

# Ernst Levy

Forgotten Genius Plays Beethoven, Liszt and Levy

## LINER NOTES

Ernst Levy was one of the century's most remarkable musicians, although his name is all but unknown to even many specialists in the study of great pianists. As a pianist he made some commercial recordings in the late 1950s (reissued here and on subsequent Marston releases) which received mostly lukewarm and negative reviews when originally released, and there exist non-commercial tapes of his playing which the International Piano Archives at the University of Maryland will soon issue.

Levy was a protean artist, whose multifaceted life as a pianist, conductor, teacher, author, theorist, general polymath and prolific composer was one that shaped and affected his interpretations to an extraordinary degree. Many experts consider his interpretations and playing among the greatest ever recorded; many disagree.

Levy's performances are not for the faint of heart. Those encountering him for the first time may well be shaken - perhaps irritated - by some of the unorthodox aspects of his approach. Although obviously grounded in a total intellectual knowledge of the inner workings of the score, Levy's conceptions - and especially the freedom with which he handles dynamics and tempo relationships - definitely demand an open-minded receptivity from the listener. Therefore it may be useful to suspend, as much as possible, any and all preconceived notions concerning how the music "is supposed to be played." Levy's departures from convention are borne of an absolute sincerity of conviction, but one must be prepared for some unexpected jolts. In the Liszt Sonata, for example (and to a lesser extent in the Beethoven works), Levy sometimes flies defiantly in the face of the composer's instructions. He does this in order to boldly construct an edifice of towering and overwhelming drama - a life-and-death conflict, even - that makes many other interpretations sound meek by comparison. In other words, this is the kind of titanic playing that grabs the listener by the neck and does not let go until the final note has evaporated. As a composer himself, and as a performer who often worked with living composers, Levy knew as well as anyone that musical creators are far more flexible in their acceptance of individual interpretations than is generally acknowledged. And because the compositional process imparts such an intensely and uniquely personal message, it invites (and even requires) a similarly personal response from the interpreter.

Born in Basel, Switzerland on 18 November 1895, Levy's early training included studies with French virtuoso Raoul Pugno (1852-1914) and with Busoni's disciple Egon Petri (1881-1962). Composer Hans Huber (1852-1921) also was an important early influence. By 1916 Levy was teaching at the the Basel Conservatory alongside Huber. "I gave many lessons, a

rather full schedule,” Levy later recalled. “In 1917 they came to get me in the middle of a university class, because Huber had suddenly fallen ill. He never returned, so I became his successor - but not the director - of the virtuoso class.”

Four years later Levy set up residence in Paris and after spending some time as a pianist and teacher, he founded in 1928 the Choeur Philharmonique. “I was steeped in choral singing, coming from Basel,” Levy said. “When I arrived in Paris, I noticed that there were no big amateur choruses. There were only some little choruses in churches here and there. I noticed that many masterworks were not known in Paris and that there was a need to create a chorus. It was not easy, but I succeeded.” Among the works given their Paris premieres under Levy’s direction were Brahms’s Ein Deutsches Requiem and Liszt’s oratorio Christus; in 1935 Levy and Choeur Philharmonique recorded Liszt’s Missa Choralis for the Polydor label, the first recording ever made of one of Liszt’s sacred choral works.

Political conditions in Europe during the 1930s brought Levy, a Jew, to the United States, where he held professorships at several major institutions including the New England Conservatory, Bennington College, the University of Chicago, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Brooklyn College. Levy’s teaching of piano and composition, and his abilities as a choral and orchestral conductor, kept him fully occupied during his American years; this period also saw a remarkable output of works that ultimately embraced fifteen symphonies and an impressive quantity of chamber and choral music. It was during this time that Levy presented occasional recitals as pianist and made a series of recordings issued on the U.S. Unicorn label. He retired from academia in 1966 and spent his remaining fifteen years in his native Switzerland.

