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Earl Wild, Pianist

Earl Wild-The Romantic Master

By Richard Devens



With the deaths of Vladimir Horowitz, Jorge Bolet, and most recently, Shura Cherkassky, Earl Wild remains the only living link to the 'golden age' of keyboard giants such as Lhevinne, Friedman, Rosenthal, Tausig, Barere, Hofmann, Paderewski, Petri, Godowsky, Rachmaninoff, and Moiseiwitsch. These pianists were noted not only for their technical feats and rhythmic freedom, but also for their golden tone, charm,

and originality. Today, many pianists possess staggering techniques, but we can rarely identify their playing by just listening to one of their recordings. With great pianists such as Horowitz and Earl Wild, we can always tell.

Sergei Rachmaninoff was Mr. Wild's greatest musical influence, and like Rachmaninoff and Horowitz, he possesses his own sound. His playing is characterized by a mastery of the tonal spectrum (from massive velvety fortissimos to the most ethereal pianissimos), deft use of pedaling and voicings, and a finger technique of awesome speed, clarity, and accuracy. His tone is always beautiful - with melodies that sing. Like a tightrope artist performing without a net, Earl Wild takes tremendous chances on stage - which makes for sheer excitement. It's literally breathtaking!

Born November 26, 1915 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, this legendary super-virtuoso has performed all over the world and mastered every facet of his art. He has conducted on numerous occasions, and continues to perform, compose, and teach.

In addition to his above activities, Mr. Wild has taken his place in history as a direct descendant of the 'golden age' of transcribers; he has been called the finest transcriber of our time. This past year, to celebrate his 80th birthday, Sony Classical released a CD devoted entirely to piano transcriptions. The thirteen transcriptions recorded (nine of which are his own) include eight world premieres.

His home at the moment is in the suburbs of Columbus, Ohio; not coincidentally, it also includes a wonderful recording studio. An immensely charming, funny, and personable man, Earl Wild spoke candidly about music and musicians. The questions posed to him often led to anecdotes and stories, and he used astute analogies to make his points. It was easy to discern that his art is truly his life.

Richard Devens: In sheer finger technique and precision, can the young pianists of today match those of the "golden age"?

Earl Wild: Many pianists today possess fabulous techniques. In sheer finger work, finger power, and precision, a lot of them are far more advanced than many of the pianists of the past; but this is not enough.

Most of the late 19th century pianists had something wonderful in their playing - namely poetry and personality. Today, there is such a demand put on musicians for technical precision, that a lot of amazing but calculated, technical playing is created. The public views this as art, but it's not art. Most of the pianists of the past were originals; today there are very few originals performing. We must also remember that many of the "golden age" pianists of the past were at the height of their careers when they made recordings (although some were unfortunately past their prime). That's why it's very helpful to have heard these musicians in public performance, as I did. Old recordings provide us with a sound picture of their individual personalities. Many of those elusive qualities seem to be missing in musicians today - which is not to say they won't get better as they mature. It's very important for all musicians (young as well as old) to attend as many public concerts as possible. Only then can anyone look back on performance practices with any perspective. I go to many concerts, but I rarely see music students in attendance. I also advise young pianists to perform as much as possible with instrumentalists and singers as well as their solo repertoire.

It's amazing how many students know absolutely nothing about writing music. They're totally lost if asked to compose a short variation on a popular tune like *Three Blind Mice*. Playing the piano should be like speech; you have to say something. Most importantly, musicians should acquire the ability to improvise.

RD: Some pianists and piano teachers think that a heavy keyboard action helps develop technique.

EW: Unfortunately, many muscular problems have occurred as a result of heavy actions. Anyone who has a piano with very heavy action should have it attended to and not torture themselves with the idea that a heavy action is helpful. There's too much snobbery today concerning pianos; instruments from different manufacturers can sometimes be good as well as bad. One of the very well-known piano manufacturers, for example, produces pianos with actions that range from acceptable to very heavy. Unfortunately, many pianists will attempt to play on a heavy action without complaining just because the instrument is from a well-respected company. I think this is very shortsighted, and it annoys me tremendously. For me personally, the Baldwin piano has the most even touch and sound. I've been using their pianos exclusively for 50 years now. Throughout those years I've worked with some really wonderful piano technicians such as Baldwin's current chief concert technician, Andrei Svetlichny, as well as select individuals at their factory, striving to set a keyboard standard that's helpful to the artist.

