's recital.

And what of Horowitz's interpretative approach, his aesthetics of performance? Horowitz was no Oscar Wilde, and his attempt to present himself in various interviews, especially during the 1970s, as a sophisticated, urbane wit were more embarrassing than illuminating.⁶² Ultimately, he was a doer rather than a philosopher. His aesthetics are best illustrated by his actual playing, rather than by his periodic verbal genuflections to the "composers intentions".⁶³ But that is not necessarily a bad thing, for artistic practice often departs radically from artistic theory, even when the theorist is the performer himself.⁶⁴ For Horowitz, "the composer's intentions" seemed to equate with the common Romantic tenet, held by von Bülow, Paderewski and many others, that the ultimate fidelity should be to the spirit of the score rather than its letter, and that the performer was both the conduit and the arbiter of that spirit. (I am, for want of anything else, putting words into Horowitz's mouth here.) Ironically, he may then have agreed with Michael Steinberg that interpretation should aim at "the reification of the composer's ideal", as mentioned above—but simply disagreed about how that ideal was embodied.

There was, of course, a wide spectrum of interpretative practices during the 19th and early 20th centuries, ranging from the much-touted "fidelity" of Clara Schumann to the notorious infidelity of the young Liszt. But this fidelity was, for the most part, not the far greater rigour of much later eras, and should not be casually confused with it, however enticing that might be. A typical 20th-century view was articulated by Sviatoslav Richter, who believed that "the interpreter is really an executant, carrying out the composer's intentions to the letter. He doesn't add anything that isn't already in the work."⁶⁵ Richter was allegedly appalled when he heard pianists ignoring repeats (a particular bugbear of his) or introducing

⁶² Many of these are now available on YouTube, for example:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZm7OW3ufbc>

But see also a much more interesting interview with Abram Chasins from 1965:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RorUmFYo7rk>

⁶³ It is worth noting that immediately preceding Horowitz's 1978 White House concert, President Carter also praised "how well he could interpret the intentions of the famous composers". One suspects that the content of Carter's remarks may have been agreed in advance with Horowitz himself:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I02B8JMnbJI>

⁶⁴ See my *After the Golden Age*, pp.179-224

⁶⁵ Bruno Monsaingeon: *Sviatoslav Richter* (London, Faber & Faber, 2001), p.153

sporadic tempo modifications. A century before, while it would have been simple enough to find some musicians who paid lip-service to an attitude like Richter's, it would have been difficult to find many who would have met his standards in practice. Indeed, one might argue that Richter himself did not always do so.

Even some of the most libertine of Romantic interpreters counseled that players should begin their work on a piece with close attention to the original text, although the final performance might well depart radically from it. Anton Rubinstein's advice to Josef Hofmann may be taken as axiomatic for many players of his generation: "Just play first exactly what is written; if you have done full justice to it, and still feel like adding or changing anything, why, do so".⁶⁶ A prevalent modern attitude would embrace the first point but abominate the second. In other words: if you cannot make it effective as the composer wrote it, do not play it at all.

Ironically, Rubinstein's insistence on first mastering the original score was if anything a rather rigorous point of view for his era, and Josef Hofmann felt that his master adopted a typically hypocritical "do as I say, not do as I do" approach: "He always compelled me to bring the pieces along, insisting that I should play everything just as it was written! He would follow every note of my playing with his eyes riveted on the printed pages. A pedant he certainly was, a stickler for the letter- incredibly so, especially when one considered the liberties he took when playing the same works! Once I called his attention modestly to this seeming paradox, and he answered: 'When you are as old as I am now you may do as I do- if you can.'"⁶⁷ To be sure, even Liszt seemed to adopt a radically more severe approach (judged by the standards of the time) when teaching later in life- especially for the works of Beethoven and Chopin- than he evinced during his own performing heyday.

