

Josef Hofmann

Solo recordings
1935-1948

Josef Hofmann *Solo Recordings (1935-1948)*

LINER NOTES

"Perfect sincerity plus perfect simplicity equals perfect achievement." Thus wrote Josef Hofmann, that classicist among the Romantic pianists. In a day when many of the internationally famous keyboard virtuosos paralyzed the public with overwhelmingly sensational derring-do, Hofmann was chaste, controlled and simple, using relatively little pedal, letting his marvelous fingers do the work with clarity and the most pellucid of sounds. It was not that he was incapable of great bursts of sound when they were needed. But he represented aristocracy at all times, a musician blessed with an unerring ear, taste, and the ability to float lines that seemed to spin into infinity. His impact is hard to describe. But to those who heard him, including this writer, the finish and transparency of his playing, and the sheer perfection of his technique, somehow made all other pianists sound thick.

From the beginning, he was recognized as one of the greatest pianists in history. He was, of course, a prodigy. What great pianist has not been? But even here the young Hofmann was unique. Born in Poland in 1876, he studied with his father Casimir. At the age of 10, he came to New York and made his debut at the Metropolitan Opera House on November 29, 1887. He set the city and its music critics on their ears.

The consensus was unanimous. Such well-informed critics as Henry Krehbiel (1854 -1923, New York Tribune) and W.J. Henderson (1855 - 1937, New York Sun) could not believe what they had heard. This is no child, they wrote. This is piano playing equal to anything the world has to offer. Such was the excitement that within the space of about two months, little Josef gave fifty-two concerts. He had in his repertoire concerted works by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Weber, and Liszt, plus of course a large repertoire of solo pieces.

After a while, people began to worry. What would this crazy schedule do to the health of a delicate-looking 10-year-old boy? A great fuss was made, and a philanthropist named Alfred Corning Clark offered Casimir the incredible sum of \$50,000 to take the child away from the stage and not return until the age of 18. To give an idea of what \$50,000 was worth in those days, a working man with a family of three was happy to be earning \$500 a year.

Casimir grabbed the money and ran. The family settled in Berlin, where Josef studied first with Moritz Moszkowski (1854-1925) and then with the great Anton Rubinstein (1829-1894), the Russian Giant who was considered the greatest pianist after Franz Liszt (1811-1886).

At age 18, Josef made his re-entry in a concert conducted by Rubinstein. He played his teacher's D minor concerto, a work that remained in his repertoire all his life. Then Hofmann started the concert life. He was not a trained monkey getting along on a limited repertoire. He worked and worked, building an immense backlog. He was especially popular in Russia. When he played in St. Petersburg in 1912, he gave twenty-one consecutive sold-out concerts. He did not repeat a piece, playing 255 different works. His memory was infallible, all the more amazing in that he seldom practiced. Once a work was in his fingers, it was there for good. As a matter of fact, he really did not need the music. He could hear a piece and immediately duplicate it on the keyboard, note for note.

No wonder Rubinstein called him a phenomenon such as the world of music had never before seen. Rosina Lhevinne (1880-1976) loved to tell the story of Hofmann's visit to Tbilisi, where her husband Josef (another all-time great pianist, 1874-1944) was teaching before World War I. They spent the afternoon together. At one point, Lhevinne played a piece that Hofmann did not know. Lhevinne told him it was the Liszt "Lorelei". "Play it again," said Hofmann. They then had dinner and escorted Hofmann to the concert hall. "He played wonderfully," recollected Rosina. "For his first encore he came out, winked at us, and played 'Lorelei' exactly as my Josef had done."

Hofmann lived in Berlin up to World War I. He moved to the United States, concertized, and also was a founding member of the Curtis Institute of Music, where he was head of the piano faculty in 1924 and then the school's director. He resigned in 1938. In 1937, he gave a Golden Jubilee Anniversary concert celebrating the fiftieth year of his American debut. At the Metropolitan Opera, with the Curtis Orchestra under the direction of Fritz Reiner (1888-1963), he played the Rubinstein fourth concerto, his own Chromaticon for piano and orchestra, and a large group of solo pieces. In Philadelphia the following April, he played a similar concert.

By that time, age was taking its toll. In addition, he had personal problems and started drinking heavily. By the middle of the 1940s he was an alcoholic, and that of course affected his playing. In 1946, he gave his last New York concert, and those who were there remember glorious moments and also several catastrophes. The formerly infallible Hofmann, that most perfect of pianists, was in sad decline. He died in Los Angeles in 1957.

