

## Book reviews

Bertrand Ott, *Liszt et la pédagogie du piano*

Issy-les-Moulineaux: Editions Scientifiques et Psychologiques, 1992. pp. 313

Bertrand Ott, *Lisztian Keyboard Energy*, trans. Donald H. Windham

Lampeter, Dyfed: Edwin Mellen, 1992. £39.95 \$US 79.95 pp. 260

Liszt has been revered as the greatest piano virtuoso of the nineteenth century, if not of all time. He has been praised as a great composer, either criticized or envied as a womanizer, respected for his charismatic personality, and now, Bertrand Ott has analysed seriously his contribution to piano playing and to piano pedagogy. This could not have been easy, given the fact that he was surrounded by so much legendary and anecdotal evidence about Liszt's performances and escapades. Ott limited himself entirely to the collection of factual evidence of Liszt's playing and of his teaching, and he then drew his own conclusions from this evidence.

*Liszt et la pédagogie du piano*, when I read it in French, gave me not only a clear insight into Liszt's piano playing, but it also brought into perspective many of the theories and prejudices about the piano pedagogy of the last hundred years or so. I often wonder why translators of books, like those who choose the titles for films, always change the original titles of the books they translate. In this case, the English title, *Lisztian Keyboard Energy*, does not seem to me to give full expression to the content of the book.

The purpose of this review is not to summarize all the material in the treatise. Anyone wishing to learn about Liszt's keyboard skills should study in detail the evidence that Ott offers. He makes his case in an effective manner, presenting firstly what he regards as historical, personal and scientific facts, and then his own conclusions.

After preliminaries, he records quotations from some of Liszt's contemporaries who heard him play, and statements by his students. We see how Liszt changed his technique and his posture at various times during his career, and we learn something from a number of the explanations that he gave to his students. Of special interest is the evidence provided by paintings, caricatures, drawings and photographs of him at the piano. When

we consider the recent investigations carried out by F. M. Alexander, and the now flourishing Alexander Technique upon which so many musicians and teachers rely as a means of achieving physical control, it is astonishing to discover how similar were Liszt's deductions, arrived at through intuition and his own studies. To see him seated at the piano erect but not tense, his arms controlled from the shoulders, and his whole body involved in the performance, we can observe how much he was up to date in his attitudes. It is also of great interest that he advocated looking away from the keyboard when playing from memory. This, he said, would not only allow the arms and hands to function freely, but would also permit the pianist to hear objectively the sounds coming from the instrument. This is now accepted as part of modern performance theory.

Of even greater significance perhaps were his statements about the then new theories of weight technique. Earlier keyboard performance styles had developed from harpsichord playing, and for this, the use of the fingers, isolated from the arms, was advocated. Leschetizky, after hearing the pianist Schulhoff perform, had spent much time trying to find out a method for producing sounds more suited to the pianoforte and to the needs of Romantic music. Although Leschetizky produced outstanding students, he did not write down his findings. Soon afterwards, however, there came two German theorists, Deppe and Breithaupt, who ridiculed the earlier ideas of playing with the fingers alone, suggesting that the weight of the arm should be the means for producing sounds at the piano. Even though in 1905, Elisabeth Caland refuted these new ideas in her book, *Die Ausnützung der Kraftquellen beim Klavierspiel (The Use of Power Sources in Piano Playing)*, the so-called weight techniques still tend to persist even today. The elements of these theories must already have been known to Liszt, who made some very percep-

tive statements about the use of the arms. In the first place, he mentioned the need for the arms to be light, suggesting the 'floating arm' of some modern pedagogy, and of great importance, he referred to the need for the arms to 'dance with the music'. This is thoroughly in line with the best of modern theories.

Ott devotes considerable time to Liszt's explanations about 'drawing' the sounds from the piano. In the English translation we find much about 'retropulsive and antepulsive energy', whereas in the original, the word 'tirée' appears frequently in relation to bringing the sounds out of the piano. This is one of the features of Ott's own understanding of the Lisztian technique, but it is necessary to read the book to acquire a full understanding of the meaning of it.

Before concluding, it may be of use to mention Ott's reasons for studying Liszt's technique in the first place. In the opening chapter he writes: 'I hope the reader will now allow me to demolish two deeply rooted prejudices, namely: "*genius cannot be imitated*" and "*the manifestations of art are mysteries that cannot be analysed*"'.

In answer to the first of these, he writes:

Can't the tool of a great personality help us free ourselves from our pianistic awkwardness? On

this subject Neuhaus confirms my point of view: 'At the risk of seeming to be an incorrigible optimist, I maintain that the analysis of the mechanics of a great artist can be useful in teaching a very average pupil.'

Next Ott writes:

The second prejudice . . . consists in claiming that the means of artistic creation conceal mysteries which cannot be discovered and explained. . . . Guido d'Arezzo wrote during the Middle Ages, however: 'He who does what he is incapable of understanding can be defined as a beast.' One should also consider this passage from Paul Roës: 'Doesn't that sort of knowledge acquired by studying profoundly the act of playing destroy intuitive execution? The contrary is our firm conviction. Although intuition may be a knowledge of those truths that do not need reasoning as an intermediary in order to be grasped by the mind, their intellectual confirmation acts as a new stimulation towards new intuitions.' In other words, an intelligent technique can only produce the good result of liberating our sensitive intuition which, although it exists independently from that technique, nevertheless needs it in order to surface and take a definite form.

Thus Ott justifies his research.

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