Nevertheless, the famously totalitarian statements of Ravel ("I do not ask for my music to be interpreted, only to be played"⁶⁸) and Stravinsky ("Music should be transmitted and not interpreted, because interpretation reveals the personality of the interpreter rather than that of the author"⁶⁹) were fairly extreme views for the first half of the 20th-century, and not entirely realizable in practice (as Stravinsky's very different recordings of his own pieces

⁶⁶ Josef Hofmann: *Piano Playing with Piano Questions Answered* (Dover, New York, 1990), p.55

⁶⁷ Josef Hofmann, *Piano Playing with Questions Answered* (Mineola, NY, Dover, 1976) pp.59-60

⁶⁸ Marguerite Long: *At the Piano with Maurice Ravel* (London, Dent, 1973) p. 16

⁶⁹ Igor Stravinsky: *Autobiography* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1936, reprint New York, Norton, 1962) p.75.

unintentionally succeed in demonstrating). For many composers and performers, the idea of trying completely to remove “the personality of the interpreter” would have remained a puzzling aim that might well have impoverished, rather than enriched a performance. Busoni even made the thought-provoking claim that as any notation of music is a transcription of an originally abstract sonic idea, every performance of this inevitably inexact notation is, like it or not, a further transcription⁷⁰ - a view explicitly supported by Arnold Schoenberg, who used it to defend Mahler’s retouching of the orchestration of Beethoven’s Symphonies.⁷¹

Liszt was little given to publishing extended disquisitions on the aesthetics of interpretation, but the nearest he got to it was an article on Clara Schumann written in 1854. This was no doubt composed with a little help from his partner and literary collaborator Princess Wittgenstein, to whom we likely owe the verbosely ornate prose style, so different as it is from that of Liszt’s own letters. The essay can be read superficially, especially from the modern standpoint of *Werktreue*, or “fidelity to the work” (now frequently conflated with “fidelity to the score”) as a eulogy of Clara Schumann’s “objective” performance style. But reading between the lines, knowing what we do about Liszt’s own practice as a performer in the previous decades, he actually seems to be relegating her to a respectable but subsidiary position, rather than putting her in the pantheon of truly inspired artists.

In fact, much of Liszt’s essay is taken up with a defense of the idea of instrumental virtuosity itself, offering the argument that the ideal virtuoso is truly creative, not simply a slavish re-creator of a composer’s conception. In this respect, it constitutes the opposite viewpoint to that of Robert Schumann, who wrote privately to Clara many years before that “The composer, and he alone, knows how his compositions should be performed. Believing you can do it better is just the same as if a painter wanted to make, say, a tree better than god created it. He can paint a more beautiful one, but then it’s a different tree...It’s always better when the virtuoso offers the work of art, not himself.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Ferruccio Busoni: *Wesen und Einheit der Musik*, ed. Joachim Herrmann (Berlin, Max Hesses Verlag, 1956) p.125

⁷¹ See the letter of 1909 from Schoenberg to Busoni in Anthony Beaumont: *Ferruccio Busoni: Selected Letters* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1987) p.394

⁷² Robert Schumann: *Tagebücher*, Band II, p.107 (October, 1840). My translation.

Liszt's essay on Clara could almost have been written as a reply to her husband's views here, and as an anticipatory response to Stravinsky and Ravel, or to Thomson's and Steinberg's criticisms of Horowitz. However, from a deeper historical perspective it is just one skirmish in a very long war indeed. The contest between proponents of a supposedly profound musical fidelity, and exponents of an allegedly empty instrumental expertise, has been raging at least since the time of Plato, many of whose remarks about music in the *Republic* and the *Laws* could easily have been directed against Horowitz and his ilk. A more immediate context for Liszt's comments, however, was what Dana Gooley has aptly called "the battle against instrumental virtuosity in the early 19th century", a critical crusade against the cohorts of superficially exciting but emotionally shallow "virtuosos", many of them pianists, who were apparently bent on destroying all vestiges of a healthy musical life in the early Romantic era.⁷³