His recording career was unusual. Hofmann was the first famous pianist ever to make a recording. In 1887, Edison, who had invented sound recording only ten years previously, invited the 10-year-old prodigy to his studio, where Josef made a few cylinders. Hofmann said that he had them until World War I, when his home in Berlin was destroyed by fire.

An inventor as well as a pianist, the teen-age Hofmann was in constant communication with Edison, offering suggestions about improving the drive mechanism. In 1904, Hofmann made five records for The Gramophone Company in Berlin. From 1912 to 1923, Hofmann recorded a series for Columbia in America, and then, in 1924, he made some for Brunswick. All of these were acoustic (i.e., pre-electric) recordings.

Hofmann never again made a commercial recording. But he did make test recordings for RCA in America and for HMV in London in 1935 when he was still in his best form. There is also a brief 1940 American Columbia test. These are released here. Music lovers recorded on acetates some of his New York Philharmonic and other radio broadcasts and a concert he gave at Curtis in 1938 was also recorded. Thus there is available a rather sizable Hofmann discography. Too bad we do not have the equivalent from Rachmaninoff, who would never appear on a radio broadcast.

Rachmaninoff and Hofmann were, incidentally, very close friends. Henry Pleasants, then a music critic at the Philadelphia Bulletin, once interviewed Rachmaninoff in the early 1930s. During the course of the meeting, he asked Rachmaninoff who he thought were the greatest pianists alive. Rachmaninoff thought for a while. "Well," he said, "there's Hofmann." He thought a bit more. "And there's me," he said. Then, according to Mr. Pleasants, "He closed his mouth and would not say another word."

In the last thirty or so years of his life, Hofmann's repertoire shrank. When he played on the radio, the general format was a movement of a concerto and then a solo group, all of a popular nature. Hofmann would select short pieces by Chopin, Schumann, or whomever, but never a complete sonata or any extended work. The feeling in those days was that a radio audience subjected to, say, Beethoven's Op. 111 (which Hofmann played inimitably) would develop brain fever and perish.

Thus on this release we get those short broadcast pieces - the Chopin nocturnes and waltzes, the Liszt "Liebestraum," and so on. Even a touch of Debussy with "Clair de Lune" - and how sweetly, unsentimentally, and colorfully Hofmann plays it! He plays two of his own pieces. Of special interest is the Hofmann "Berceuse," played once as a piano solo, and then with the violinist Efrem Zimbalist (1889-1985).

The best idea here of Hofmann in his prime comes from the 1935 test recordings and the 1938 Jubilee program in Philadelphia. Hofmann was still in his prime in all of these, and a good idea can be obtained of his sound and dynamics. The most interesting item from the RCA tests is the first movement of the Chopin B minor sonata. It unfolds easily and naturally, with the typical equilibrium between right and left hand (how he despised what he derisively called "right-handed pianists!"). The architecture is clearly defined, there is a transcendent lyricism, and the piece moves with an inevitable-sounding metrical steadiness relieved by delicate rhythmic adjustments. Hofmann, the great Romantic pianist, always had a classical streak in him. He was the coolest of the great Romantic pianists, even more so than Rachmaninoff. Those who equate Romantic style with egoism and "insane liberties" (as one uninformed American pianist put it) should be forced to listen to this aristocratic, elegant performance.

Equally fascinating is the performance of Chopin's "Andante Spianato e Grande Polonaise." Hofmann takes the "Andante" at a much faster tempo than is heard today, when tempos in general have slowed alarmingly. The prevalent feeling in recent years seems to be that slowness equals profundity. But Hofmann's tempos represent the faster, nineteenth-century tempos, as played by a pianist who was born only 27 years after Chopin's death. As Hofmann plays it, the music has ever so much more flow and charm and life and sparkle than in today's more sluggish tempos. And in the "Polonaise," he is coruscatingly brilliant. Every note is clear in this difficult virtuoso piece, textures never blur, and there is a grand sweep. Pianists who heard this performance must have come away from the concert asking themselves how he did it.

Tempos are also fast in the Beethoven E-flat sonata movement on the HMV disc. Here again we have nineteenth-century tempos. And here again we have Hofmann's classic precision, unflagging rhythm, and sheer joy of playing. Modern listeners, accustomed to much slower tempos, may be startled. In the Chopin F-sharp nocturne on the HMV recordings, Hofmann fits the fioritura into the bar, rather than lengthening the bar to fit the fioritura. Also on HMV are the two popular Chopin-Liszt transcriptions, which represent Hofmann at his very best. Again, it is appropriate to quote Hoffman: "Perfect sincerity plus perfect simplicity equals perfect achievement."

