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CHAPTER VI - Concert Activity

In our times it is clearer than ever that a concert pianist can and must be a propagandist, like any other artist. After all we, too, are to some extent "engineers of the soul". It is with a feeling of deep satisfaction that I watch the manner in which the best Soviet pianists carry out this commendable task. I would mention, in particular, Sviatoslav Richter who may serve as an example worth following. Richter does not confine himself to playing Soviet, Russian and Western classical music, but he repeatedly performs in various cities of the USSR the whole of Bach's *Wohltemperiertes Klavier* (apart from other Bach compositions). He has literally brought back to life the marvellous Schubert sonatas and some Weber sonatas that for some reason had been forgotten, and has played a multitude of seldom heard pieces by Liszt, Schumann, Beethoven; in short his concerts not only give pleasure to a wide audience but also open before it new horizons and bring before it excellent little-known compositions, thus constantly broadening and raising the level of artistic culture and musical experience. But as a matter of fact many of our pianists do this; I need only name Sofronitsky, Gilels, Zak, Oborin and there are others.

Vladimir Horowitz once told me (I had advised him to play some excellent but not yet very popular compositions) that he plays in public only what the public likes most, the rest he can play at home. The concert activity of Richter and Horowitz betrays a certain difference of approach (I am here speaking of the youthful Horowitz; later he changed considerably).

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It amounts to this: one of them is led by the public, while the other leads the public, taking into account its possibilities and character. The slogan of the youthful Horowitz was: "Success above all". Richter's slogan: "Above all, art!". The second slogan implies the idea of serving the people, while the first implies the action of pleasing the public.

For many pianists and (even more) learners, a public performance is far from a simple matter. It is well known that there were excellent virtuosi who suffered from stage fright and whose performances in public were usually much below their real standard. They obviously did not have the fervour of the prophets of old, or of the Roman tribunes, the gift to "come before the people". But this fervour, or instinct, is a most important condition for concentration. In our age much is done to accustom young persons to all types of social activity and this is also extremely useful for our young pianists: I have noticed that in

the last twenty to twenty-five years stage fright has been definitely on the decline.[Nota 1](#)

The question of how to prepare for a public performance is obviously of interest to many learners and teachers. Considering the vast variety of characters, gifts, and circumstances in which pupils live, it is very difficult, even impossible, to give a general prescription. Joseph Hofmann gave this advice: learn a new composition three times and put it away three times before playing it in public. This is very good advice but presupposes a highly organized way of life aimed constantly at achieving the best possible "concert form". In our circumstances only a very few can do this in view of the numerous pursuits and studies that have nothing to do with the best possible concert form.[Nota 2](#)

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Yet excellent recitals can be given even if their preparation is completely contrary to Hofmann's recommendations. Here is an example: several years ago Sviatoslav Richter played three Russian concertos with orchestra. One of them (Rachmaninov's First in the new version) he had already played, but a long time ago; the other two—Glazunov's First Concerto and the Concerto by Rimsky-Korsakov—he learned in exactly a week (he took the score on the 2nd and the performance took place on the 9th) having never played them before. Nevertheless the concert was excellent. Of course it is not only a question of having a tremendous talent but also an amazing capacity and ability to work, to learn. I would call this the "emergency method". But as a matter of fact Richter mostly does prepare his concert appearances this way, the "emergency" way. The reason is not that he does not have sufficient free time, as is the case of some others (for instance Oborin, Oistrakh, or myself, poor sinner, who carries a constant load of thirty-five pupils). Richter does not teach, he hardly takes part in any committees or adjudicates at competitions, but he is moved by a tremendous artistic ambition (an excellent ambition) which forces him at every public appearance to play something he has never played before.

I spoke earlier of Tausig who, coming home from a concert was fond of playing the whole of his programme through, most carefully, attentively, in order to clear it from all the hazards of a concert performance. Richter, because of circumstances, sometimes immediately after a concert seeks out some quiet corner with a piano and plays until 5 or 6 a.m. learning a new programme for his next recital. Is this not an "emergency" method? I think that nowadays it is very important (although for entirely different reasons) that everyone should aster this "emergency" method which was by no means so necessary before, when there was more time. But on the other hand the concert activity of this same Richter confirms the truth of Hofmann's advice: Richter himself told me that it was only at his fourth public performance of Mozart's Sonata in A minor that he achieved what he considered a satisfactory interpretation.

