

Vladimir Horowitz: 'If you don't have colour, you don't have anything'

What is the Russian School?

The young Russian pianist Rustem Hairutdinoff sets out to discover the ideals at the root of one of the world's greatest pianistic traditions

A great deal of confusion currently surrounds the term 'the Russian pianistic tradition'. This phrase has been superficially applied to any successful pianist coming out of Russia - often conjuring up images of fire-eating virtuosi scooping up competition prizes. And very often musicians with aesthetic principles as different as those of, for example, Sergei Rachmaninov and Sviatoslav Richter are mentioned in the same breath as being representatives of the 'great Russian school'. To discover the true meaning of this term, I have been searching for some common features in the pianistic principles of several performers who belonged to this tradition.

Even the most superficial acquaintance with the recording legacy of, to name but a few, Sergei Rachmaninov, Josef Lhévinne, Josef Hofmann and Vladimir Horowitz reveals that all of these

pianists possessed an exquisitely beautiful sound. Their incredible achievements in this area were due to a very conscious cultivation of singing tone and colour on the piano, as the following quotations illustrate.

Josef Lhévinne dedicated a long chapter of his *Basic Principles in Pianoforte Playing* to 'the secret of a beautiful tone', in which he explains how a 'ringing, singing' tone is to be achieved:

'The main principle at the first is to see that the key is touched with as resilient a portion of the finger as possible, if a lovely, ringing, singing tone is desired... Just a little further back in the first joint of the finger, you will notice that the cushion of flesh is apparently more elastic, less resistant, more springy. Strike the key with this portion of the finger, not on the fingertips as some of the older European methods suggested...' He also emphasises the part that the wrist plays in the production of a good tone: '...when the hand descends, as large a surface of the fingertip as feasible engages the key; and the wrist is so loose that it normally sinks below the level of the keyboard.'

This last passage holds particular interest because it testifies to the fact that Horowitz's famous flat-fingered technique was not a mere oddity, a weird invention of his own, but an integral part of this same tradition which he took to its limits in the pursuit of his ideal of singing tone.

COLOUR, COLOUR, COLOUR

Rachmaninov was also primarily concerned with sound and colour. Gina Bachauer thus summarised her studies with him: 'Studying with Rachmaninov was one of the greatest experiences of my life... He was really one of the great specialists in tone, in colour. For him the sound he was producing was the greatest, most important thing. Technique and so on took a second place. The first place was colour, colour, colour.'

This is very similar to Horowitz's words on the nature of technique:

'...but I have no phenomenal technique. There is that technique, the ability to play scales rapidly up and down the keyboard, which is necessary, but which becomes very boring after two or three minutes of listening... That instrument is capable of sounds which are loud or soft; but in between there are many, many degrees of sound which may be played. To be able to produce many varieties of sound, now that is what I call technique, and that is what I try to do.'

One way in which such a variety of colours could be produced was through a very special 'artistic' use of the pedal. Anton Rubinstein's most famous pupil, Josef Hofmann, dedicated a section of his book *Piano Playing* to this fascinating subject.

'...there are in many pieces moments where a blending of tones, seemingly foreign to one another, is a means of characterisation... In this connection it should be remembered that the pedal is not merely a means of tone prolongation but also a means of colouring - and preeminently that. What is generally understood by the term piano-charm is to [a] great extent produced by an artistic use of the pedal... At times we can produce strange, glasslike effects by purposely mixing non-harmonic tones. I only need to hint at some of the fine, embroidery-like cadenzas in



Sergei Rachmaninov: 'The art of Anton Rubinstein conquered my imagination'

Concerto (Andante, measures 101, 102 and 103). Such blendings are productive of a multitude of effects, especially when we add the agency of dynamic gradation...'

Horowitz, whose exquisite pedalling was deeply admired by many of his colleagues, spent much time on it with his pupils. According to Eduardus Halim, he 'had no hesitation blending several harmonies at the same time. It was a beautiful effect... Harmonies seemed suspended in the air, helped by the slight harmonic clash when the harmonies were pedalled through...'

Another way of producing colouristic effects on the piano was the most extraordinary ability to differentiate the musical texture, to split it into different colouristic and dynamic layers. This was achieved by combining a very deep, penetrating and projecting sound with a more superficial touch and was especially effective when inner voices were exploited. A combination of two or more contrapuntal lines could result in an amazing 'three-dimensional' sonority, where one line could be heard very closely while the others would sound distant. All the melodic lines would be clearly heard simultaneously, phrased against each other with complete independence and freedom.