© Harold C. Schonberg, 1997

TRACK LISTING

CD 1 (64:11)

The Curtis Institute Recitals, ca.1935:

Hofmann:

1. Berceuse, op. 20 no. 5 [3:02]
(solo version)
2. Berceuse, op. 20 no. 5 [3:11]
(with Efrem Zimbalist, violin)

RCA Victor test recordings, 1935:

Chopin:

3. Waltz in A-flat, op. 42, Take 1 [3:36]
19 April 1935; (CS 88937 - 1)
4. Waltz in A-flat, op. 42, Take 2 [3:30]
2 May 1935; (CS 88937 - 2)
5. Waltz in A-flat, op. 42, Take 4 [3:32]
2 May 1935; (CS 88937 - 4)
6. Nocturne in D-flat, op. 27 no. 2, Take 1 [4:47]
2 May 1935; (CS 88938 - 1)
(Recording was aborted before the conclusion of the performance.)
7. Nocturne in D-flat, op. 27 no. 2, Take 2 [4:46]
6 May 1935; (CS 88938 - 2)

Chopin-Liszt:

8. Chant Polonaise, op. 74 no. 1, "The Maiden's Wish" [3:32]
6 May 1935; (CS 88958 - 1)

Chopin:

9. Sonata No. 3 in B Minor, op. 58, First Movement - Allegro maestoso [8:17]
6 May 1935; (CS 88959 - 1) (CS 88960 - 1)
10. Polonaise in A, op. 40 no. 1, "Military" [3:30]
6 May 1935; (CS 88961 - 1)
11. Waltz in A-flat, op. 42, [3:34]
19 April 1935; (CS 88962 - 1)

HMV test recordings, 29 November 1935:

Chopin:

12. Waltz in A-flat, op. 42 [3:28]
(2EA 2575 -1)

Chopin-Liszt:

13. Chant Polonaise, op. 74 no. 12, "My Joys" [3:32]
(2EA 2576 -1)
14. Chant Polonaise, op. 74 no. 1, "The Maiden's Wish" [3:15]
(2EA 2577 -1)

Chopin:

15. Nocturne in F-sharp, op. 15 no. 2 [3:16]
(2EA 2578 - 1)

Beethoven:

16. Sonata No.18 in E-flat, op. 31 no. 3, Second Movement - Scherzo [4:11]
(2EA 2579 - 1)

CD 2 (70:54)

Philadelphia Golden Jubilee, 4 April 1938:

Chopin:

1. Andante Spianato e Grande Polonaise, op. 22 [9:45]
2. Berceuse in D-flat, op. 57 [3:11]
3. Waltz in D-flat, op. 64 no. 1, "Minute" [1:26]
4. Nocturne in F-sharp, op. 15 no. 2 [2:48]

Mendelssohn:

5. Song Without Words, op. 4 no. 4, "Spinning Song" [1:35]

Columbia test, 9 February 1940:

(CO 26504-1) The first few measures of each of the following are played:

Chopin:

6. Polonaise in A, op. 40 no. 1, "Military" [:58]
7. Waltz in A-flat, op. 42 [:53]
8. Nocturne in D-flat, op. 27 no. 2 [1:19]

The following selection is played complete

Liadov:

9. Musical Snuff Box [1:11]

Ford Sunday Evening Hour, 19 October 1941:

Weber:

10. Sonata No. 1 in C, op. 24, Fourth Mvt - Presto - Rondo "Perpetual Motion" [4:00]

Chopin:

11. Nocturne in E-flat, op. 9 no. 2 [4:00]
12. Waltz in D-flat, op. 64 no. 1, "Minute" [1:32]

Liszt:

13. Liebestraum No. 3 in A-flat [3:47]

Walter Damrosch Birthday broadcast, 1 January 1942:

Chopin:

14. Nocturne in D-flat, op. 27 no. 2 [5:06]
15. Waltz in D-flat, op. 64 no. 1, "Minute" [1:31]

The Bell Telephone Hour:

Rachmaninov:

16. Prelude in C-sharp Minor, op. 3 no. 2 [3:28]
1 March 1943

Prokofiev:

17. March, op. 12 no. 1 [1:28]
March 1943

Hofmann:

18. Elegy [1:45]
1 March 1943

Chopin:

19. Nocturne in F-sharp, op. 15 no. 2 [3:09]
9 August 1943
20. Waltz in E-flat, op. 18, "Valse Brillante" [3:36]
9 August 1943

Mendelssohn:

21. Rondo capriccioso in E, op. 14 [6:18]
27 March 1944

Debussy:

22. Suite Bergamasque: "Clair de lune" [4:31]
19 August 1946

Home recording (date unknown, ca.1948):

Gluck-Sgambati:

23. Melodie from ORFEO ED EURIDICE [2:20]