

Master of Distortion and Exaggeration

☞ IF ONE HAD never heard before the works Vladimir Horowitz played last night in Carnegie Hall, or known others by the same authors, one might easily have been convinced that Sebastian Bach was a musician of the Leopold Stokowski type, that Brahms was a sort of flippant Gershwin who had worked in a high-class nightclub, and that Chopin was a gypsy violinist. One might very well conclude also that Liszt's greatest musical pleasure was to write vehicles for just such pianists as Vladimir Horowitz. The last supposition would be correct. Liszt was that kind of pianist himself, and he turned out concert paraphrases of anything and everything from the *Faust* waltzes to Palestrina motets. Whether he was quite the master of musical distortion that Horowitz is, history does not record; but I think there is little doubt possible that a kinship of spirit exists between the two pianists. One has only to hear Horowitz play Liszt's music to recognize that.

Do not think, please, that my use of the word *distortion* implies that Mr. Horowitz's interpretations are wholly false and reprehensible. Sometimes they are and sometimes they are not. His Bach is no worse, and no better than Stokowski's, on which I take it to be modeled. His Brahms may be less light-minded on other occasions than it was last night. His Chopin varied a good deal during the evening. The B-flat minor Sonata was violent, coarsely conceived, melodramatic. He made its Funeral March sound like a Russian boat song by accenting all the offbeats of the bass, and he turned its serene middle section into the most affected of nocturnes. His Etudes, however, were recognizable and, of course, quite brilliant, as they should be; and the A-flat Waltz (an encore) was as normal as his Liszt.

Supernormal would be a better word for the way he renders the works of the great Hungarian Romantic. He seems to have a perfectly clear understanding of what they are about and a thorough respect for them. He exaggerates when exaggeration is of the essence, but he never tampers with their linear continuity. He makes all the right effects, and he makes them in the right places. The only distortion is one of aggrandizement. He plays the Liszt pieces faster and louder and more accurately than anybody else ever plays them. Sometimes he plays the music of other composers that way too, and the effect is more tremendous than pleasant. In Liszt it is both tremendous and pleasant, because Liszt's music was written for that kind of playing and because Mr. Horowitz really loves and understands that kind of music. It is the only kind that he approaches without fidgeting, and last night it was the only kind the audience didn't cough through.

If I speak chiefly of interpretation, it is not that I am wanting in admiration of Mr. Horowitz's justly acclaimed technical powers. But these

powers are exploited by a violent and powerful personality that is, after all, a part of his virtuoso equipment. Paderewski had and Artur Schnabel has a strength of crescendo comparable. E. Robert Schmitz has an equal cleanness of articulation and a more even trill. Josef Lhevinne's octaves and general marksmanship are at least as good. And almost any of the more poetic virtuosos, Rudolf Serkin or Robert Casadesu, for example, has a lovelier tone. But none of these pianists is so free from respect for the composer's intentions, as these are currently understood. Horowitz pays no attention to such academic considerations. He is out to wow the public, and wow it he does. He makes a false accent or phrasing anywhere he thinks it will attract attention, and every brilliant or rapid passage is executed with a huge crescendo or with a die-away effect. It is all rather fun and interesting to students of what I like to call the wowing technique. It is a great deal more than that, however, when he gets into his own arrangement of Liszt's arrangement for one piano of Saint-Saëns's arrangement for two pianos of the latter's orchestral version of his own song called *Danse Macabre*. His rendition of that number is in every way the berries.

MARCH 7, 1942

The Gluck Case

☞ THE Juilliard School used to give modern operas. They did but they don't anymore, as the ditty hath it. Their latest production was Gluck's *Iphigenia in Tauris*, a work which sometimes passes in the modern world for the most classic of musical classics, but which in its own day was considered a triumph of novelty and of fashion. I have no quarrel with a pedagogical policy that eschews today's modernism in favor of that of a century and a half back. I am all for bringing up the young on the ancient models of things, even though this may imply glorification of the Agamemnon family. The young take more things in their stride than we do maybe, anyway, including what Mr. John Peale Bishop once rhymed so prettily as "Iphigenia's incestuous desires." The purpose of this article is not to correct anybody's morals but to offer a warning to whom it may concern that Gluck's operas are not quite such model matter for musical imitation as their historical prestige might suggest.

That prestige is as much a result of publicity as it is of intrinsic musical excellence, though the latter, as anyone knows, is not wanting. Gluck had a gift from his prodigious early years of making himself a center of controversy and of intellectual excitement. He perfected this gift in Italy, where he learned, as well, a great deal about sheer theater and became a skilled harmonist and orchestrator. Counterpoint he never mastered, but he got to be extremely expert at musical declamation. Arriving in Paris with this far-from-negligible equipment for dramatic composition, he