I must admit I endured a few concerts where the pianos had heavy actions when I was just starting, but today I would give up the concert date rather than play on such a piano. Baldwin sends me wonderful sounding pianos with really marvelous actions, which make my concert performances a pleasurable experience for me. That's what playing the piano should be about; pure enjoyment. With a good piano, I know that I will be able to project the music without worrying about the actual mechanism.

RD: How should one go about choosing an instrument?

EW: When selecting an instrument, try not to be beguiled by the beauty of the immediate sound; sometimes it can seem very beautiful, but have no substance. The true value of a piano depends upon whether it will accept an extreme forte with quality (not a raucous sound) as well as a pianissimo with carrying power.

RD: Can an action be too light?

EW: I think a light action is wonderful, although it can be too light. What matters is how pianists use their hands. You can be comfortable with all styles of music if you play very close to the keys. Close playing will definitely give your career longevity. Pianists who lift their fingers too high always develop hand trouble that first starts with the fourth finger, and then moves up into the arm. It stems from their initial teaching. My teacher, Egon Petri, always insisted that I play very close to the keys. When Petri played, you rarely saw his fingers move. He had a huge sound which seemingly appeared out of nowhere! He also had one of the biggest repertoires of all time. He traveled with this very large multipage, single-spaced book containing his entire concert performance repertoire. He would send it to the sponsors of his various concerts and say, "Pick your program!"

RD: It's confusing for a student to encounter diametrically opposed viewpoints among teachers. What if the teacher that a student spends the most time with is a 'raised finger' proponent?

EW: That's very unfortunate. Teachers who promote that style of piano playing rarely had concert careers. If you notice, all the great pianists of the past as well as the present never play with high fingers. It's a technique that creates a percussive sound, and works against the natural hand position. If you want to be a concert performer, it's important to play your concert programs for pianists who have performed in public. Theoretical teaching rarely works under the rigors and stress of a concert performance.

RD: You've said that it's OK to redistribute passages between the hands. In your 1994 Carnegie Hall performance of Chopin's "Etude in Thirds" (Op. 25, No. 6), you played the double thirds in measures 47 and 48 entirely with the right hand. Some pianists play the entire passage beginning on the 'E' and "G-sharp" with two hands. Others take the "D"s (or 'D's and 'F-sharps') with the left hand. Did you feel you would have been "cheating" if you redistributed the notes?

EW: When I practice, I try everything that can possibly make a passage better. It's perfectly acceptable to redistribute passages between the hands as long as the pianist plays the same notes. The sound achieved should be controlled by the ear and then projected to the finger tips. In this particular etude, I played it as written. It's a matter of the pressure you put on the keys - not to play too heavily. Simply relaxing while staying very close to the keys always works.

RD: Unless the 'G-sharps' in measure 47 (the fourth beat) and measure 48 (the fourth sixteenth of the first beat) are held a split second longer than the bottom 'E', we cannot play the two double thirds legato; if we do play them legato, we cannot maintain the speed.

EW: In fast passages like that one, there's no such thing as legato. Playing close to the keys will create a legato-like sound. Most legatos are only illusions, anyway. In the *Etude in g-sharp minor*, however, I found that any facilitation would have hindered the motion.

RD: But you would never have any 'moral' problems regarding redistributing the hands in performance?

EW: Josef Hofmann would never have had a concert career if he had not redistributed many passages to accommodate his extremely small hands. It should always be the ear which controls the sound through the hands. Take the opening of Beethoven's *Sonata in c minor, Op. 111*, for instance. If you can create the same sound, or even make it better by redistribution, it should make no difference to anyone. In that passage, I personally play the original placement. It's so terribly pedantic to think that anyone should be forced to stick to the distribution of the hands as

written on the page. Every hand is different. The naturalness of your particular hand, not the composer's hand, will tell you whether to redistribute or not. Pianists must learn to be guided by the tone they're producing, as well as by the feel and the comfort of their hands. It takes slow, intensive work to achieve this. If pianists are willing to go through this process, I can guarantee they will be pleased with the tone they produce.

