

Josef Hofmann: The Piano's Forgotten Giant. By Elizabeth Carr. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023. xv, 239 p. ISBN 9781538183403 (cloth); 9781538183410 (ebook). \$95.00. Index, bibliography.

This seriously flawed book is the first English-language treatment of the life and career of one of the most esteemed pianists of the 20th century. Hofmann (1876-1957), born near Crakow, studied initially with his father and then with Moritz Moszkowski. He later became the only private pupil of Russia's Anton Rubinstein. He began playing in public at the age of six, and made his American debut at ten. He quickly attracted attention as a child prodigy of extraordinary ability, but withdrew from the concert platform in 1888. Hofmann returned as a mature artist in 1894 and, after frequent international touring, eventually settled in the US. During the early decades of the 20th century, Hofmann ranked with Sergei Rachmaninoff and Ignace Jan Paderewski for pianistic supremacy in the eyes of audiences and critics, although such other eminent figures as Leopold Godowsky, Moriz Rosenthal, Ignaz Friedman and Josef Lhevinne had their avid followers.

Hofmann pursued various musical and non-musical paths during this time. He composed a substantial body of music for the piano (most of which was published), and between 1927 and 1938 served as Director of the newly-founded Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia--where he was responsible for a number of innovative ideas in music education. During his free time Hofmann enjoyed tinkering in his workshop and became noted for various patented inventions dealing with automotive mechanics (including windshield wipers and air suspension) as well as piano tone and action. Hofmann continued concertizing for a decade after his departure from Curtis, but his late years were plagued by alcoholism and a host of personal difficulties. He then retired to southern California and became a virtual recluse.

Author Elizabeth Carr, a Massachusetts piano teacher and administrator, establishes as her premise that Hofmann has been somehow "forgotten." This may have been true briefly during the 1950s, but the available evidence says otherwise. In fact, the published attention to Hofmann over the past fifty years or so (largely generated through the discovery and reissue of his recordings) has been remarkable. *New York Times* critic Harold C. Schonberg, in his *The Great Pianists* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963; revised edition, 1987) led the way to a great extent, while essays or reviews by other scholars of pianism like Jan Holcman, Rafael Kammerer, Harry L. Anderson, Frank Cooper, Gregor Benko, Ezra Rachlin, Charles Hopkins, and Peter Rabinowitz--not to mention Hofmann's pupil Abram Chasins--have substantially raised our awareness of Hofmann's stature in recent times. Carr, for her part, seems familiar with only a small portion of these post-1963 sources. Furthermore, the legacies of most of the "golden age" pianists of the early 20th century (i.e., Hofmann's contemporaries) have likewise become much more highly visible than previously.

Carr's book covers Hofmann's life and musical pursuits in 16 chapters. Several are devoted to specific aspects in greater detail, such as his teaching, administrative work,

composing, and recording activity. These are interspersed with an ongoing chronicle of his private life as well as his public career and its reception. The author has drawn upon archival Hofmann material at the Curtis Institute and from his long association with Steinway & Sons, while acknowledging the current inaccessibility of the contents of Hofmann's estate. She does make considerable use of a 1965 book describing Hofmann's life during his marriage (1905-1927) to his first wife: *The Amazing Marriage of Marie Eustis and Josef Hofmann* by Nell S. Graydon and Margaret D. Sizemore (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press).

The author's chronicle, however, also relies on a great many tedious, verbatim, and often repetitious newspaper accounts, not all of which are properly sourced. In fact, the book overall reveals an alarmingly casual handling of documentation, with many sources (over 40 by my count) either incomplete, error-ridden, or missing entirely. The text also abounds in misspellings and assorted typos (one of which--p.155--involves Hofmann's own name!). In addition, there are important missing elements from a purely biographical standpoint. As but one major example, the initial years of Hofmann's return to the stage (c.1895 to 1907) demand thorough treatment, but are allotted only one page.

Any 21st-century perspective on Hofmann as pianist must of necessity be based on his surviving recordings. This sonic documentation warrants a comprehensive, detailed study--which Carr's book fails to provide, despite her claim of "intensive listening" (p.xi). The Hofmann recordings on cylinders and discs extend from as early as 1895 to 1948. (This does not include his unreliable reproducing piano rolls.) They represent nearly 18 hours of playing time, encompassing 82 works by 23 composers. Hofmann's "official" commercially issued discs, however, comprise only a portion of the total. After 1923 he refused the release, with one exception, of any further recordings--a decision partly due to his serious misgivings about the recording process. But since Hofmann's death, many significant additional concert and recital performances, some being of broadcast origin, have come to light through fortuitous circumstances. The totality of his recordings has been--and remains--readily available in CD format on the VAI and Marston labels: 16 CDs in nine volumes. All have been superbly remastered from the original sources. Carr, to her discredit, fails to provide even a semblance of a discography, let alone a serious discussion of Hofmann's pianism from the abundant available evidence. Her cursory eight-page chapter on the recordings devotes much space to a capsule history of early recording techniques, and to the pianist's various affiliations with G&T, American Columbia, and Brunswick. The result is a major missed opportunity, especially in light of the multiple, contrasting Hofmann versions of several major works such as Beethoven's G Major Concerto and Anton Rubinstein's Concerto No.4. When Carr does attempt a rare venture into a description of Hofmann's playing (as on p.147-8), she makes the incorrect assertion that "Hofmann remained always faithful to the composer's score while he showcased details that other pianists chose to ignore. Rarely did he alter any text..." This bald statement can be immediately contradicted by examining his live performances, starting with the Chopin Ballade in F Minor from his 1938 Philadelphia recital. Furthermore, this contradicts Carr's own earlier