As a composer Levy’s idiom was not identifiable with any school or tradition. He was a firm believer in the viability of tonality (as opposed to dodecaphony), and he constantly sought new vistas within the parameters of tonal music. He went so far as to study the writings of Pythagoras and the mathematical similarities between musical scales and star distances explored by Kepler. He himself measured the south tower of the Chartres cathedral to determine the relative proportions of the tower’s architectural elements and published his findings on the subject as an appendix to the book, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order*, by Otto Georg von Simson, Pantheon Books [1956]. Levy concluded that the entire cathedral was a fully calculated, deliberate representation, “full of symbols, and full of musicality.”

The total integration of all musical disciplines that typified Levy’s long career, together with his profound knowledge of art, science, and philosophy, brought about his unique approach to the performance of Haydn, Beethoven, Liszt, and Brahms (composers Levy especially favored on his recital programs). It is the startling individuality of Levy’s playing that is immediately apparent upon hearing his recordings. As his long-time colleague Dr. Siegmund Levarie put it, “One either accepted him

completely, or else had no idea what he was about.” Levarie described Levy as “a man of enormous intelligence who existed on a high spiritual plane. Pointing to “the way [Levy] illuminated the music,” Levarie goes so far as to say that “he was capable of changing people’s whole attitudes toward music.”

Not surprisingly, Levy had very definite ideas about the role of the interpreter. “One must first read the text exactly. Then one has to know how to read between the notes. This means, I read first philologically exactly what there is, what is written down, but what is written down is always imperfect, notation is imperfect, everything is imperfect. From across the notes I try to penetrate to the spirit, to what has produced the writing. I interpret the writing starting with the knowledge I have acquired, or the feeling, it is all together. I try to arrive as close as possible to what the creator has wanted to say. If I am mistaken, [then] I am mistaken. Those who are dead do not protest, and from the living it has never happened to me. But that does not mean that I am not sometimes in error. I do what I can. There are as many interpretations as there are interpreters, but the essential [elements] should always remain the same.”

The combination of sonatas from Liszt and from Beethoven’s late period on this recording is particularly appropriate. Liszt, of course, was one of the foremost nineteenth century interpreters of the Beethoven sonatas and even published a now little-known edition of all thirty-two. It is also undeniable that his own masterwork of 1853 - the B Minor Sonata - could hardly have assumed its ultimate architectural design had Beethoven not paved the way through the ceaseless formal experimentation that permeates his own sonata output. Levy, at a 1950 Chicago lecture-recital, expounded at some length on the shaping forces that led to Beethoven’s mastery of the sonata idea, and on the links between Beethoven and Liszt as sonata composers. A portion of that lecture follows:

“We are struck at once by the fact that [the Liszt Sonata] does not show the usual division into movements or parts. Let us realize that in a sonata composed nearly [100] years ago, this constitutes a remarkable feature which, one would think, ought to have aroused the curiosity of the scholars. It is strange to report that, to the best of my knowledge, it did not. The reason? We can only guess, but it seems fairly clear that we have here a proof of how little Liszt [has been] taken seriously as a composer, and another tending to show that even scholars will occasionally fall victims to general opinions and prejudices. [In any case, we are concerned with] the most outstanding monument of the evolution of the sonata as a form, after Beethoven... When Liszt writes a sonata in one movement, built as strictly as anything classic, and in a straight line continuing Beethoven’s trends, it is hardly noticed, for what else could a romantic composer do but dissolve the classic form?

“As I see it, the confusion arises from a failure to distinguish between the form as a phenomenon, and the more or less hidden forces behind the form. We may [thus] say that there are a few principles out of which many forms may arise. The principles are permanent, immutable. The forms are

transitory, changing. We have, first of all, the principle of repetition. It is a very general and very important principle - the first, in fact, on which this world is built. Repetition is the main technique of nature to create extension, in the inorganic as well as in the organic realm. Before you can shape anything, there must first exist matter to be shaped. In music, repetition might be used as a shaping factor, as in what we call recapitulation. It might also be used simply as a means of extension, as in a ground bass. Then we have the principle of variation, which in its extreme consequences leads to metamorphosis. By accepting this view we shall obtain new perspectives, be able to correct certain current opinions and, in the matter under discussion, do more justice to Liszt as well as to Beethoven.