RD: I've never understood something about the "Urtext mob." They think it's a sin to redistribute, yet they change fingerings. Rudolf Serkin is an example of a pianist who changed fingerings on the spur of the moment in order to better achieve his musical intentions on a particular piano. If the former is a sin, the latter should be also.

EW: I don't believe that Serkin changed fingerings on the spur of the moment. Perhaps he did so in something simple, but certainly not in complex contrapuntal writing. Having recorded the Beethoven piano sonatas a number of times, he might have changed fingerings over a period of years - which is understandable. But neither his public nor record producers would be aware of this, or much less care, as long as the outcome was good. To think that composers were stuck with certain fingerings is ridiculous. Much of our concept of piano playing stems from the tyranny that was placed on us by the Europeans. Anyone who didn't adhere to their ideas was considered a nobody. Many American artists are downplayed by the Europeans, especially in their music magazines.

RD: Artur Schnabel would probably have been against the redistribution of passages, yet the fingerings in his edition of the Beethoven sonatas are his own. I'm sure they worked for him and helped him achieve his musical goals, but I find them crazy.

EW: Schnabel's fingerings are quite strange. He suggested bizarre fingerings that were of little help to the performer. A pianistic cult was formed around him, but few of his followers were first-class pianists. They usually played the same repertoire, which over time became increasingly stultified. I thought Schnabel had a wonderful personality. He was also very talented in other areas of the music field; he wrote some music which was quite modern for the day. I'm sure he must have enjoyed having such a wonderful and faithful following. Although the advice he gave was always highly personal, his pupils were rarely capable of achieving his creative style. I admired Schnabel, but his editions are simply terrible. Sometimes there's only one line of music on the page, the rest of the page being devoted to how he thought it should be played. The worst thing a pianist can do is to read someone's idea of how to work on a piece of music, especially Beethoven, before they actually begin. When I was a child, the local music teachers would always speak the names of Bach, Beethoven or Brahms with a quiver in their voices, as though these particular composers were somehow on a pedestal and untouchable.

I listen to Schnabel's recordings because his many exaggerations in tempi are usually very interesting. Schnabel's pupils always presented themselves as the high priests of the music of Beethoven, though many of them were not very inspired teachers.

RD: Rather too much has been written about Schnabel's wrong notes and lack of concern for technique. But those who heard him in his younger days testify that quite the opposite was true. Claudio Arrau said he was flawless.

EW: I heard Schnabel perform the Brahms *Concerto in B-flat*; it was among the finest I've heard. It sounded fresh and alive, and made all the others, except Petri, seem ordinary. I also heard him give a great performance of the *Emperor Concerto*.

RD: In your Schirmer editions of the piano music of Liszt, you wrote as a footnote: "Abrupt silences without rever-

beration are very rare." Is this why you pedal through the rests in Chopin's "Ballade in g minor" (for instance, beginning in measure 10)?

EW: I find that lifting the pedal in those spots interrupts the mood. Literal readings of Chopin usually produce a very static interpretation. The real problem with this passage in the *g minor Ballade* is that pianists often accent the third and sixth beats. Think of playing it on a string instrument using one bow for the two notes - like a heart beat. It then makes beautiful music.

There are a number of terrible Chopin editions around, some of which were edited by pianists who could not play a passable performance of the music. The fingerings are absurd, and the phrasings are given in long lines that forego any indication of breathing, which is of the utmost importance in melodic playing.

RD: I've heard some pianists say that they prefer to play on a so-called "emotionally neutral" piano. They don't want the tone to be so ravishing, because then they can't create their own tone. I disagree with this, because if one had such a piano, there wouldn't be much they could do to make it have such a beautiful tone. What is your reaction?

EW: Statements like that are pure b.s. It's like saying: "When traveling, one should take the ugly road rather than the more accessible scenic route, in order to obtain a feeling of achievement!" The idea that deprivation leads to triumph had its greatest success in medieval religious attitudes.

RD: You once played the Chopin "Etude in g-sharp minor" (Op. 25, No. 6) at the 92nd St. YMHA in New York. It was the slowest performance I ever heard, but it 'worked' on its own terms. The ascending scales in double thirds were so light - like a feather floating on a cloud. Phrase endings evaporated. The performance displayed tremendous touch control. Why did your conception of the piece change to a more conventional interpretation (as on your Chesky recording and last year's Carnegie Hall recital)?

