

## VIDEO REVIEW

"The Art of Piano: Great Pianists of the 20th Century." *Great Performances*. PBS. June 2000. Music Video and DVD. Warner 29199-3, 1999. \$26.99.

1. As a pianist I remember more vividly than many things from my youth hearing and seeing some of the great pianists presented here in live concerts. When one talks of an "unforgettable" concert by this or that artist, for me that has always included the visual as well as the aural component. To see clips of Horowitz, Rubinstein, and Cortot, for example, is not merely to hear different approaches to the piano and its repertoire, but one could almost speak of three different activities engaged in by these men. Horowitz seems to crouch at the piano, as if almost ready to pounce on it; Rubinstein sits quite straight, almost aloof, while Cortot grimaces and sways about. And the musical results always seem a direct outcome of the particular activity. After attending a concert by this or that great pianist (whose manner of playing was often totally different from my own) I would often go home to the piano and try to imitate that artist, not just his or her sound, but by adjusting the bench and virtually my whole stance at the piano—what better way to learn, after all, than by apprenticing oneself to a great master?
2. So a composite video such as this one is for me a veritable treasure trove, a true legacy of a large proportion of the great piano playing of the 20th century—much of which is still indebted to the 19th. The video available for purchase is narrated by John Tusa, but the same program as seen on PBS several months ago was narrated by John Rubinstein, son of Arthur. I was told by the producers that since the film involved many studios from many countries, the video exists with various narrations in different languages. The small booklet enclosed with the video has a text that follows to a large extent the line of the film; it has been translated into English from an article in French.
3. Briefly, the pianists represented are: Claudio Arrau, Wilhelm Backhaus, Alfred Cortot, György Cziffra, Annie Fischer, Edwin Fischer, Glenn Gould, Myra Hess, Josef Hoffman, Vladimir Horowitz, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, Benno Moiseiwitsch, Ignaz Paderewski, Francis Planté (born in 1839, recorded in 1928!), Sergei Rachmaninoff (who unfortunately is only heard but not seen), Sviatoslav Richter, and Arthur Rubinstein (pictured). There are also commentaries by a number of pianists, conductors and managers, including Piotr Anderszewski, Daniel Barenboim, and Colin Davis. Some of these are enormously sympathetic,

such as Anderszewski, or very insightful, such as Daniel Barenboim, who describes each artist in a particularly characteristic way. Cortot, for example, he describes as follows: "I think Cortot looked for the opium in music. He looked for anything that was extraordinary; he always looked for something, not sickly, but something abnormal, totally removed from reality, and far from anything that could be construed as smelling of normality."

4. There are, to be sure, some disappointing omissions—why, for example, do we get Backhaus but not Artur Schnabel? Schnabel was certainly far more important as one of the great pianistic forces of the century, whose influence is still felt widely through his most important students. Likewise one misses the two great Romanians Dinu Lipatti and Clara Haskil. Hearing and seeing Clara Haskil twice in my youth was worth many lessons indeed (and was a lot cheaper...). One can only suppose that there were no film clips available of these artists. But Rudolf Serkin certainly had film clips. In his later years we watched him play at the White House for Ronald Reagan; one regrets his omission as well.
5. One aspect of film is the ability to show hands up close, which is something even a live concert cannot provide (save for those few who might be sitting on the stage or in the first row). Most fascinating for me have always been the hands of Horowitz (pictured), described by Tamás Vásáry as "like watching a race horse." Yet I believe Horowitz's hands were actually not very good as raw material: one sees a pinky curl under, other fingers flailing outward in a scale. Horowitz doubtless worked hard to bend these hands to his will as a young man; perhaps that's just what makes his playing so exciting—the reins are always taut. Hofmann had very small hands—in his later years Steinway made him a piano with a narrower keyboard. Alicia de Laroccha (another sad omission from the film) is also a pianist who hasn't the best hands—these artists all trained their hands with their keen ears and minds. (I have always contended that pianists don't really play with their hands—the hands are just the last extension of a whole system of piano-playing parts.) The most perfect hands to be seen here are those of Michelangeli—we are told by the narrator that Michelangeli was very concerned with all visual aspects of his playing, so this makes perfect sense. I doubt that most great pianists worry about how their hands look (or perhaps according to some schools of piano playing one should worry...).
6. Highlights of the film, for me, include Horowitz's performance of the Scriabin d# minor Étude (Opus 8, #12), Cziffra's *Grand Galop*

*Chromatique* of Liszt, and the lesson by Alfred Cortot on "*Der Dichter Spricht*" from Schumann's *Kinderszenen*. Cortot speaks in French, with subtitles at the bottom of the screen, but even for those who don't understand French, the fantastic poetry of the expression is revealed mostly through his extraordinary voice. But there is much more of interest here, some of it for me quite unexpected. I never heard Myra Hess live, and have admired many of her recordings for years—her "stance" at the piano is quite different from what I would have thought, to me quite strange and even rather inappropriate for what is coming out of the instrument. And of course we see Glenn Gould—this is less of a surprise. Backhaus and Edwin Fischer don't come out particularly well here, in my opinion, but Paderewski (especially as it's from a film in which he appears as an actor) is just wonderful.

7. Among the more interesting commentaries, Sir Colin Davis speaks of the solo pianistic activity as being somewhat "narcissistic." Other musicians need partners, but pianists sit by themselves finely tuning individual interpretations and musical idiosyncrasies. I am not sure I go along with this notion; I don't think that what we do is in any substantial way different from the activity of anyone who creates by him- or herself—be it a sculptor, a writer or a violin- or clock-maker. Perhaps it is a kind of privilege some of us have, to be able to shut ourselves off from the outside world and develop and refine our art. And perhaps this is in some way what makes the best of us so fascinating to others.
8. The recorded sound quality, even in the stereo hi-fi version of the video, is of course far from modern standards and the film clips are almost all in black and white, but they are perfectly adequate for the understanding and appreciation of what these artists could do. A highly rewarding and entertaining 108' visit with pianistic giants of the past.

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