Obviously Rachmaninov had this magical effect very much in mind when composing his piano music and, along with Horowitz, he was undoubtedly the greatest exponent of this art. It is sufficient to listen to his own rendering of his piano pieces - for example, the middle section of the famous G minor Prelude op 23 no 5, or, as suggested by Horowitz, 'If you want to get an idea of his (Rachmaninov's) sound, go to the second movement of his recording of his first piano concerto.'

Fortunately for us, Horowitz himself lived long enough to be recorded with advanced modern equipment, so there is no lack of evidence of the great colouristic effects he could produce on the instrument. When teaching, he instructed his students that 'the colourings of the left hand were of the greatest importance.' 'You must practise for colour,' he would say. 'Each colour you must

be able to get on each finger. When you are able to do that, when you have real colour in your playing, the interpretation cannot be artificial... With the colour, the register in your fingers, you can create an atmosphere without slowing down or speeding up.'

THE HUMAN VOICE

Clearly, the art of 'singing' on the piano cannot be reduced merely to the ability to produce a variety of beautiful sounds. The matter of unifying these sounds into a phrase is of paramount importance in achieving a singing quality.

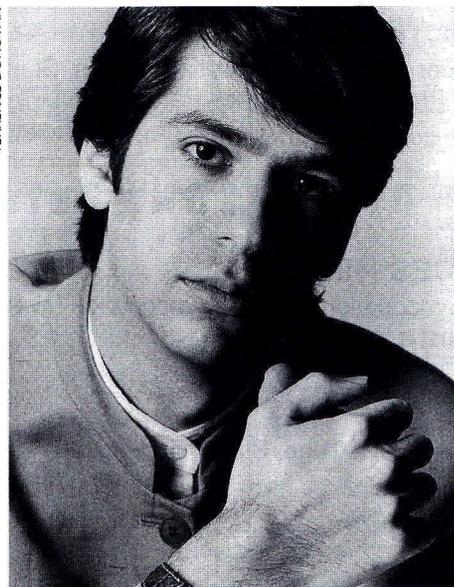
It is evident that the pianists discussed here admired and were influenced by one another. However, there was also a different, 'external' source of inspiration. Both Rachmaninov and Horowitz were strongly influenced in their phrasing by the great singers.

Rachmaninov, when addressing the Philadelphia Orchestra during a rehearsal of his *Symphonic Dances*, said, 'When I was a young man, I idolised Chaliapin. He was my ideal, and when I thought of composition I thought of song and Chaliapin.'

Horowitz also greatly admired Chaliapin. But the man whose art had an even greater impact on him was the Italian baritone Mattia Battistini. As a child, Horowitz was much more interested in opera and singers than piano playing and he later recalled:

'I was collecting records of singers, never of pianists. I was interested in Battistini and Caruso and on the piano I would try to imitate the singers. That is still true of me today. The most important thing on the keyboard is colour and singing. I would much rather go to the opera than to piano recitals. At piano recitals I was bored. They play good octaves, double notes, so what? They all sounded the same. If you don't have colour, you don't have anything. Anton Rubinstein, I later learned, told his pupils the same thing. Try to imitate the sound of the human voice, he kept saying.'

Indeed, the great Rubinstein used to say, 'Strength and lightness, that is the secret of my



Rustem Hairutdinoff

touch. I have sat for hours trying to imitate the timbre of Rubini's voice in my playing.'

In yet another interview, Horowitz explained, 'I never met Battistini, but I got every record of his I could find. He was the greatest of the *bel canto* baritones and very free in his style. He was always sliding from one note to another. I never heard a singer with such a portamento. I loved it. I try to do it on the piano. You can do it with the pedals. I do it all the time.'

CLINGING, SINGING

Horowitz called this 'legato pedalling': '... the most important thing is to make a percussive instrument a singing instrument... One way in which I obtain a singing quality is by using the damper pedal frequently; but you don't hear it. When, in changing from one chord to the next, the damper pedal remains depressed long enough so that there is an overlapping of the two harmonies for a moment, a singing quality, the result of the legato pedalling, is produced.'