It would not have escaped Liszt's notice that Clara Schumann's husband Robert was one of the most prominent of these anti-virtuoso writers, nor that he himself had often been the target of similar invective from other critics, though not directly attacked—on these grounds at least-- by Schumann, who could tell that Liszt was something special. As a riposte to the critics, Liszt accordingly presented a defence of virtuosity as the highest form of creative interpretation, undertaken by artists with both the technical skills and the musical imagination to awaken the quiescent notes of the score, to channel the spirit, rather than the letter of a work. In fact, to transcend the letter: "Virtuosity", declares Liszt, "is not the passive servant of the composition, because the life and death of the artwork entrusted to it depends on its breath...No-one would call painting a servile, matter of fact reproduction of nature. In the same relation of one to the other stands virtuosity to productive musical art [i.e., composition]. He would be no artist who, with uncomprehending faithfulness (*Treue*), just followed the contours laid out before him, without permeating it with creative life from his own notion of passions or feelings."

But in this light, what is Clara Schumann? She is, apparently, "an obsequious, reverential and faithful devotee of the Delphic god [of music], she serves his cult with

⁷³ Dana Gooley: *The Battle Against Instrumental Virtuosity in the Early 19th-Century*, in *Franz Liszt and his World*, ed. Christopher Gibbs and Dana Gooley (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006) pp.75-112

shivering conscientiousness. Trembling, lest she loses an iota of the message to be delivered, lest she wrongly stresses a single syllable, and thus becomes a guilty, deceitful interpreter (*Interpretin*), she suppresses her own feelings. In order as an incorruptible intermediary and faithful explainer to communicate the oracles, she renounces her own inspiration. She will elucidate no obscure passage according to her own personal inclination—for her there is nothing big or small in the holy books. The worthiness and authenticity of each individual page has been certified after strict testing. Instead everything is holy, and ought to be accepted, free from doubt, and with pious reverence.”

And the result? Liszt obviously cannot quite bring himself explicitly to call her playing unimaginative and boring, but he does nearly get there: “she is so intensely controlled by her devotion, that the more moving, human element almost completely retreats into the background in the face of this objective interpretation of art.”⁷⁴

Admittedly, there may be an undercurrent of standard-issue 19th century misogyny here: Clara, as a woman, could not be genuinely „creative“ in the same way as her composer husband could be, even if she herself also composed—a point made more or less explicitly towards the beginning of the essay. And admittedly, Clara had evolved from one of the few pianists to programme Liszt’s music in public in the late 1830s into one of its most zealous detractors by the 1850s.⁷⁵ But it is difficult to believe that Liszt would not have reacted with the same outwardly complimentary disdain to any player of any sex who shared her approach to performance. He was, after all, in his later years a fervent admirer of Sophie Menter’s playing. It had the freedom and inspiration he missed in Clara’s. And he continued to believe that Clara was talented but vastly overrated, referring to her with dripping sarcasm in his masterclasses as “the divine Clara” (“die göttliche Clara”) and calling prosaic performances accompanied by irrelevant bodily movements “frankfurterisch” (Clara just happened to teach at the conservatory in Frankfurt, and famously swayed around while playing...).⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Liszt, ed. Julius Knapp, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 4 (Leipzig, Breitkopf und Haertel, 1911), pp.248-259 My translation here and elsewhere.

⁷⁵ For a thought-provoking evaluation of the development of Clara’s concert programming see Alexander Stefaniak, *Clara Schumann’s Interiorities and the Cutting Edge of Popular Pianism* in *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 70/3 (2017), pp. 697-765

⁷⁶ For a more extensive and balanced evaluation of Clara Schumann’s pianism than Liszt was able to offer, and an account of the complex relationship between them, see Nancy B. Reich: *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001), especially pp.194-202.