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From my personal experience I could give the following example: the general public as well as musicians usually react very favourably to my performance of Chopin's First Concerto in E minor; and it may well be that the rendering of this work is less liable to be affected by the inevitable vicissitudes

of mood, concert form, the influence of the moment, than the performance of some other compositions (the "standard" of performance being so to speak more constant).

To me the reason is clear: not only did I put in a great amount of thorough work into this concerto in my youth, but for some reason I have performed it specially frequently (in various cities of the USSR), and before each performance I would work at it again, if only two or three days or even one day or a few hours; what is important is that I worked at it again and again and consolidated yet again what had been achieved previously. (Here you have it, the Hofmann method. This also explains the high standard of performance of pianists who give many recitals in many cities, usually performing not more than two or three programmes). To say nothing of the fact that I love this concerto quite particularly and perhaps this is one of the main reasons for the approval of the audience.

This most useful method, the method of acquiring mastery by repeated performances, by routine (in the best sense of the word) is to all intents and purposes not available to learners since what they need above all is to acquire a repertoire, and after playing in public one or two compositions they immediately begin learning something new. Sometimes a learner has the possibility of testing in public his performance of a composition twice or at the very most, three times, whereas the concert pianist plays a composition dozens and hundreds of times.

I refer to this fact, of which everyone is well aware, only in order to stress once more the inequality that exists between the position of the learner and the concert pianist. In order to remedy this situation even slightly, pupils should not only be made to appear as often as possible at all kinds of private concerts (in schools, conservatoires) but they should also go through some of the more important works with their teacher again, after a lapse of time, repeating them, perhaps "doing them" three times during their years at the conservatoire and each time again play them in public.

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I sometimes deliberately use this method although it meets with opposition on the part of some of the members of the piano faculty who consider that "the rule" (which incidentally is nowhere to be found in writing) is that a pupil should never play the same things in public twice, to say nothing of three times. After all, what I recommend is just as natural as reading Pushkin at the age of ten, twenty, forty and even a hundred if one can only live that long. Of course at the same time I also struggle against the attempts of some pupils to perform at every public performance pieces they have played again and again, using as an argument against them the well-known saying of Kuzma Prutkov: [Nota 3](#) "You can't hatch the same egg twice". Such is the simple dialectic of life.

May I be forgiven for describing now a few facts and observations from my personal experience as a concert performer. One can always draw some conclusions from the experience of others that are useful to oneself.

Just as other pianists I have in my time given concerts, the quality of which differed: good, medium, bad. Perhaps I should honestly confess that in my case the fluctuations between the best and the worst were greater than "usual" and that perhaps it might have been better in some cases to cancel the concert than

to play "in spite of everything". But it is not this that interests me at present, but something else. When, after a concert or a number of concerts, I sometimes considered why the concert was as it was and not different, I could very easily establish a connection between the quality of the concert and the mode of life that preceded it and the way I worked. It almost always appeared that for me the most important condition for a good concert was preliminary rest, good health and vitality, freshness of spirit and body. I always found it especially easy and pleasant to play after a holiday; there were no small mishaps, no feeling of weariness from which I sometimes suffer in Moscow where I am snowed under by my teaching work. In spite of the minimum of preparation (sometimes for only a day or two before the first concert, and of course I never worked while on holiday) the technical level was high.

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Of course I did not learn new compositions but played works which I had played many times before and since I have a large repertoire I sometimes gave eight or nine recitals with different programmes quite easily.

None of this would perhaps be worth mentioning were it not for the fact that three-quarters of my life are lived in conditions that are entirely wrong for concert work and I always recall with gratitude that "island of happiness" on which from time to time I find myself when, after a complete rest (and first of all a complete rest from the playing of others to which I frequently have to listen for days on end), there is nothing which physically prevents me from being what I am.

(Cortot used to say that for a concert pianist on tour the most important thing is sound sleep and a good digestion. All great artists have always required on their tours every kind of comfort, thoroughly planned in advance. This is understandable: it is the first and most essential condition for a performer's activity. That is why in the first place I mentioned rest and health.)