claim (p.47): "Comments were also made as to the increasing liberties he was taking in performance."

With regard to Hofmann's extensive activity as a composer, which spanned nearly 40 years, Carr's chapter is woefully inadequate. Hofmann published nearly 70 solo piano works. All are examined in full detail by Stephen Husarik in a 1983 doctoral dissertation for the University of Iowa, which Carr shows no sign of having consulted (although, curiously, she includes it in her bibliography). Had she done so, a thorough list of works, at the very least, could have been provided to her readers. While Hofmann did not have major ambitions as a composer, his best piano works deserve proper recognition. Such pieces as *Kaleidoskop*, *Nenien*, and *The Sanctuary*, among others, display a remarkable level of inventiveness and pianistic craftsmanship. None of these is discussed by the author. And despite the availability of excellent recordings (by various players) of a representative sampling of Hofmann's output, Carr is apparently unaware of them. Instead she confines most of the chapter to a lengthy account of how, for a period of time, Hofmann used the *nom de plume* of Michel Dvorsky for several of his compositions. Carr singles out Hofmann's *Chromaticon* for piano and orchestra for special mention, but erroneously attributes it to Dvorsky's name, then falsely claims that it was published, and summarily dismisses it.

The chapter on Hofmann's teaching deals principally with his work at the Curtis Institute. Carr emphasizes her personal friendship with two of Hofmann's pupils there during the 1930s-- Shura Cherkassky and William Harms, even claiming "precious insights" obtained from the latter. Therefore it is a major disappointment to find little specificity about what their lessons with Hofmann were like. However, a wide-ranging source of Hofmann's views on pianism and interpretation can be found in his *Piano Playing With Piano Questions Answered* (Philadelphia: Theodore Presser, 1920; reprint, New York: Dover, 1976). This volume, still in print, is a familiar item to most Hofmann devotees. Carr draws upon it for a considerable portion of this chapter. She also uses an indordinate amount of space on elementary pedagogical issues that have little bearing on Hofmann's philosophy of teaching advanced talents. One major statement cannot stand uncorrected. Carr asserts that "prior to his association with the Curtis Institute, Hofmann had no experience teaching piano." Decades earlier, Hofmann had taught one of the great prodigies, a Polish girl named Paul Szalit. Carr is also unaware of surviving accounts of his early teaching from the Russian pianist Maria Barinova, who worked with Hofmann as well as Ferruccio Busoni.

The chapter dealing with Curtis also misses a major opportunity to examine Hofmann's relationships with major musical personalities of the day. One example is Carr's quote (p.107) of a letter from Hofmann to Curtis's patron Mary Curtis Bok, suggesting that conductor Leopold Stokowski be fired from the faculty. But there is not a word about the fact that the two men had been, until then, the closest of friends and champions of each other's work, nor any reason given or speculated upon as to why the friendship ended. Similarly, a full page (p.106) is devoted to a trivial early Hofmann encounter with fellow pianist Moriz Rosenthal, who Hofmann later invited

to join the faculty at Curtis. But Rosenthal departed after two years (as did several other eminent faculty), for which Carr offers no explanation.

The book contains eight pages of photographs or reproductions of various documents. One of the most interesting is the listing (plate 5) of the 255 compositions Hofmann played at a series of recitals in St. Petersburg in 1912-13. Unfortunately it is useless because it has been drastically reduced to illegibility. Surely greater space could have been found for it. For that matter it would have been fascinating and informative to offer typical examples of Hofmann's program-building over the years, about which Hofmann had definite views. We are given none.

Although this biography does disclose occasional new details about Hofmann, and sketches his life to a certain degree, the result hardly justifies the author's claim that it provides "thoroughly traced and documented" treatment (p.xii) of its subject. We are given a great deal of reportage, but very little probing into the very real complexities of Hofmann's personality. The absence of so much essential material, and the profusion of errors, require that the book be read with extreme caution. Moreover, there are few if any signs of proofreading or editorial assistance. Was this perhaps a self-financed publication? Finally, the suggested retail price of \$95.00 is beyond exorbitant.

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