

Josef Hofmann

Complete Recordings - Volume 7

LINER NOTES

The Hofmann Controversy

More than 50 years after his last public performance, Josef Hofmann is arguably the most controversial pianist in history. Glenn Gould and Vladimir Horowitz inspire a similarly broad range of reactions but their admirers can usually understand something of their detractors' positions, and vice versa: few Gould fans speak out in favor of his Mozart, few Horowitzians extol the virtues of their idol's Beethoven. In contrast, reactions to Hofmann's interpretations have grown increasingly polarized over the years, ranging from zealous devotion to unalloyed contempt.

This was not always the case. At his peak Hofmann was almost universally admired, but there always seem to have been reservations. The respect that Godowsky and Rachmaninoff had for him is well known, and the astute Olga Samaroff echoed their high opinions. However Mark Hambourg called him a "cold, unemotional" pianist, a claim evidently made frequently enough that Hofmann's colleague Andre Benoit felt it needed to be answered in his memoirs: "Some claimed that he was cold and unimaginative. ... Far from cold was he! But he substituted tenderness for cheap sentimentality." Igor Stravinsky thought he was one of the greatest musicians, but Arthur Rubinstein's dislike of Hofmann's playing, expressed late in life in his memoirs, is well known. Claudio Arrau wrote that he "didn't know what to make of him," and Horowitz called him "a very good pianist but a second-rate musician" (which, ironically, is almost exactly what Richter said about Horowitz).

Many have claimed that Hofmann's playing represents an older, less "respectful" romantic tradition, but it's not that simple. Rachmaninoff's playing was more old-fashioned than Hofmann's; so was that of Friedman and Cortot. Yet these three are widely admired, even by those who disagree with their approaches. When opinions differ so widely, it's rarely a simple matter of taste. Hofmann's art exposes major differences in aesthetic emphasis between his supporters and his detractors. The root of the Hofmann animus may be this: Relative to his contemporaries, he had a modern way of playing, but in reality his modern manners overlay a thoroughly romantic aesthetic approach.

Hofmann the Modernist

Hofmann's name has been linked with that of his friend Rachmaninoff for decades. Both were transitional pianists, with elements of both the traditional and the developing aesthetic. But Hofmann, more so than Rachmaninoff, was a major influence on the emerging modern style.

Strictly from the standpoint of interpretive technique, Hofmann is the more modern of the two. This can be illustrated by comparing his 1937 Golden Jubilee recording of Chopin's Nocturne op. 9 no. 2 with studio recordings by Rachmaninoff and the old-fashioned Paderewski. Amazingly, the great Rachmaninoff, often cited as a model of modern interpretive probity, breaks his hands and rolls accompaniment chords far more often than Hofmann! *

Hofmann's generally simultaneous attack gives his performance a sense of cleanliness and tidiness compared to Rachmaninoff. The impression of precision is enhanced by Hofmann's treatment of time. Hofmann's tempo—123 beats (8th notes) per minute—is considerably quicker than that of Rachmaninoff and Paderewski, who both play the piece at 98 beats per minute (bpm). Hofmann's tempo also has less elastic in it than Rachmaninoff: Hofmann's ranges from 48 to 165 bpm (or 39% of the basic tempo varying to 134%), while Rachmaninoff's ranges from 37 to 149 bpm (or 37% to 152%). (Time flexibility is more challenging to analyze in Paderewski's performance because his lengthenings and shortenings tend to affect smaller rhythmic units—such as an eighth-note instead of a dotted eighth-note.) Again, Hofmann's approach is more romantic than most of today's pianists, but that is clearly not how he sounded during his career, when his playing was compared with his contemporaries.

Hofmann the Romantic

If Hofmann was in many respects a modern pianist, and modern pianism is uncontroversial today, then the source of the Hofmann controversy may lie less in his general style than in the specific interpretive choices he made. His playing has a clear sense of narrative and climax, but it is less structuralist than Rachmaninoff's. In the Chopin Nocturne, Rachmaninoff and Paderewski reach their fastest tempos in the climactic stretto of bar 30; Hofmann's fastest tempo is the beginning of the second theme at the end of bar 8 and the beginning of bar 9—a point of less structural importance. The slowest moment in Rachmaninoff's recording comes at the end of bar 20, immediately preceding the final return of the main theme—a moment of great structural significance, while Hofmann's slowest moment highlights not structure but a detail: the trill on the first beat of bar 23. This particular nuance is widespread enough in earlier pianists to qualify as a bona fide tradition; both Rachmaninoff and Paderewski also pause here, but in the context of their interpretations neither one makes so much of it as Hofmann.