EW: I change ideas quite frequently. Pianists are subjected to many variables in life; you should never try to imitate yourself. The size of the room or concert hall in which you perform will have a lot to do with the speed with which you play. In large cavernous rooms, pianists should play more slowly to allow the sound to homogenize. It's important for performers to remain as flexible as possible in preparing a concert program, in case the performance does not go as was hoped. Musicians must always be prepared to adjust artistically.

RD: So your interpretation of that Chopin etude happened spontaneously?

EW: Yes, it was spontaneous. I always try to be flexible with tempos. If the instrument allows me to do something extra, that's great, but if it doesn't, I make do. In reference to that 92nd St. YMHA recital in the late 70's: as I remember, I was suffering from a terrible case of the flu that night. That afternoon I called to cancel the performance, but was coerced by the director of the hall into performing. Perhaps my illness had something to do with my tempi. After the concert, the director of the hall never thanked me for not canceling; in fact, he made many disparaging remarks to some people about my performance.

RD: You've performed and recorded the Chopin Ballades many times throughout your career. In places such as the coda of the Fourth Ballade in f minor, the 32nd notes are meant to be played with the third note of the triplets in the opposite hand. Where did this originate?

EW: It's the old-fashioned annotation.

RD: Is this the same sort of thing as the double dotting convention in Bach?

EW: Yes, exactly.

RD: In "Piano Playing: With Piano Questions Answered" (a compilation of questions from readers - with replies - which originally appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal*), Josef Hofmann was asked how to correct the fault of bending out the first joints of the fingers when their cushions are pressed down upon the keys. Hofmann replies that this problem comes under the heading of faulty touch, and is one of the most difficult pianistic ailments to cure. Why is it wrong to play this way?

EW: Because it goes against the natural position of the fingers.

RD: What is the ideal hand position?

EW: The perfect hand position for piano playing can be seen in the painting of Michelangelo's "God." As for the ideal hand, Chopin's bony, tapered fingers were perfect. Even Rachmaninoff's hands had marvelously tapered fingers, although in his case, it was his lush sound that made him famous as a pianist. His recordings never quite captured his extremely beautiful concert hall sound. He once told me that he never performed in public unless he was well prepared. From the many concerts of his that I attended, I can attest to that.

Tapered fingers make playing the piano and manipulating the fingers between the black keys much easier. Unfortunately, I have long thick fingers down to the ends; I'm always experimenting with fingerings that will help maintain the necessary dexterity.

RD: I encountered a teacher who advocated holding the first, second, third, and fifth finger tips down in a playing position while curling the fourth finger toward the fall board until it was straight.

EW: That's silly. As a child, I studied with a teacher who gave me the Pischna exercises to play. These exercises are truly tortuous as well as ruinous to the hand. One day at a lesson, they were so painful to play that I got up from the piano, handed my Pischna book to the teacher, and said, "I've had enough of you. Good-bye." My mother, who was waiting in the foyer, took me home.

RD: Would you be surprised if I told you that the teacher I mentioned was a strong advocate of Pischna?

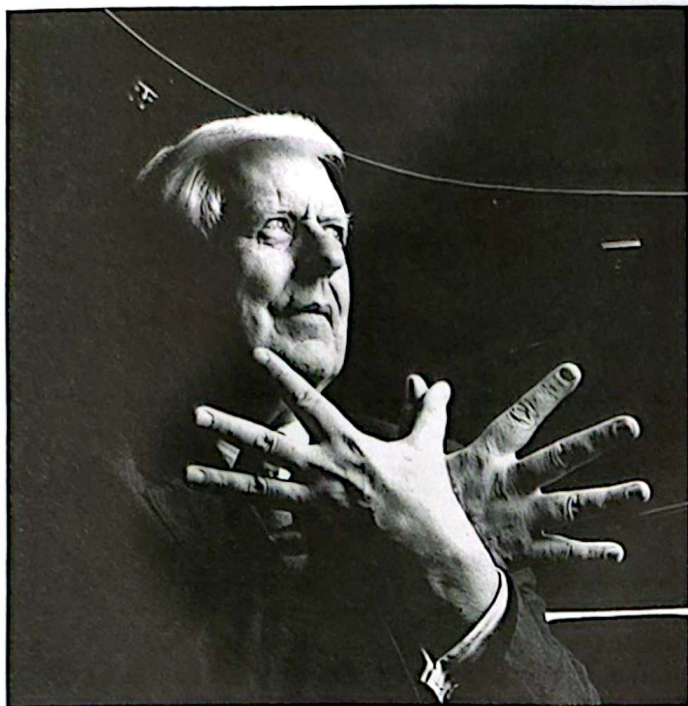
EW: That doesn't surprise me in the least. Who was it?