As an addendum, and a downright hilarious one in the light of our contemporary concert culture, Liszt could not resist penning a final paragraph musing on several of Clara's most peculiar habits, which included "conscientiously" preparing for performances, and even wanting to try out the piano beforehand in the hall she was due to appear in. All in all, he concluded, "Clara Schumann is not a pianist and concert-giver in the normal sense of the terms".⁷⁷

Ignoring Horowitz's Clara-like obsession with the exact nature of the pianos he played on and the halls he played in, I imagine he may have subscribed to everything else Liszt wrote above. Horowitz obviously regarded interpretation as an act of individual imagination as much as reverential score reading, although, as Taruskin pointed out, his score-reading in Schumann's *Träumerei* is significantly more accurate and less willful than Steinberg seemed to believe. Steinberg had chosen a particularly bad example, leaving himself wide open to Taruskin's eloquent skewering. Yet Horowitz's powerfully individual musical style, his plethora of nuances and inflections, the distinctiveness of his soundscape, cannot help but attract listeners' attention. Whether that also means that attention is inevitably distracted from "the music" is a moot point, and only arguable if one believes that there is such a thing: that a piece of music has a specific, ideal Platonic form distinct from any single performance. I would propose that Horowitz simply widens our idea of what a piece of music might be, the possibilities it might contain, the effects it might produce.

I used to think of Sviatoslav Richter as Horowitz's interpretive antithesis, especially in the light of his remarks like "the interpreter is really an executant", quoted above. Others still hold this view. Anthony Phillips, writing in 2015 on Richter's playing, commented, "Music-making at his level is blood-brother to composing, not in the sense of grafting on to the score a potentially intrusive personality, but of re-creating the composer's inspiration".⁷⁸ I suspect that Horowitz might here have been considered the "intrusive personality" *par excellence*. But I would now argue that that Richter's granite-like music-making was actually just as intrusive (which I do not regard as necessarily a negative quality) and individual as Horowitz's, especially after listening to the recent releases of Richter's complete

⁷⁷ Liszt, ed. Julius Knapp, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 4, p. 259

⁷⁸ Anthony Phillips, "How This Book Came About" in Walter Moskalew, Anna Moskalewa-Richter, Dagmar von Reincke, translated and edited by Anthony Phillips: *Svetik. A Family Memoir of Sviatoslav Richter* (Toccata Press, London, 2015), p.19

recordings.⁷⁹ To be sure, Richter does not tease archly, cajole and seduce like Horowitz—these effects are not part of his artistic persona—and he may well have really believed that he was just “following the composer’s instructions”. But he does blatantly ignore them when he feels like it (the stunningly slow opening of the Rachmaninov 2nd Concerto, for example, which conforms neither to the score, nor to the composer’s own recording). And he always sounds like Richter, just as Horowitz always sounds like Horowitz. The former may have become—erroneously—a God for purists, but the latter became, as Berlioz famously said of Liszt, a God for pianists.

On these rare occasions when Horowitz takes on the mantle of Puritanism—in his Beethoven, for example—he tends just to be dull and dutiful. Puritanism may be virtuous, but it really does not sound like much fun. We might reasonably ask which Horowitz we would rather have—the indulgent or the ascetic? And with the former, the “disrespectful” one, we might well argue that Horowitz was drawing attention as much to the piano itself, to its almost infinitely malleable potential, as to his own quicksilver talent. After all, in every other respect, Horowitz was a remarkably un-histrionic pianist. There were no flamboyant outfits or theatrical grimaces, hardly any superfluous gestures of the hand or arm, no dry ice, no candelabra. Even the much-discussed flat-fingered technique was a means to a musical end rather than a visual effect. Nor did he rely for his reputation on a distinguished pianistic lineage. He did constantly refer to his one short meeting with Scriabin, and to his friendship with Rachmaninov, but his teachers at the Kiev Conservatory, Sergei Tarnowsky and Felix Blumenfeld, fine musicians though they may have been, were hardly names to conjure with like Liszt, Leschetizky or Busoni. He forged his own style. What we see when we watch a video of Horowitz on stage is utter concentration and sincerity. No wonder he remains an idol for many young pianists. He not only took himself seriously, he took their profession seriously too. And he demonstrated that there was more variety and colour still to be discovered in our ossified standard repertoire than many of us had ever imagined.

⁷⁹ Sviatoslav Richter: *The Complete Album Collection: Live and Studio Recordings for RCA and Columbia* (Sony Classics, 18CDs, 88843014702)

Sviatoslav Richter: *Complete Decca, Philips and DG Recordings* (Decca, 51 CDs, 478 6778)