It's probable that the overall sound of Hofmann's playing could scarcely have been more different from that of Anton Rubinstein, his teacher. Hofmann was as fastidious as Rubinstein was slap-dash; Rubinstein famously remarked after a recital that he could have given a second performance with the notes he dropped. His piano writing suggests that his technique was nowhere near as highly developed as Hofmann's, yet it's also clear that Hofmann accepted some of his teacher's values if not his teacher's personality: both valued spontaneity. Rubinstein believed that a performance's details flowed naturally from the overall concept of a piece—but he also believed that one's overall concept of a piece was

subject to enormous variation. This was the motivation for his refusal to give more than one lesson on a piece of music. Hofmann took to heart Rubinstein's emphasis on spontaneity, and it is this trait that gets him in the most trouble with modern critics. His overall conception of a work changed less than is sometimes claimed, but there's no doubt that Hofmann left many details up to the mood of the moment—his two studio recordings of Chopin's "Military" Polonaise, for instance, have the climaxes in different places. The two performances of the Beethoven Concerto No. 4 presented here differ even with respect to the notes in several passages.

Hofmann the Unique

Finally, "most unique" is a redundancy, but Hofmann may nevertheless have possessed the most unique pianistic approach in recorded history. Differently put, his playing may have the least in common with that of any other great pianist. At his prime, his playing was a riot of color. Among recorded "Moonlight" sonatas, for instance, Hofmann's 1936 broadcast (Marston 52014-2) is without precedent and without descendants. Never has the first movement had such a brilliant polychrome surface. The voicing is amazing: each note is heard, at times through a haze of pedal, yet blazingly clear underneath, a result of his extraordinary fine dynamic control. Even in some of his latest performances, such as Debussy's "Clair de Lune," (Marston 52004-2), Hofmann creates sounds you'll hear nowhere else.

Hofmann's misfortune is to have been at the leading edge of a stylistic development that we now take for granted—clean, precise playing—and the trailing edge of what is now taboo. To a generation raised to believe the score is an infallible text, his spontaneity frequently looks like mere arbitrariness. No one, we think, could actually believe all these different ways of interpreting a piece; so he must be insincere. Ironically, while Benoist felt the need to defend Hofmann against the charge that he was unimaginative, the tendency today is to regard Hofmann's interpretations as overly imaginative, running roughshod over the composer's intentions.

Hofmann's approach directly challenges some of the most cherished notions of contemporary interpretation. Since the degree to which one approves or disapproves of Hofmann is probably proportional to the degree to which one agrees or disagrees with these modern notions, it is unlikely the controversy around Hofmann's interpretations will die soon. His recordings will remain a thorn in the side of anyone who believes a performance can be definitive, and who believes that a piece of music is essentially a score, and a performance merely a more-or-less accurate realization. These are modern ideas and perhaps have little to do with romantic aesthetics. One sobering quote, written much closer in time to the age of the great composers, comes from Hofmann's colleague Harold Bauer (born 1873), who wrote in his autobiography that "many of the markings in question were only superficially related to the music. They did not form an integral part of the work and occasionally represented nothing more than subconscious mannerisms of the composer. ... Experience has taught me that the average composer's written indications are sometimes, but not always, right, whereas his verbal directions for performance (supplementing those already written) are almost invariably wrong."

Hofmann's Broadcast Recordings

It's hard not to associate Hofmann and the phonograph. He was the first pianist to record (as a child on an Edison cylinder machine) and his recorded legacy at the time of his self-imposed retirement from the recording studio in 1923 was among the largest of any pianist. But Hofmann never again approved any commercial recordings, and his issued studio recordings fill only three CDs. The majority of Hofmann's recordings are live, recorded either in concert or taken from radio broadcasts. Their existence testifies to Hofmann's popularity: live recordings of his contemporaries are extremely rare. They have also distorted the current impression of Hofmann's playing, because there were and are two distinct Hofmanns. He did not play the same way in the studio as he did in public, and because recordings by their nature focus the listener's attention in different channels than a live performance, a recording of a Hofmann live performance can give a misleading impression.

Hofmann early on realized that recording and live performance were very different ways of hearing music. A master craftsman, he adjusted himself to their different needs: spontaneity and drama in public, polish and comparative understatement on record. Near the end of his life he wrote to his friend Alexander Greiner about his Golden Jubilee concert that it had been "impossible to perform simultaneously for microphone AND such a luxuriant mass of people as the Metropolitan Opera House presented, without doing occasional violence to the music."

One technique Hofmann used in his live concerto performances ("violence to the music") was to begin a phrase relatively loudly and then decrescendo when entering after an orchestral tutti. There are numerous instances in these performances, such as the first movement of the Beethoven 4th conducted by Mitropoulos at 3:12, 4:21, and 5:00. On a monaural recording, with everything coming from the same place, it can seem exaggerated. In concert, when both the ear and the eye have to adjust, it makes perfect sense, because things seem softer when our focus is elsewhere. Hofmann grabs our attention with his entry, and then draws us psychologically closer with his decrescendo.