RD: I won't reveal her name, but she has a big following (about three feet wide!).

EW: Piano playing should not be painful. If something begins to hurt, it's a good bet the pianist is doing something incorrectly - possibly using too much pressure. The teacher or coach should help to analyze and correct the problem. A good teacher would never destroy a young musician's enthusiasm by projecting the idea that playing the piano is a painful business. It's possible to achieve good tone control in pianissimo passage work by lightening your arm weight and keeping the fingers close to the keys. When playing fast passages, you should not be hampered by thinking too legato.

RD: But that does not mean that passage work—such as in Bach—cannot 'sound' legato.

EW: When I was a child, the great performers always played Bach with a very beautiful legato; it was gorgeous, because the listener could visualize as well as hear all the lines and intervals. When Glenn Gould came on the scene, he made it very easy for himself by playing mostly staccato. At the time, everyone said, "Isn't that wonderful; it sounds



just like the period." To me, it didn't sound like the period at all. It sounded like the piano imitating a harpsichord.

I find most of Gould's recordings to be very ordinary. I think he misled many people with his interpretations of Bach. It was a bit like *The Emperor's New Clothes*. In my early years, it would have been unheard of for a pianist to deliberately attempt to annihilate the past. The first half of this century produced many great Bach players (notably Egon Petri and Edwin Fischer), whose interpretations were outstanding and their legatos beautiful to hear.

Twenty years from now, when there is an evaluation of recordings made in this period, I believe Glenn Gould's discography will have a limited acceptance. When Bach playing returns to a more valid concept, but for a few exceptions, his versions will become an oddity.

Most of the ideas that Gould used in his radio and TV documentaries already existed years before in the early days of radio at station KDKA in Pittsburgh—which happened to be the first radio station in the U.S. I know, because I worked there off and on from the time I was 14. In the 1920's and 30's, KDKA invented all the things Gould 'reinvented.'

Gould was always surrounded by admirers for whom he could do no wrong. Today, his loyal fans have set up a Glenn Gould Web page on the internet, where you can view his photos, peruse his vast discography, or download his performance of one of the Bach partitas!

RD: I think it's amazing that he could go for long periods of time without touching a piano, then play better than ever when he went back to the keyboard. He apparently didn't have to 'practice' in the traditional sense.

EW: I don't think we know that to be true. Gould kept his personal life totally hidden. As to not touching a piano for extended periods of time, once you come back to the keyboard, the first performance is usually very good, because all the muscles are relaxed, and your conception of the music is a recall without question. The agonies begin with the second performance, and the third performance is usually horrible. After the first performance, you have to start to practice again; I can guarantee you that.

RD: What will be the consensus of Vladimir Horowitz's recordings twenty years from now?

EW: Many of Horowitz's recordings will be considered to be extraordinary. I prefer his live concert recordings, because of the spontaneity and exuberance which exuded from him when confronted by the audience. His ego was very dependent upon the public's adulation. He also never totally planned his performances in advance. He took chances in his recitals, and many exciting interpretations occurred because of it. He was also quite witty. I always enjoyed the many comments he made about music and musicians. He once gave me one of the nicest compliments I ever received.

RD: You have stated that interpretation has something to do with age and maturity, and if one plays Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" or the Schumann "Fantasie" before the age of forty, they're mad. Were you referring to 'learning' the pieces or 'performing' them in concert?

EW: I was referring to performing the pieces in a public concert. It's possible to play the notes very well at any young age, say twelve or so; but just note playing is such a small part of playing the piano. Musicians need some perspective to perform certain music properly.

RD: But don't pianists (as well as all other people) mature at different ages? It's possible for a thirty year old pianist to be more mature than one who is fifty.

