

# PIANISTS AND PIANO PLAYING OF TO-DAY

*By W. J. Henderson*



IGNACE JAN PADEREWSKI

*the romanticist of the piano, and probably the most  
celebrated pianist of modern times*

**T**HE world is bestrewn with players of the piano, but there are few pianists. One cannot be a pianist by assault, nor even by slow and patient labor. One can be a player of the piano by the exercise of determination, through the obsession of sheer ambition, the wild inward clamor for glory; but one is a pianist only by the grace of God. Only the divine gift of supreme love hides in the core of the soul that secret sympathy for sounds of which Cowper half unwittingly sang, and in the tips of the fingers that exquisite sensitiveness which feels through the ivory clad lever the touch of the felt-covered hammer on the strings.

For some there exists only a sensuous thrill, a desire to stroke the sleek ivory keys and hear the piano purr. Often for these there is a long trail of glory and a glittering weight of hard cash; for the populace has ears to hear tone and little judgment in the listening. Yet in the end the master commands, for to him belongs all that lies in the hand of the merely sensuous performer, together with all which eludes that fleshly grasp. The sensuous player can fool the populace much of the time; but his fate confronts him when he tries to dally with the awful word of Bach or Beethoven.

**I**N the exquisite shallows of the lesser Chopin the piano player may glimmer and gleam and shoot rays of gold and carmine through the transparent waters. Through the champagne fantasies of Liszt he may strike even flashes of divine color or even rays of dazzling light. He may sing ravishly the wordless songs of Mendelssohn; he may flourish magically the wildering cadenzas of Rubinstein. But the militant Chopin, the passionate Schumann, the Miltonic Brahms, the prophet Beethoven and the All-Father Bach are not for him. These merciless gods of musical art strip him of his cheap finery and expose his nakedness to the cold wind of critical contempt.

The player of the piano, like talent, "may frolic and juggle." He may run scales with amazing rapidity, shake from his fingers groups of double thirds, or sonorous chord successions, and weave the mystic spell of interlocking passages in which the melody plays hide and seek between the two hands. But there will always be minutes when the piano will elude his watchfulness and betray the sorry truth that it is only an instrument of percussion after all.



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**T**HE aim of all technic is tone. The player of the piano must again and again accept what falls to him, do what the hammers allow. The pianist creates every instant, and there is no moment when he does not evoke from the piano the highest beauty of tone. And this beauty carries with it a mystic and pervasive illusion. It conceals the percussive nature of the instrument and deceives the hearer into believing that the piano can sing like a voice of a violin.

When Paderewski makes a scale he sets in oral heaven a tonal rainbow. When a player of the piano tries to do the same thing he offers us nothing finer than a masquerading xylophone. The aim of all technic is tone, beautiful, vital, singing tone, the flesh and blood of music. This is for the pianist to give. The mere player can produce it only when the path is clear. The pianist never fails. It goes with him into the most complicated mazes of florid passage work. His fingers cannot batter; they can only caress; and to them the piano yields up its spiritual sweets.

But there is something more, something that lies beyond the material realm of performance. The true pianist does not find in tone the completion of his desire. It is the fulfilment of technic, but technic is the lever with which this Archimedes stirs worlds. Some splendid force must move the lever, and this force is imagina-



JOSEF HOFMANN

*whose technic is greater than that of any other pianist now before the public*

tion, the creative faculty of the human mind. How many are credited with imagination who offer only phantasy! Phantasy, the power of imaging, that mystic power which works in dreams. Imagination, that power of representation which acting in the intelligent service of feeling and thought fills the world with the poetry of a Shakespeare, the sculpture of an Angelo, the music of a Beethoven. In the supreme functioning of its combining and arranging power it creates the ideals of humanity. Some of these are embodied in the works of the master composers, where the player of the piano can never find them. Only genius understands genius; and the pianist has it. To him the printed page of music becomes alive. To him it renders up its precious message, to be by him transmuted through the blood of his own life to the ears of them that have ears to hear.