There's historical precedent for this. In "Principles of Expression in Pianoforte Playing" published when Hofmann was still a child, Adolph Christiani wrote: "Therefore, to accent a theme does not mean to accent every note of it, but to emphasize the beginning of the theme only ... The emphasis on the beginning is necessary, in order to call attention to the theme's appearance, or reappearance, after a temporary rest."

It's such adjustments to which Hofmann may have been referring in an unpublished article on piano rolls: "One must bear in mind that during a pianist's performance two simultaneous impressions are created, tonal and spectacular, and that in a mechanical [recorded] performance only the tonal is produced." We can only imagine how he would have played for a studio recording of a concerto.

That said, Hofmann was in fine form in the Mitropoulos Beethoven 4th. His emphasis on the melodic qualities of what most pianists treat as accompaniment gives the performance the impression of being lit from within. He creates a gentle overall mood by such practices as omitting the left hand's syncopated accents in the passage beginning 5:23 into the first movement, and arpeggiating the resolutions at 5:36 and 5:40 to soften their effect. And Hofmann's fine control enables him to make thematic connections most pianists ignore. For instance, he makes a striking decrescendo on the seemingly ornamental scale at the beginning of the first movement—albeit capped off with an accent on the final note—that relates this passage to the cascade of rising scales beginning at 11:35 of the finale. This relationship is inherent in the music but rarely audible; Hofmann realizes Beethoven's thought by echoing the decrescendo from the initial scale in the later scales.

There is yet another way in which recordings inherently distort a musician's legacy. Though they can be extremely accurate in their documentation of what a pianist did—a pause here, an emphasis there, dry in one passage, pedaled in another—they may not convey the atmosphere of the occasion well at all. Charisma resists our attempts to pin it down.

These performances were not intended to be heard repeatedly. To get the truest impression from them, listen—as much as possible—as if you're hearing them live: rarely and attentively, without interruption, preferably in company. (It is especially difficult for me to follow my own advice in the case of the "Emperor," which contains moments of such ravishing tone that it seems as though I were hearing this warhorse for the first time.) If these performances are treated with understanding, not as studio recordings, they'll reveal many beauties that otherwise might seem heretical. And before condemning Hofmann for his interpretive choices, remember that there is overwhelming evidence that he approached "interpretation" from a place much closer to the great composers' intentions than our own. Hofmann's "live" recordings are full of delights and revelations, and have much to enlighten our dark musical age.

* Hofmann plays his right hand and left hand simultaneously on 63 of 67 strong beats and all 50 weak beats. This is less often than today's pianists, who most often tend to play their hands together all the time, but more modern than Rachmaninoff, who plays his hands together on only 44 of 66 strong beats and 47 of 51 weak beats, and considerably more so than Paderewski, who plays his hands together on only five of 51 strong beats and five of 41 weak beats. (Some weak beats begin with rests or ties in the right hand; textual alterations account for the different numbers of applicable beats in Hofmann's and Rachmaninoff's performances; and eight bars are cut from Paderewski's recording.) Hofmann's modernism is also apparent when we track the common romantic practice of rolling accompaniment chords. He rolls fewer than six percent of them; Rachmaninoff over 20 percent; and Paderewski, almost 25 percent (and considerably more if one counts rolls accomplished so swiftly and quietly as to sound merely like less-percussive attacks).

TRACK LISTING

CD 1 (69:42)

Broadcast, 22 August 1943:

BEETHOVEN: Piano Concerto No. 4 in G, op. 58

1. Introductory announcement [0:30]
2. I. Allegro moderato [16:25]
3. II. Andante con moto [4:34]
4. III. Rondo: Vivace [9:40]

Conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos

Broadcast, 12 May 1940:

BEETHOVEN: Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat, op. 73 "Emperor"

5. I. Allegro 19:46
6. II. Adagio 8:04
7. III. Rondo 10:43

Conducted by Hans Lange

CD 2 (64:52)

Ford Sunday Evening Hour, 19 October 1941:

1. Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat, op. 73 "Emperor", Third Movement (Rondo) [10:24]

Conducted by José Iturbi

Bell Telephone Hour:

2. BEETHOVEN: Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat, op. 73 "Emperor", First Movement (Allegro) [8:55] - 19 August 1946 (Abridged)

3. BEETHOVEN: Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat, op. 73 "Emperor", Third Movement (Rondo) [7:49] - 9 August 1943 (Abridged)

4. CHOPIN: Piano Concerto No. 1 in E Minor, op. 11, Third Movement (Rondo: Vivace) [11:00] - 31 July 1944

5. CHOPIN: Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Minor, op. 21, Second Movement (Larghetto) [8:55] - 30 July 1945

6. SCHUMANN: Piano Concerto in A Minor, op. 54, First Movement (Allegro affetuoso) [7:29] - 13 January 1947 (Abridged)

7. SCHUMANN: Piano Concerto in A Minor, op. 54, Third Movement (Allegro vivace) [11:20] - 14 January 1946

Tracks 2-7 with Symphony Orchestra conducted by Donald Voorhees