“Let us now consider the sonata as we know it from Beethoven. What is its characteristic feature as a spiritual entity? I hope I shall meet with approval when I say that it is an impression of dramaticism. The question is whether we shall ascribe it to Beethoven’s personality or to the character of the sonata. Beethoven, no doubt, was a dramaticist in music. But the fact that the adequate form of expression for his dramaticism was the sonata points to the sonata as an inherently dramatic form. [The appearance of the ‘development section’ within a sonata movement was the event that presented] us with a veritable drama. First part: ‘exposition’ - personae dramatis are introduced. Second part: development - the conflict, the dramatic evolution proper. Finally: the ‘recapitulation,’ which is an improper term, for it is really the outcome of the drama. The first theme appears as the victor, so to speak, the second theme giving up its own home key, if we may say, and adopting that of the main theme.

“These changes came about gradually, and also were only gradually apprehended by the composers. The first to become fully aware of the situation was Beethoven. Mozart and Haydn did not, in general, completely yield to the exigencies of the new idea. They kept the dramaticism in chains, so to speak, thereby realizing an infinitely precious, if precarious, balance between the old static conception and the new dynamic influx.

“The sonata as it was handed over to Beethoven showed a succession of movements, the number of which varied from two to four. The four-movement scheme was generally established in this way: a first movement in sonata-form, followed by two lyrical (in contradistinction to ‘dramatic’) movements, one in slow tempo, the other a minuet whose name [and character were altered] by Beethoven into a ‘scherzo’. [For the finale, the composer faces a problem]: if his sonata is to be considered as one work in several parts rather than as a loose succession of pieces - and that is how Beethoven understood it - the last movement has to balance the first in importance, in weight. Haydn could still write his wonderful, witty, carefree Rondos. But Beethoven could not, because the dramatic idea of the first movement, of the sonata-form, had begun to radiate over the rest, imperiously driving toward a complete coherence and unity of the sonata as a whole. The finale represented an artistic problem of the first magnitude, and Beethoven struggled with it all his life. This means that he attempted a different solution in practically every new

sonata composition. With each work, whether sonata, symphony, or quartet, Beethoven had to start anew the attack on the finale-problem, because the spiritual data and, hence, the formal consequences, were different in every one of his works. In this, Beethoven is characteristically of the nineteenth century - a 'modern' composer.

"For instance, in Op. 111, which consists of only two movements [the second being a theme and variations], the dramaticism is twofold. Each of the movements is dramatic in itself. Superimposed on that primary dramaticism is another one, resulting from an implicit polarity: in the first movement, an outward struggle - in the second an inward ascension. Both parts are connected by a musical symbolism of the highest and most profound significance.

"You will admit that we are pretty far, by now, from the academic concept of the sonata scheme. Also, it might occur to you that by this time the terms 'classic' and 'romantic' [may] appear a little vague, a little emptied of the meanings we usually associate with them. If that should be the case, we are just in the right state of mind to approach the Liszt Sonata. Thus, I am sure you will already have [anticipated] that the next step in sonata composition - a step Beethoven himself did not take, but presumably would have taken had he lived only a little longer - must logically consist in writing a sonata in one movement. The dramatic idea, spreading out from the first movement, had taken hold of the [entire] sonata. The different movements had lost their independence, and had become stations in a continuous dialectical process. It really needed only minor adjustments, beside the blotting-out of a few double bars, to bring forth the sonata in one movement. It was Liszt who took that step, as an inevitable consequence of Beethoven's concept of 'development'.

"If you can see why the one-movement sonata had to be written, you will certainly also have an idea as to how it might be organized. The presiding principle being that of dialectics, the whole work will consist of one huge 'development' (the term taken in its technical meaning), in which more lyrical parts will lie imbedded. Liszt's sonata is a drama played without interruption. On the formal level, this is achieved through such an arrangement of the sonata-form that, first of all, the finale is made to be identical with the recapitulation. This provides the possibility of letting the slow section and the scherzo become functions of the development. In fact, all the sections of the sonata are functions of the development, which begins right at the exposition and is carried through the recapitulation, up to what would correspond to the 'catastrophe'. The climax - not to be [confused] with the 'catastrophe' - coincides with the beginning of the recapitulation, as in Beethoven's Op. 111. Preceding the climax, and leading up to it, a demonic fugato must be considered that part of the development which goes through the station of the Scherzo. The slow section, though clearly also a function of the development, has a slightly more independent, because less transitional, character.