EW: I meant that a musician will not have the same musical perspective at age forty as at age sixty. Just going through the succession of years adds maturity and insight. Many great works need a lifetime of perspective before performing them in public. I purposely waited until I was 78 years old before performing and recording the "Hammerklavier" Sonata.

RD: A twenty year old could obviously not perform the "Hammerklavier" with the same maturity of Serkin in his later years or yourself. But even if the twenty year olds are not giving the piece its full justice, couldn't performing in public only help them - in terms of gaining valuable performing experience? As their interpretation evolves, it can only get better.

EW: Performing a lot is great, but let the twenty year olds get their experience by playing these very emotionally involved pieces for friends in private. I don't mean young people shouldn't play in public. They should evaluate their position in life, and only perform pieces that are technically and emotionally secure with them. Almost all young musicians want to play pieces that are beyond their abilities - which is fine with me - but they shouldn't subject an audience to their lack of musical maturity. The concert-going public wants to hear music that will be emotionally and spiritually uplifting. Teachers should guide students by explaining which pieces they are ready to perform in public, and which pieces they should study, put away, and then work on again - over and over - for a period of years before performing them publicly.

Teachers do a terrible disservice to fragile budding musicians by expecting them to play music that is beyond their musical grasp. Unfortunately, friends and family usually approach performances from the standpoint that it is extraordinary that their friend or loved one can not only perform in front of an audience, but remember all the notes, as well. The performer usually comes away believing he gave a mature performance.

When I played my debut recital in New York City, I programmed the Schumann *Fantasie*, which is quite an unwieldy piece to perform; like most of Schumann's compositions, it's extremely difficult. Looking back, I really had no business programming such a piece. I played all the notes, and thought I was projecting an emotional interpretation. I had two reviews; *The New York Times* critic said very nice things about the Schumann, whereas the critic from the *Tribune* hated it. Now,

after many years, I can finally see the *Fantasia's* total shape from beginning to end—and I know it's my musical maturity that's brought about that insight. I find it very difficult to believe articles or reviews that say a twenty or thirty year old artist has "plumbed the depths" of any great musical work. Is that an old plumber's expression, or what?

RD: Harold C. Schonberg once wrote that Heifetz cheapened himself by recording "White Christmas." This beautiful melody could have been harmonized to sound like it was written by any "classical" composer. One can take a theme from most "classical" pieces, and make a pop song out of it. In the fourth movement of the Brahms "B-flat Piano Concerto," a theme sounds just like the song, "The Sweetest Sound in All the World." In another popular song, the melody to the lyrics, "Never Gonna Fall in Love Again" has its origin in a theme from Rachmaninoff's "Symphony No. 2." Many other examples could be cited.

EW: I composed and recorded my *Reminiscences of Snow White* (on my latest CD) as an antidote to that sort of thinking. Had *Snow White* been popular in the nineteenth century, there would have been at least a Thalberg or a Liszt transcription - perhaps others, as well. When I mentioned to a few people that I was writing a piano transcription based on Disney's *Snow White*, some of the snobbish ones were appalled, but most were amused. I enjoyed working with all the beautiful tunes, as well as writing it all out; I personally think it turned out quite well. If nothing else, it's amusing. I often write pieces just to irritate the musical fundamentalists!

RD: Make sure you don't move to Hollywood. Your domicile would be evidence of even greater decadence.

EW: Oh, don't mention Hollywood. Isn't it sad that the word *Hollywood* doesn't have an "r" in the spelling - so it could be rolled?

RD: Did you admire Paderewski?

EW: Yes, very much. If you listen to the early Paderewski recordings, he frequently played the left hand ahead of the right hand. He has been criticized quite severely for doing this, but I don't understand what difference it makes as long as the music is beautiful to listen to. The public, as well as most critics, should approach music as to the sheer beauty it casts on the ear - not to whether it's performed in a "right" or "wrong" manner.

Paderewski always had something to say in his music. He was an extremely kind man, but he had quite a sad life. He adored his homeland, Poland. The last time he visited New York, he appeared on WQXR radio asking for money to rebuild Poland after World War II, because it was in such a terrible state of destruction. As he spoke, he began to weep; it was one of the most touching moments I ever witnessed. Growing up in Pittsburgh, a city he visited quite frequently, I heard him perform many times. There was a large Polish community in Pittsburgh, and all through my childhood people would invariably say to me, "Paderewski played on my piano." It became so amusing, I kept thinking, "George Washington slept here!"

