

Moriz Rosenthal in Word and Music: A Legacy of the Nineteenth Century

Edited and with an introduction by Mark Mitchell and Allan Evans. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. xx, 184 pp. ISBN 0-253-34660-6.

As one of the foremost representatives of the so-called "golden age" of pianism, Moriz Rosenthal (1862-1946) earned esteem as much for his intellectual erudition and rapier wit as for the virtuosity and sensitivity of his playing. Born in what was then Poland, Rosenthal pursued studies with Chopin's pupil Karol Mikuli, then with Liszt's pupil Rafael Joseffy, and finally with Liszt himself at Weimar. He divided his performing career between Europe and the United States, but did not settle in this country until 1938, after which Rosenthal and his wife Hedwig Kanner devoted much time to teaching; their best-known pupil is Charles Rosen. (The book's preface contains Rosen's vivid personal recollections of Rosenthal.)

Until now there has been no single or substantial source of information concerning Rosenthal's background and career or his attitudes toward music and piano playing. The present volume attempts to gather a selection of his more important writings, supplemented by additional material. Much appears in print, or in English translation, for the first time. Of the book's 31 chapters, 18 are devoted to Rosenthal's own words while the remaining 13 contain reviews and observations by various others, among them Eduard Hanslick, James Gibbons Huneker, and Kaikhosru Sorabji. (Disclosure: a copy of the original text of Rosenthal's "Mahleriana" chapter was furnished by the undersigned to co-editor Allan Evans in 2001 at his request.)

Of prime interest is Rosenthal's unpublished autobiography, which unfortunately covers only the first 14 years of his life. Later portions of the book offer the pianist's descriptions of his encounters with such notables as Anton Rubinstein, Johannes Brahms, Johann Strauss II, Gustav Mahler, and Ferruccio Busoni. Rosenthal's keen eye and ear for their individual peculiarities make these chapters particularly valuable. One of Rosenthal's own less-endearing qualities was his extreme sensitivity to criticism. Included is a caustic letter he sent to a critic who gave him a negative review, as well as the critic's published response to Rosenthal's letter.

In 1922, Rosenthal became embroiled in an especially acrimonious situation that reflected Viennese musico-political intrigue at its zenith. Among the other players were critic Julius Korngold and his son, composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold, then in his mid-20s. The dispute had been festering for a number of years and involved the elder Korngold's shameless promotion of his son's music. The present volume confines the matter to a single attack on Julius Korngold in a Viennese newspaper, incorporating a sworn statement from Rosenthal. Unfortunately the co-editors have failed to provide the full context of the scandal, which reveals considerably more detail, not all of it flattering to Rosenthal. This information is readily available in Brendan G. Carroll's *The Last Prodigy: A Biography of Erich Wolfgang Korngold* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1997; pp.72-75 and 150).

A four-page chronology gives the reader further biographical data on Rosenthal, but it is not supported by any specific references or documentation of sources. Some entries are questionable: in 1888, for example, Rosenthal is said to have played in New York on November 13, "during the Great Blizzard". Unfortunately it is an established fact that the Great Blizzard occurred

between March 11 and 14 of that year. In general, source citations are hit-or-miss throughout the book, and the lack of a bibliography is a further liability. (Even the subject of the book is denied any listing of his published articles.) Endnotes for all chapters are gathered at the rear of the volume, and these provide, among other things, identifications of most of the names mentioned in the text. Here we find fellow pianists such as Josef Hofmann, Ignace Jan Paderewski, and Artur Schnabel, although it is difficult to imagine any reader of the book who is unfamiliar with these individuals. In many cases, however, more pertinent information is conspicuously missing, such as the source for co-editor Mark Mitchell's quote of Georg Schneevoigt's significant comment about a Rosenthal concerto program (p.134), or any proof that Julius Epstein was indeed "the pianistic idol of both Anton Rubinstein and Leschetizky" (p.162, note 39). Page 42 contains a passage from part of Lilli Lehmann's autobiography where she mentions someone named "van Dyck." But no endnote is attached, and there is no reference to "van Dyck" in the index. We could have been informed that the person in question is Ernest van Dyck (1861-1923), a Belgian tenor who earned much success at Bayreuth and Vienna. Finally, neither the section devoted to Rosenthal's witty aphorisms nor the one called "Rosenthal as Humorist" contains any citations for the origin of the material included (nor is there an explanation for their omission).