"On the level of compositional technique it will be noticed that practically everything is interrelated through the process of metamorphosis, which is

an extreme case of variation. The technique of metamorphosis, though not new in itself, acquired a particular significance in the period following Beethoven, especially with Berlioz and Liszt.

“Intellectual tools brought to operate on works of art are necessarily rough. In art, as in life, the apparent paradox holds that nothing has so much weight as the imponderable. The historical connections having been discussed, it is now time to pass from intellectual considerations, transmitted through ordinary speech, to the language of music, which I hope to be able to speak to you through the fingers...”

Donald Manildi, 1997

### Ernst Levy's Inner Ear

“... Experience the power of the man at its fullest... realize his greatness.”

The present writer has made an eccentric habit for many years of discretely observing musician's ears; the biggest ears I have ever seen belonged to two great pianists. Curiously, both shared “Ernst” as their first name, Ernst Levy and Ernst von Dohnányi. As a student, I knew Dohnányi during the last two-and-a-half years of his life while, as conservatory official, I met Levy in Lausanne, Switzerland after his retirement. Of Dohnányi's playing, my experience was both via recordings and first hand. Levy's playing came my way only through recordings. Both men were remarkable in their ability to create performances that communicated what was hidden behind the notes of a printed page - the work's meaning. Another part of the equation was tone and their ability to control it while playing, so that it became a major factor in communicating what they knew about the music. They made their tone - each uniquely - no matter what the instrument on which they played (as their recordings prove). This tonal mastery was a property that seemingly belonged only to the pianistic elect. As far as I can tell, its ownership has largely eluded the widely acclaimed Ashkenazys, Brendels, Magaloffs, Pollinis and Serkins of this world while being unquestionable with regard to such giants as say, Bolet, Gieseking, Hess, Hofmann, Horowitz, Novaes, Paderewski, Friedman and Rachmaninov. What ears those men and women had!

Ears are a musician's greatest tools. Thought of scientifically, they are a pair of external receivers to channel sound waves into physical organs inside the head. When converted and transmitted to the brain, the inner-ear impulses are processed to allow split-second assessments to be made - setting up further expectations, as data continue to arrive, and engendering reactions in the realm of feelings and emotions. Thought of musically, ears are the means through which any performer judges the sounds being created during the interpretation of a score and the means for those listening to appreciate the effects. In today's world of too many performers - pianists in particular - all apparently stamped out from the same mold, with virtually interchangeable interpretations built in, one wonders at the diminishing role played by the ears. Few are those who can shape their aural perspectives through tone, to touch the core of their

hearers' being. Levy could do just that, as these recordings attest.

Whether in his own works or in such juggernauts of literature as Beethoven's Hammerklavier and the Liszt Sonata, Levy's hands, working together with his ears, can be heard molding piano tone into phrases of commanding bigness. Lines arch, harmonies blend, textures vary - as unmistakable personal statements. Everything is round, deep, solid, intense. Nothing is "as usual." Tempos, which play little role in tone, belong to Levy's idea of "form unfolding in its own time," regardless of metronome markings or tradition. Savoring complex musical thoughts, he lets us hear them grandly - which sometimes means slowly, not because he could play no faster but because he heard the music at that rate. His treatment of the finales of certain Haydn sonatas, for example, was as crisp and fleet as Glenn Gould's - for he knew their music as purposefully slight, requiring no rumination. Today's ears, accustomed to our present tradition of less-personal readings, may fail to understand, hence to value the Levy approach and to be moved by it. In fact, that was his curse. Critics of his M.I.T. recordings found them to be so at odds with prevailing taste that the LPs suffered a short shelf life. The U.S. Unicorn label disappeared and, with it, the pianist's legacy of strikingly original, probing interpretations of Beethoven, Liszt and Haydn. Levy received no mention in Harold Schonberg's book *The Great Pianists*.