It would frequently happen in Moscow, that in the middle of my work with pupils, meetings, and sometimes even competitions, I would, in spite of my tiredness, have to prepare a concert. I prepared it honestly, trying to make use of all my spare time, but because of excessive fatigue the concert would not come up to the desired standard, a certain amount of spiritual wear and tear would, on the concert platform, sometimes turn into highly strung tenseness (for this reason some musicians consider me a "nervous" pianist, but they are completely mistaken; what to a superficial or unfriendly observer appears to be "nervousness" is in actual fact the healthy protest of spirit and body against an enforced, irrational way of life which hampers the free manifestation of the artistic will). What sometimes particularly hampered my spiritual freedom on the concert platform was the mere feeling (not even always justified) that I had not managed to work as much or in the way I had wanted and considered necessary, while the amount of work actually done was sometimes twice or even three times greater than the amount I put in when I was in perfect health, completely free of other duties and spiritually rested.

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I also noticed that it is much more difficult to give a single recital in the space of one or two months—because the recital then becomes an exception to the rule, this rule being, as I already said, usually entirely incompatible with concert work—than to give a series of concerts on a tour, since in this case the whole way of life is aimed at one thing only: public appearance, and nothing or practically nothing interferes with it. And then, as the saying is, one gets the knack, one gets used to doing it and since concert playing (why not say it?) is infinitely more pleasant and a hundred times less tiring than teaching, particularly if you see that you are giving pleasure to your audience, your whole vitality increases and it sometimes even seems that life has more roses than thorns (and this is immediately reflected in one's playing).

I am describing the most ordinary things, well known to all. But what can I do if our life is made up of precisely these most ordinary things? We all know perfectly well how we should organize our lives in order to achieve the maximum development of our abilities yet we are frequently completely unable to put this knowledge into practice. I became very sad, once, when David Oistrakh, this amazing artist and magnificent virtuoso, admitted to me that it had not been easy for him to play even the Rachmaninov Trio at the memorial ceremony for Antonina Vassilievna Nezhdanova because he had not held a violin in his hands for almost a month; at that time examinations had coincided with endless competitions, and like all of us he had had to sit and listen, and judge and prepare his pupils.

Such an admission, made in passing, ought to get to the ears of the officials of the Ministry of Culture; it should worry them as it worried and grieved me. Perhaps I am making a tragedy out of a trifle? I don't think so. We all of us want to be Stakhanovites in our work but Stakhanov would never have allowed his pick-axe to lie idle while he attended meetings.

About stage fright, from which so many people suffer, Rimsky-Korsakov said very accurately that it was in inverse proportion to the degree of preparation. This formula is true in spite of the fact that it does not exhaust all cases and kinds of stage fright. I remember, for instance, the first recital given by Leopold Godowsky at the beginning of the 1906 Berlin winter season. He was, of course, perfectly prepared, yet the feeling of special responsibility connected with the first concert of the season was apparently so strong that the first part of the recital was marked by nervousness and stiffness.

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I saw him the next day. He was very displeased with his recital. Anton Rubinstein, as everyone knows, was very nervous and once even broke a mirror in the artists' room with his fist before walking on to the platform (this seemed to have calmed him). The nervousness of such artists as Rubinstein can hardly be confused with the feeling of fear and timidity which frequently overcomes the fledgeling pianist. Such nervousness as that of Rubinstein is, I think, due partly to the fact that every public performance is subject to "the power of the moment" and the highly artistic personality capable of inspiration is more liable to be affected by it than the standard, balanced artists who experience neither great flights nor great falls; secondly, since a reputation already acquired and the high regard of the public imply special obligations, there is, here too, a certain element of fear—fear of losing the goodwill of the

listener. But the main reason is the great spiritual tension without which a man called upon "to come before the people" is unthinkable: awareness that he must communicate to the people who have come to hear him something important, significant, deep, different from the daily humdrum experiences, thoughts and feelings. This type of nervousness is a good and necessary feeling and anyone incapable of it, who walks on to the platform as a good official walks into his office certain that today, too, he will perform the tasks required of him, such a person cannot be a true artist.

One of the main mistakes in preparing for a concert (and in work in general) which I noted in some pupils and pianists, is the complete divorce between their work at home and the performance in the concert hall. For them the notion of learning is identical with that of practising; they are prepared to play by the hour some beautiful composition, thumping out every note, to practise each hand separately, and to repeat the same passage endlessly, in short to learn music without music. It does not occur to them to play the composition in its entirety thinking first of all of music; for them the notion of "music making" is incompatible with the notion of "work". It is understandable that with such an exceptive method the best musical compositions are turned into exercises or etudes. The logical and practical mistake made by pianists who adopt this method, is that they consider it as an intermediate stage on the way to reaching some other, higher goal, but since they stop at this stage for too long (some remain there for good) it becomes an end in itself beyond which nothing can be achieved.