RD: Sometimes, in the midst of a performance, one gets an inspiration on the spur of the moment. Some people feel that what may sound marvelous at a concert (and after a couple of hearings of a recording) will be hard to endure after one has heard it for the hundredth time. When you're recording, might you say to yourself, "Oh, I mustn't do this; it's for posterity, so I'd better be more conservative"?

EW: No. I try to keep my playing as free as possible no matter if it's a live performance or a recording. Toscanini once said to me, "Tradition

is usually just bad taste handed down." I don't care whether someone plays a piece of music in an entirely different fashion than the norm, as long as it's convincing and has personality. What I dislike are performances of music that are exaggerated to the extent of mistaking legatos for staccatos. I go to many piano recitals, and have always enjoyed performances as long as they don't sound manufactured. Fake musicality is the curse in my book.

RD: I understand you collaborated with the great violinist Mischa Elman.

EW: Yes, many times. I liked him very much; we were great friends. He played the best Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto* I ever heard.

RD: Where was the most unusual place you ever performed?

EW: In the 1970's, the wife of the president of Mexico, Mrs. Lopez Portillo, came backstage after an appearance I had with the New York Philharmonic, and asked if I would like to come to Mexico and perform with an orchestra she had formed. I performed the Grieg Concerto in many different locations on that tour, but the huge mud cathedral in a very small Mexican village had to be the most unusual performance space in which I ever performed. The orchestra's stagehands brought everything on a truck from Mexico City: lights, music stands, and of course my piano. I don't think any of the villagers had ever seen or heard a symphony orchestra perform before. Mrs. Portillo's goal was to bring culture to the masses, so the concert was free. It was wonderful to see the expressions on people's faces as they watched and listened to the orchestra. I'll bet my opening chords of the concerto are still ringing throughout that cavernous cathedral!

RD: What was the most unusual experience you've ever had during a concert?

EW: Many years ago, I performed the Brahms *B-flat Piano Concerto* in Orlando, Florida with the Orlando Symphony, followed by a run-out concert in Daytona Beach the next night. It also just happened to be during Spring Break. The performance was in an old movie theater, and of course there was no rehearsal before the concert. As I was playing a very energetic passage in the first movement, I noticed the piano starting to roll away from me. I quickly pulled the piano back, and continued playing. In the next passage, the force of my playing sent the piano rolling even further, so I jumped up to catch it so it wouldn't roll off the stage. By then I was completely undone, and stopped playing altogether. Since we didn't have a run-through in this hall, the conductor, being well upstage and under a heavily draped proscenium, didn't hear that I had stopped playing. I walked over and tapped him on the shoulder; when he turned around and saw me standing there, I thought he was going to faint! He stopped the orchestra, and I explained what had happened with the piano. An orchestra member went backstage to find a stagehand to help secure the piano, but none was to be found. Having been told the concert would last about forty minutes, they decided to go across the street to the local bar. Some of the orchestra musicians helped move the piano back to its proper position, and found some large weights to put in front of the wheels to anchor it in position. As this was proceeding, the conductor asked if we should go off-stage to wait. I replied, "We might as well stand out here and enjoy it. It will probably never happen to either of us again!" After the piano was put in place and well-secured, the orchestra manager declared that we would have to begin exactly where we stopped, because it was getting late; otherwise, there would be union overtime problems.

RD: You have said that many composers today are not writing for the public; they're writing for each other. In one respect, you must write accessible music if you want audiences to pay to hear it; but on the other hand, one must be true to one's self and not write something against one's

esthetic judgment solely to pander to public approval. The problem is that some composers think it's a compliment if the public doesn't like their music; it's proof that they're great composers.

EW: I was speaking mostly about university life, where the composers listen to each other's creations with little concern about the public's interests. Most of them try to be very chic and up-to-date, but even music in a dissonant style has to have organization to be accepted. The lack of counterpoint in most of the writing today is depressing. The minimalists are the worst offenders; they write the most boring pieces that go on and on and say nothing.

RD: We were speaking about writing music accessible to the public. If that were a criterion of quality, then acid rock, heavy metal, rap, etc., would be greater music than that of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. It certainly enjoys a much wider listening public, even though most of it is garbage.