However, one has only to listen to Levy's performance of Liszt's *Bénédiction* to experience the power of the man at its fullest and to realize his greatness. In the hands of lesser artists, the *Bénédiction* tends to sprawl, its nearly monolithic nature and stately motion failing to hold the listener's attention except sporadically. As such, the piece has never enjoyed much success with the public. Excellent recordings of it have been made though, by Arrau, Barenboim and Gunnar Johansen, yet Levy takes the work to an even loftier level of expression. His treatment of the two huge climaxes, outcomes of melodic and harmonic lines growing ever more intense, are awe-inspiring as those of Horowitz and Nyiregyhazi (preserved in recordings of other works). No stridency or harshness mars the tonal glory intended by Liszt as the music delivers its message of spiritual rebirth and ultimate peace. This is the marvel of Levy's tonal control.

A different aspect can be heard in his projection of melody above chord tones, as in the second subject, *Grandioso*, (in D major) of the Liszt Sonata. Unlike pianists who take the literal approach, Levy does not drown the line by pounding out its underlying repeated chords. Liszt's instruction is simple: *FF*. But instead of playing everything at that level, Levy drops the dynamic of what lies beneath the line, so that the melodic idea is revealed supreme. He is equally interesting in countless other places throughout the Sonata, altering emphases of the score to suit the realities of his ears and how they tell him to balance the elements. Ebb and flow are felt everywhere, unencumbered by slavish adherence to the printed page. Levy moves along passages lingered over by others and dwells upon beauties which others have seldom noticed. His creative approach (or should it be called creator's approach?) places this interpretation - as different as it is -

among the splendid ones enshrined on records by Anda, Barere, Cortot and Horowitz. They, after all, differ magnificently, too, from the score as they do from each other, for such is the nature of this greatest of Romantic sonatas.

If, after hearing the performances in this album, the listener remains somehow mystified, let him or her be consoled by Levy's own aphoristic words. There are those who understand and those who do not understand.

Frank Cooper, 1997 University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida

## **TRACK LISTING**

### **CD 1 (78:02)**

Beethoven:

Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat, op. 106, "Hammerklavier"

1. I. Allegro 12:06
  2. II. Scherzo: Assai vivace 2:18
  3. III. Adagio sostenuto: Appassionato e con molto sentimento 20:43
  4. IV. Largo: Allegro risoluto 12:00
- 1958; Kapp Records KC-9030-S

Piano Sonata No. 32 in C Minor, op. 111

5. I. Maestoso - Allegro con brio ed appassionato 9:19
  6. II. Arietta: Adagio molto semplice e cantabile 21:18
- 1956; Unicorn Records UNLP 1034; originally recorded by Peter Bartók

### **CD 2 (78:57)**

Liszt:

Piano Sonata in B Minor

1. Lento assai - Allegro energico 12:00
  2. Andante sostenuto 7:03
  3. Allegro energico 11:07
- 1956; Unicorn Records UNLP 1035; originally recorded by Peter Bartók

4. Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude, Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses No. 3 16:24  
1956; Unicorn Records UNLP 1035; originally recorded by Peter Bartók

5. Sposalizio, Années de Pèlerinage, Seconde Année-Italie: No. 1 6:51  
1929; (1159-60) Sonabel 12030

6. Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12 in C-sharp Minor 9:05  
Recorded in concert on 14 November, 1954

Levy:

Pieces for piano

7. No. 6 2:35

8. No. 7 3:32

9. No. 8 4:51

10. No. 9 2:09

11. No. 18 2:34

March 29, 1954; Recorded by Columbia Records in Conjunction with the Fromm Foundation but never issued

All Tracks were recorded in mono, except CD 1 Tracks 1-4, which were recorded in stereo.

All Tracks were recorded in Kresge Auditorium M.I.T. except CD 2 [5, 7-11].

Marston would like to thank Ernst Levy's sons, Frank and Matthys Levy, his colleague Siegmund Levarie, and his admirers Gregor Benko, Raymond Edwards, Thomas Frost, Donald Manildi and Gerald Morgan, Jr. for their help in the production at this CD release.

Producers: Scott Kessler and Ward Marston

Audio Conservation: Ward Marston