**T**HE history of pianists is still to be written. But some things are on record. We have all been led astray by legends about Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt, Thalberg, Taussig, Rubinstein. The Titan of them all was Liszt, and yet calm observers, who were well acquainted with his playing, testify that such performers as D'Albert and Busoni were or still are the technical equals of Liszt in his best days. If this be true, it is safe to say that



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neither Liszt nor Rubinstein had the tremendous technical skill of Rosenthal or Godowsky. Perhaps even Lhevinne should be named in this assembly. In several features Taussig, Von Bülow and Rubinstein all excelled Liszt. It is certain equally that Liszt excelled Beethoven, and that great things were done in the last days of Beethoven which could not have been conceived in those of Mozart.

What is it, then, that made Liszt the consummate master, the grand and imposing figure of piano history? It was the overwhelming expression of his mighty personality. When Liszt played he vitalized the music, no matter what it was, with the flaming splendor of his temperament. At the zenith of his glorious career he achieved results without fully knowing how he did so. He believed in inspiration. He courted uncertainty. But there was something in the man which mastered every audience. And what is more to the point there was something which gave him a swift and beautiful insight into the meaning of the printed page.

**NATURALLY** I never heard Liszt; but if all that his contemporaries wrote is true, any one of the great pianists of to-day is technically his superior. Rubinstein went far ahead of him in the use of the pedal, and later players have gone further than Rubinstein in accuracy and finish.

Without doubt Paderewski, Hofmann, Bauer and Busoni form a quartet of contemporaneous pianists before whom Liszt would pause in respect.

To write about the living pianist is not the easiest of tasks. There is too much to be said, too much to be omitted. Yet the task must be undertaken.

The writer of this article verily believes that neither Liszt nor Rubinstein was the equal of Josef Hofmann in finish of performance. Hofmann's technic is greater than that of any other pianist now before the public. It is supreme in its resource. It comprises all that is meant by perfect flexibility and independence of finger, pliancy of wrist, elasticity and power of arm.

There is no subtle gradation of force that Hofmann cannot make in either simple cantilena or rapid passage. Of the wide domain of variety of touch he is the perfect king. Of all the secrets of pedalling he is the master. And what marvellous fingers! How firmly they touch, how softly they caress the keys!

But if this man had only his technic, he would be but a player of the piano. Hofmann is a strong, rich, and extremely sensitive intellect. His mental operations are calm, but incisive. He thinks steadily and resistlessly. He is intensely philosophical, but his philosophy is warm with feeling. He is profoundly introspective, as every real artist is, but he contemplates the ego only as a concrete illustration of humanity.

He studies his music with incredible rapidity, because his analysis is so quick that he gets essential results in the sweep of a glance. Like other real pianists he does not live in the piano. His mind feeds itself on art, on literature, on nature. Perhaps Hofmann is less responsive to externals than some other artists, but the pastures of his spirit are by no means narrow. His command of the public is limited by



FERRUCCIO BUSONI

*who combines technic with professorial intelligence*



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HAROLD BAUER  
*whose art is essential'y for the musician*

his command of himself. There is a semblance of austerity in his presence at the piano. He emits too little of that mysterious fluid called magnetism. To get from his playing all that is in it one must understand. Few do that.

**I**t is a singular coincidence that the greatest pianists of this day are both Poles. There is something not altogether tangible in the genius of Paderewski, Hofmann's great compatriot. But there is one trait of his style which is easily discerned and comprehended. He is the romanticist of the piano. With a technic not inexhaustible, he sings marvellously. For his spirit all music is instinct with passion. Austerity and he cannot dwell together. Paderewski does not play Brahms, for in the Miltonic style his sunset tints must all be reduced to an undistinguished gray. Bach indeed he adores, for here he can paint in the masterful outline and elemental colors of Michael Angelo.