EW: Of course it's garbage, but they have what is known as the *beat*, which seems to motorize the most basic of emotions.

RD: What purpose does a critic serve?

EW: I think musical criticism is very important. The critic's job should be to inform the public about the music that's performed and to relate how the audience reacted, for the benefit of the readers who were not in attendance. Often a critic will pan a concert that the audience loved, never mentioning how the audience reacted.

RD: It would bother me to be a critic, because I would feel uncomfortable criticizing someone if I couldn't perform the work any better. If I *could* do it better, I should be on stage instead of criticizing.

EW: I've lived so long, and read so many things about myself, that I usually read them with a "so-what" attitude. Sometimes I feel a yearning to know the reasoning of the critic, but that would be a life's work, and I don't have the time or patience. I'm mostly bothered by critics who use escape phrases, such as "plumbing the depths," or my favorite, "the composer's wishes." I've known a lot of important composers in my lifetime: Rachmaninoff, Hindemith, Poulenc, Copland, Barber, Piston, Levy, Creston, Stravinsky, Menotti, and others. Composers rarely speak in the same jargon as critics. Sometimes they might say, "Perhaps it might be a little faster here, or a little slower there."

RD: Usually composers are more free in accepting different interpretations of their music than the critics.

EW: Yes, definitely. I telephoned Sam Barber one day back in the 1950's, because I was going to perform his *Excursions, Op. 20* in recital at Town Hall and was bothered by the 2nd movement (the *Blues* movement). I asked him if I could come to *Capricorn* (his residence) and play the piece for him. He said he was coming to N.Y.C. the following day, and would be glad to come over to my apartment. After he arrived and we chatted awhile, I went to the piano and played the *Blues* movement for him; I then repeated to him that I felt something was wrong. I said, "Please play it for me." As he was playing, I noticed he was playing all the dotted eighth and sixteenth rhythms as triplets; I had been playing them as written on the page. I said, "Sam, why didn't you annotate them as triplets?" His response was, "Oh, I don't know; I guess I never thought of it!"

RD: You have single-handedly resurrected marvelous romantic treasures. The d'Albert "Scherzo" (which you recorded and played as an encore at your eightieth birthday recital at Carnegie Hall) is a spectacularly effective virtuoso gem, and your recording of Godowsky's "Künstlerleben" on Vanguard is one of the all-time great piano

recordings. In the concerto literature, your recording of the Scharwenka "Piano Concerto No. 1 in b-flat minor" (with its beautiful melodies, lush harmonies, and sparkling virtuosity) is nothing short of phenomenal. We're lucky to have that splendid 1970 recording with Leinsdorf and the Boston Symphony finally available on an "Elan" CD. How did the initial recording come about?

EW: My teacher at Carnegie-Tech (now Carnegie Mellon University) in the early 1930's was Selmar Janson. He had studied with Xavier Scharwenka among others, and had a vast library of old 19th century music. That's where I found the d'Albert *Scherzo* and the Scharwenka *First Piano Concerto*. I studied both of these works, as well as many other interesting pieces, while with Janson at Carnegie-Tech.

In the late 1960's, Harold C. Schonberg wrote an article in *The New York Times*, asking why some of these musical gems of the last century weren't being performed. He particularly mentioned the Scharwenka *First Piano Concerto*. A few days later, I received a phone call from Erich Leinsdorf asking if I knew the Scharwenka concerto Schonberg had written about. I was so amused that I replied, "I've been sitting by my phone for forty years waiting to be asked to perform this piece!"

RD: How would you like to be remembered?

EW: Just being remembered is nice. I have always tried to achieve in this world what was destined. I'm doing as much with the talent I was given as is humanly possible. In the final analysis, that's what really counts.

(Earl Wild's piano transcriptions are available through Michael Rolland Davis Productions, 2233 Fernleaf Lane, Columbus, Ohio 43235; FAX (614) 761-9799.)

(Richard Devens is a pianist and writer born in Brooklyn, New York. He holds a BS in Music Performance from Brooklyn College, where he studied with Augustin Anievas and Michael Rogers. He holds an MM in Music Performance from The University of Arizona, where he studied with Nicholas Zumbro. He also studied with Richard Fabre in New York. He concertizes, accompanies, and teaches.)



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