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I repeat: in striving to reach the goal, that is, an artistically accomplished performance, one should proceed in a straight line (there is bound to be some meandering anyway). This helps to organize the purely technical work rationally and if at times, when trying to solve particularly difficult virtuoso problems, that work prevails, it will still not lead the pianist down a mistaken path, but will be precisely that stage which enables him to reach his goal. Here I must again recall Tausig's method: the temporary exclusion of all expression and artistic quality of performance; a method I frequently use. But I do so when working on compositions that I have already played, already used, that have been verified artistically and musically accomplished. Before the composition is allowed to see the light of day (or rather the lights of the concert platform) I play it many times at home, by myself, in the same way in which I would play it for an audience. (True this is not the aim I set myself, but as I get carried away by the composition, I "perform" it for myself and for others though these others are not present.) It is obvious that works that have been played in public frequently are the ones that least require this treatment; in their case the "dry" workmanlike playing through of the composition is more suitable.

But, in general, one may say that both the method recommended by Hofmann and the emergency method and many others too are good and proper according to the circumstances. Personally I have more faith in the method of Hofmann, or a similar method, but I, too, have had occasion to prepare a recital by the emergency method. For instance, I had to play the Second Sonata by Szymanowski at a concert of his works in Vienna in 1913 exactly nineteen days

after receiving the music and I played it quite well though this composer is very difficult and complex.

It may perhaps be worth while relating an instance which I consider interesting since it was the most intensive and strenuous work I have had to do in all my life.

When I was seventeen to eighteen (this was in summer in the lovely village of Manuilovka, in the region of Poltava which subsequently became famous because Gorky used to go there frequently for a rest) I tackled for the first time that most difficult of Beethoven sonatas, op. 106 (the "Hammerklavier") with fugue. I tackled it with enthusiasm, and thought of it constantly away from the piano, when walking, bathing, dining.

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On going to bed I used to put the music on the chair near a candle (there was no electricity in Manuilovka then) and read it until I fell asleep. I dreamt of it in my sleep and it sometimes happened that in my dream I would get "stuck" in the fugue and couldn't remember how it went on. Apparently this worried me so much that I would wake up, light the candle, take the music and start reading the fugue from the place where I had got stuck. Then I would fall asleep again. This happened more than once. As a result of this kind of "work" I learnt the whole sonata from memory in exactly six days and for that kind of composition this is really a very short time. Sometimes I took much longer to learn much easier pieces because I did not have that tremendous will, I was not "possessed" as I had been when learning the "Hammerklavier". (The reason I was so possessed is clear; I knew beforehand that this is one of the greatest and most difficult of Beethoven's works; so naturally there was the challenge: "let's see if you can cope with such a task!".)

This factual example shows the tremendous importance of intensive will-power, passion, determination to forge ahead in order to reach the goal one has set oneself. (I forgot to say that during those six days I did nothing else, I did not even read a book.) This experience brought me to a strange conclusion, namely that in addition to the four ways of learning a piece recommended by Hofmann (the first, to learn a piece at the piano, with the music; the second, at the piano without the music; the third, with the music but without the piano; and the fourth, without the piano and without the music, i.e. walking in town or in a wood and just thinking the composition through) there is yet a fifth way, to learn a piece in one's sleep. This is not the product of a feverish brain; it is the truth. I need hardly say that subsequently, before every performance of this sonata, I studied it again and again and only rarely did I manage to play it as I would have liked. Busoni used to say that life was too short to learn Op. 106, which is perhaps why he played it as no one else.

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The example of Godowsky is memorable for me. I sometimes happened to be at his home when he was preparing for a recital. Pieces that he had played dozens and perhaps hundreds of times he would again and again check against the score, he compared the different versions of various editions (of Chopin alone he had seventeen editions at the time!); in other words in the shortest

possible time he again went through the work he had done long ago. An example of artistic honesty worthy of being followed.