Beethoven is his high god and at the altar of this Jupiter he worships in heroic accents. Chopin is his intimate friend. Schumann is his daily bread. Schubert is his little brother. These are the lyric masters whose music woos his fingers most tenderly. For Paderewski's secret is two fold. He plays with infinite wealth of color and he conceives in the depths of a mind supersensitive in perception, fragile in its gentleness, noble in its breadth, classic in its scholarship, inspiring in its poetic imagination. When he first came to us in 1891 it was noted that he played with exquisite finish in all gradations of tone and color, with delicate and penetrative intelligence, with masculinity and with a marvellous sense of musical beauty. He has grown in all these because he has lived, studied and thought. It was noted in his first season that he sometimes forced the tone of the instrument. He still does so, even more than at first, for he has acquired a more robust feeling toward music. But he is still the same extraordinary poet. And this is the summary of his greatness. There are more faultless players of the piano than Paderewski, but there is not another personality of such potent spell that uses the piano as its medium of expression.

**HAROLD BAUER** has never excited the general public as much as Paderewski. I am not sure that Mr. Bauer is not to be felicitated because the result is that only music lovers go to hear him. Mr. Paderewski has to project much of himself into receptacles which never held musical matter before. Mr. Bauer's hearers are almost exclusively experienced music lovers, teachers, and students. It is not easy to tell a layman the precise secret of Bauer's charm, but the musician sums it up in the word "musical." This word covers a multitude of merits, such as perfection of rhythm, unerring judgment in phrasing, infinitesimal scaling of dynamics, cool, yet not cold, planning of nuances, and application of color in opulent continence. Mr. Bauer is perhaps the most restful of all the pianists, for if he rarely makes celestial harp strings of one's nerves, he often makes a peace that



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passes understanding. His is an art of the temperate zone. The splendors of the tropics are for Paderewski and the glories of the mountains for Hofmann, perhaps; but Bauer is a most adorable pianist for the land of our daily bread.

Ferruccio Busoni, on the other hand, is the incarnation of the intellect. Here is a pianist who has risen to his high position by the employment of a superb technical equipment under the calm command of a professorial intelligence. Busoni seldom melts, but he always commands interest and inspires respect. There is, too, something pedagogic in his playing, something like that authoritative communication of Von Bülow's art which incessantly said, "This is the correct reading, no matter if it does seem oratorical."

**THERE** are other pianists, to be sure. One cannot set aside as negligible such artists as Gabrilowitsch, Lhevinne, the technician, Carreno, the lioness, and Fanny Bloomfield-Zeisler, the leopard of the piano. But in the region where Liszt and Rubinstein dwelt admission is for the few. One certainly does not think of Bauer or Busoni as coequals of these mighty masters, yet their places in the van are assured. Bauer in particular has one lovely trait. The smaller his auditorium, the more exclusive his audience, the more irresistible his art. Chamber music, the music which has to be good enough, as Sir Hubert Parry puts it, to live with, is the happy field for Bauer's ministrations. Give him a small orchestra of strings and a Bach concerto and he will lead you for half an hour through fields of Elysium. It is not what you expect when you go to hear Paderewski, for the orchestral thunders of this pianist make one think rather of the rides in the winds of Ossian's storms. Paderewski's art is Handelian. It courts the platform and it sings the "Hallelujah" chorus.

Hofmann seems to hold a beautiful equilibrium between these two. He is at home in the great hall or the small chamber. He makes triumphant proclamations or confidential communications with equal felicity. He is neither a still small voice whispering in the corners of privacy, nor a trumpet pealing before a glittering army. He is rather a guide, philosopher and friend. Like Paderewski he soars in transcendent heights or skims close upon the levels of the flowers. Bauer is happier among the flowers than in the clouds. Busoni dwells in the basilicas of learning and publishes the gospel of method.

These are four masters of our time. They are pianists not players, of the piano. The piano is their instrument, not their conqueror. They have much to say. They might say it without a piano, but nature filled the tips of their fingers with senses that yearn for the feel of the keyboard. So they use the piano to communicate their messages. And each of the four has his own style which in the end leaves verbal description baffled.

For it is a singular difficulty of all art criticism that the one thing of which the world craves definition is the one thing undefinable. It is easier to describe the personality of a man than the individuality of his art. But what cannot be prisoned in words can be felt by the spirit, and thus verbal frailty is overcome.