As if to compensate for such lacunae, the endnotes contain an excessive amount of irrelevant or misleading trivia. What, for instance, is the point of including Aubrey Beardsley's comment about pianist Sophie Menter (p.162, note 27)? On p.36, Rosenthal mentions a pupil of Liszt performing in Vienna's Bösendorfersaal. We are then referred to p.163, note 52, which supplies abundant trivia about the hall's history but with no connection to Rosenthal. On p.31, Rosenthal's passing reference to Louis Plaidy's technical exercises prompts a lengthy digression (p.163, note 40) that quotes one John Francis Barnett's opinion of those exercises. And on p.105, where Rosenthal describes his shortened version of the Brahms-Paganini Variations, a note follows (p.171, note 3) informing us that the late Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli did something similar, and implying that this practice was rare. In fact, any number of pianists have abridged and/or altered the sequence of these variations. Among them was Paderewski, who actively did so during Rosenthal's career as well as during Brahms's lifetime.

A section labeled "Annotated Concertography", prepared by co-editor Mark Mitchell, turns out to be nothing of the kind. Instead it is an alphabetical list of Rosenthal's repertoire, derived from "programs and reviews from more than one thousand of his concerts" ostensibly examined by Mitchell. Here is another missed opportunity: where we might reasonably expect to find some representative examples of Rosenthal's program-building over the years, especially his series of "historical" recitals mentioned several times elsewhere (p. xv, xix, and xx), the book reproduces only a single program from 1928.

Yet another aspect of Rosenthal's activity which the co-editors seem to have overlooked is the series of nearly 50 Liszt piano works that he edited in the 1920s for the Berlin publisher Ullstein. The complete absence of any mention of, or commentary upon, this undertaking by a major Liszt pupil is indefensible. In addition, Rosenthal composed a small number of well-crafted piano works, both original pieces and paraphrases. Although the titles of these are buried within Mitchell's "Concertography", the book contains no significant description of their style or their distinctive pianistic traits (other than brief generalities from two contemporaneous critics).

Rosenthal did not make any disc recordings until 1927. From then until 1942 he recorded fairly steadily for a variety of labels. Co-editor Evans supplies a discography arranged alphabetically by composer; it is more comprehensive than anything previously published. Unfortunately it is marred by a number of problems. First of all, the absence of any explanatory preface will cause many readers confusion concerning matrix and issue numbers, both of which are included but not identified as such. Some items are described as "unissued" while others are "unreleased"; if there is a distinction meant, I have yet to discover it. Separate takes of the same recording are generally specified, but it is not made clear which have survived and which were destroyed, a basic element of any discography. Some CD reissues of the original 78s are listed in part, while others are omitted entirely. Again, this is profoundly unhelpful to those in search of Rosenthal's recordings. Furthermore, the book provides no description or evaluation of the relative merits of Rosenthal's discs. Yet another irritant is the lack of any details of Rosenthal's Ampico reproducing piano rolls; he made at least a dozen that appeared between 1924 and 1930. Although rolls are notoriously unreliable documents, it serves no purpose to pretend they do not exist.

Accompanying the book is a CD of selected Rosenthal recordings, produced and transferred by Evans. Collectors will be especially interested in one item: a hitherto unpublished portion of the Largo movement of Chopin's Sonata in B Minor, op.58, from a 1935 BBC broadcast. Rosenthal's playing here has a haunting introspection and poetry. His later complete recording of the sonata (not released during his lifetime but subsequently available on LP and CD) is also included, but this was not a wise choice; it finds Rosenthal considerably past his prime, with his technical command only a shadow of what it once was. Of the CD's 17 tracks, 12 are devoted to Chopin, the others to Schubert, Albéniz, two Liszt transcriptions, and Rosenthal's own spectacular 1931 paraphrase of Johann Strauss's Blue Danube.

In summary, since there is little likelihood any other publications about Rosenthal will appear soon, this well-intentioned volume, with all its deficiencies, will have to suffice. *Moriz Rosenthal in Word and Music* does, however, contain enough unique material to definitely merit investigation by anyone interested in earlier schools and traditions of pianism.

- Donald Manildi

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