Zadora, a well-known pupil of Busoni, told me that on the day of a recital Busoni frequently played his whole programme from beginning to end slowly and without "expression" which is what Tausig used to do after a recital (but as a matter of fact he probably did it before the recital too). It is very important to save one's emotional energy on the day of a recital, to say nothing of the usefulness of playing the work through carefully, accurately and attentively (only with the fingers and with the help of cold reason). I know this from bitter experience. Once when I was due to play in the evening (for the first time) the Twenty-four Preludes of Debussy, I began rehearsing them in the morning on a concert grand. The piano was good, I got carried away and instead of doing "cold" work, I played the whole programme with excitement, completely involved spiritually and emotionally and derived tremendous pleasure. In the evening I played twice as badly as I should have and could have done. Of course, the reverse can also happen, but such cases are exceptions and not the rule.

I think that a typical great virtuoso pianist who has from childhood or youth been accustomed to the concert platform, who has devoted his whole life to it exclusively, and achieved perfection and consequently great fame, could write much better and more convincingly than I about concert work and its requirements. To name but a few of our contemporaries: Giesecking, Horowitz, Artur Schnabel, Casadesu, Petri, Claudio Arrau, and others; and of the younger generation: Gilels, Richter, Benediti Michelangeli, Gulda.

It occurs to me that it would be very interesting for young pianists to have more detailed information about the way in which prominent pianists prepare for recitals and about their concert work in general. A musical journal (why not our *Sovetskaya Muzyka*?) could send a brief questionnaire on the subject to our own and to foreign pianists.

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I imagine that many great pianists might wave it aside with a joke or some brief aphorism. But there would probably be some who would reply seriously and in detail. After all, we do publish a series of books in which painters write about themselves and which are extremely interesting. Why not have some about pianists? I think that all professionals and lovers of the piano would be most interested in such books.

The trouble is that the very great virtuosi who are constantly engaged in playing at home or on tours, and now also in making records, hardly ever write or tell anything of the behind-the-scenes aspect of their work which is of such interest to young pianists; the fact that they do not write is due not only to a lack of time but also, apparently, to the "sound commonsense" reason that the whole of their performing work speaks for itself so convincingly that it needs no comment and anyone with the least bit of intelligence, especially a professional, can draw his own conclusions.

My own "concert biography" is rather an example of an argument to the contrary than an example to be followed. After finishing the *Meisterklasse* of the Vienna Musical Academy with Godowsky, because of war conditions (the First World War had then broken out), I immediately plunged into the very thick of teaching work, and at the beginning had extremely poor pupils. Elizavetgrad,

Tiflis, Kiev, Moscow (in 1922)—this was the thorny path unsuitable for a concert pianist and one which I continue to tread even now that I am grey and wrinkled. I mention all this in order to warn young pianists who are sufficiently gifted to become concert pianists not to allow themselves to be prematurely submerged in teaching. Just as it is useful and even essential for a true teacher, so it is harmful for a true performer. [Nota 4](#) Of course, working with a few talented pupils ("homeopathic teaching") is useful and fruitful for any performer; it is only a question of quantity and selection.

The ideal would be for a great concert pianist not to begin teaching before he is forty or forty-five years old. He himself would then be happy and his public would be grateful to him.

Notas de Rodapé

Nota 1 For the sake of accuracy, however, I must say that in the last few years cases of amnesia during auditions and examinations have become more frequent even among good pupils; I attribute these cases solely to the excessive work-load and fatigue during examination periods. I once had an excellent pupil who did not once play in public without forgetting and losing her place. The reason was that she was absolutely overworked and was in a constant state of fatigue. [Voltar Nota 1](#)

Nota 2 Here is a small example: One morning I had to adjudicate at a conservatoire competition in which nine pianists played nine sonatas by Soviet composers, after which, of course, I had to discuss their performance at length, and in the evening I played a most difficult Scriabin programme which included, *inter alia*, the Sixth, Eighth and Tenth Sonatas. From the point of view of concert discipline this is a crime. [Voltar Nota 2](#)

Nota 3 An imaginary poet, reputed for his aphorisms, invented by Count A. Tolstoy and the brothers Zhemchuzhnikov, ed. [Voltar Nota 3](#)

Nota 4 I remember that Szigeti, the violinist, once asked me how many pupils I had and when I told him "about thirty" he cried out, aghast, "But this is suicide!". [Voltar Nota 4](#)