

## Voice of the Piano - Notes

The theme of this CD "The Voice of the Piano" has great significance for me. The ideas behind the choice of repertoire illustrate the beauty and wonder of what has come to be considered old world piano sound. The history and tradition of this kind of sound have their roots in the emergence of the modern piano. This old-fashioned singing sound creates our biggest emotional response. It is our primary communicator. Its importance and usefulness in our musical and emotional consciousness is vital if the classical piano music heritage and modern piano is to survive. Aural images necessary for beautiful piano sounds are slowly disappearing from our culture.

The works on this disc are musical icons from my encyclopedia of sound imagery. They illustrate different aspects of singing on the piano. The endless variation of pleasing sound conveys a sublime intensity of emotion for most of the repertoire. "To sing" is what the 19th century piano and piano music is all about. It is the mainstay of our musical language. This basic round, warm sound plus special ways of phrasing, inflecting and bending it, made pianists such as Chopin, Liszt and Rachmaninoff into legends. The emotional release created a tidal wave of interest in the piano. As we approach the 21st century interest is diminishing.

We all ought to be concerned with our aural piano heritage. We have lost a lot of sound sensitivity and sensibility. The issue of sound is not solely confined to emotion nor is it the only communicator in musical expression. The quality of the instrument itself is of great significance and so is the performer's handling of the instrument.

The interaction between human and mechanical motion, and physical and human emotion, create relationships which make the piano speak with great beauty and variety of sound. This approach, this imagery, a fusion between emotion and motion, is out of style. Factual as well as philosophical connections need to be explained so that the desire to express deep feelings does not vanish from our musical culture.

Let me explain what the aural icons, the works in this album, mean to me. This will help illustrate how personal connections provide a rich soil from which emotion and meaning grow, and how over time these symbols recombine to revitalize and achieve an ongoing process of focus and transformation. These works have been with me since childhood. They are part of the first language which has defined me and which I have defined.

I heard the Mozart sonata when I was three years old. As with most events there is more than one report. In this case there is one by me, an early and strong memory, and another by my cousin, who recently told me his version. Our memories differ:

My cousin Eugene Levin, a medical intern in his mid-twenties, came to our home. He walked into the living room, opened up some tattered yellow music and played the C Major Mozart sonata. My aural image obliterates the other senses. I perceived his playing to be indescribably gorgeous. The sound, the music was exquisite. This image remains inside me as the most beautiful classical sound I ever heard.

Gene relates the event in another way. He used to drop by the house quite often. To this day he loves music but was never a pianist. He stumbled through the Mozart sonata. I was watching him, fascinated. When he finished, I sat down and played back exactly what he played, smoothly and very musically. It was a much-improved version. He was extremely startled and was so impressed and depressed that he never tried that piece again. Shortly thereafter he stopped playing the piano altogether.

This tale illustrates a major life-changing experience for each of us. Gene has been a successful physician for the past forty years and has not included the piano in his list of hobbies. I chased after this image. It became part of my lexicon and greatly influenced the course of my life. This early sound image grew stronger. Every time I play music of this period, I reconnect with it. Gene was my first exposure to someone actually playing a whole piece from beginning to end. What got me was the love and warmth in the sound of the music. Those few moments made an imprint that to this day propels and defines my understanding and perception of meaning. Early role models and early experiences carry resonances that shape our existence.

As a child and adolescent, I continued to bathe myself in the live sounds of such artists as Rubinstein, Heifetz and Piatigorsky. Indeed, this is how the Mendelssohn became a part of this album. I remember being struck dumb the first time I heard the Heifetz recording of the E Major Song Without Words. I was fascinated; it was the sound, and the way he shaped and inflected it. I remember listening over and over; every time it was beautiful and emotional in a different way. Last month I played this recording for the first time in thirty years. It was hard to believe that his performance was my model. I have not changed my original image, yet my current impressions are different from my long-term image and aural memory. His playing style is shockingly different from what I remember and seemingly unrelated to my present style. My first reaction was to correct my memory, to say that it is wrong, but that would cancel the process of personal history and evolution. Despite what we think, important feelings grow inside us if we permit ourselves to acknowledge and remember our symbols. Icons are like trigger points; they collect and disperse emotional energy.

Our aural history parallels great paintings and great literary works in that it speaks to us. In this sense old recordings with their unsophisticated technologies are part of the community of living and important sounds. The Steinway piano dominates and provides the main context for sound. Pianists like Rachmaninoff, Lhevinne, Hofmann, Schnabel, Giesecking, Rubinstein, and

Horowitz are precious icons. It is necessary to hear their recordings in original form without altering the sound perspective because it is this original sound that motivated and inspired their feelings. Our ability to go back and forth in time, the ability to perceive history emotionally, is one of mankind's greatest gifts.

Schnabel's Schubert made me aware of the incredible range of the voice of the piano. This was my first experience with Schubert; I was eight years old. I was awed by the wondrous luminescence of the treble and the focus of the melodies that I heard in Schnabel's playing. I remember being so moved that I could hardly breathe. Of course, I did not know that I was listening to a Bechstein in contrast to a Steinway. Again, sound was critical; another image was formed. I am still in love with the old, round, sensuous Steinway sound and the purity of the Bechstein.

This disc underscores various kinds of singing sounds. Gershwin is song. His writing extends the song and singing lineage of Mozart, Mendelssohn and Schubert. I freely adapted this arrangement of Rhapsody in Blue from Gershwin's own marvelous historic performance. The work's popular appeal, sound accessibility, singing style, warmth and love make it a vibrant vehicle for the voice of the piano.

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