This effect, however, did not substitute for a proper finger-legato, but rather added to it. The secret of the latter, in Horowitz's words, was 'to play briefly, very briefly, through the preceding note...' This instruction directly corresponds with Josef Hofmann's opinion on the subject. 'The most beautiful tone in legato style is ever produced by a "clinging and singing" gliding of the fingers over the keys... there should always be two fingers simultaneously occupied.' Not surprisingly, Josef Lhévinne dedicates a chapter of his *Basic Principles* to 'the basis of the beautiful legato', in which he also maintains that '...there is always a moment when there are two sounds'.

It is quite evident from these quotations that the pianists discussed here (it doesn't seem possible to discuss every representative of the Russian school in this article) had very similar views on such important issues as sound, colour, legato, phrasing, use of the pedal, etc. More often than not, these views differ significantly from the opinions and methods advocated by other performing traditions. Is it a mere coincidence that a few generations of pianists with totally different personalities shared the same principles and aspired to the same ideals in their interpretations?

THE ART OF ANTON RUBINSTEIN

There was one man whose art was the standard of measurement for these musicians. The name of Anton Rubinstein held a special magic for them all.

Josef Hofmann was fortunate enough to study with him and later wrote a chapter on 'How Rubinstein taught me to play'. Rachmaninov, although he did not take lessons from Rubinstein, heard him play in his famous Historical Concerts: '... the art of Rubinstein conquered my imagination and undoubtedly played a great role in my pianistic formation... I was listening, spellbound by the beauty of his sound, and could have listened endlessly. Pedalling was one of Rubinstein's secrets. He himself very aptly expressed his attitude towards it by saying, "Pedal is the soul of the piano". It would do a lot of good to all pianists to remember that.'

Josef Lhévinne also heard Rubinstein around the same time as Rachmaninov and from then on

held his unforgettable performances as a lifelong ideal of musicianship and pianism:

'He employed in principle the touch we have discussed... and his playing assumed a power and a grandeur I have never heard since his time, but to which I always aspire as my life ideal in my public performances.' Although Rubinstein died ten years before Horowitz was born, the latter grew up hearing his name spoken with reverence and was very eager to hear first-hand recollections of his performances.

'As a student I heard many accounts of his playing from those who studied with him or heard him in concert. Nobody who ever heard him could forget the experience... Paderewski once told me about the time he heard Rubinstein. It was in Paris, and Paderewski was 19 years old. Rubinstein at that time was getting old and sick and he had bad eye trouble, glaucoma... He played the F sharp minor Sonata of Schumann. Paderewski said that the first movement was terrible. Rubinstein lost control. But when he came to the second movement with the long melody Paderewski told me, "I never in my life heard such a singing piano. He impressed me more than any pianist I ever heard."'

PROUD TRADITION

Horowitz liked to refer to himself as 'a spiritual grandson of Rubinstein' because, as he explained, 'I studied with Felix Blumenfeld, who had stud-

ied piano with Anton Rubinstein and composition with Tchaikovsky. Felix, my professor, was the right hand of Anton Rubinstein. Blumenfeld knew his playing by heart from every angle.' Horowitz was very proud to belong to the tradition founded by Rubinstein: 'In Russia I recognised my Russian heritage. I am a Russian pianist, born in the Ukraine and a student at the Kiev Conservatory there. Thus I like to think that my playing and my musicianship reflects a Russian tradition. Once a critic in America said that my playing, my style was in the Anton Rubinstein tradition. I think he was correct. Josef Hofmann, the most famous of the Rubinstein pupils, heard me play one of the Liszt *Petrarch Sonnets* and said to me, "You know, I think my teacher would have liked your pedalling."'

It is obvious from these quotations how profoundly Anton Rubinstein's art affected the development of the pianistic tradition in Russia. It was a driving force behind the ideals and aspirations of a few generations of musicians who measured themselves against the standards set by this great man. It is hardly a coincidence that they all admired in him those very qualities which became the hallmarks of their own performing styles.

Despite their strongly individual musical personalities, these great performers are unmistakably recognisable as representatives of the same tradition, known as the Russian Pianistic School. But has this tradition perished? Horowitz liked to refer to himself as 'the last

romantic'. It is obvious that in today's technological climate many young pianists feel the need to seek a more romantic form of musical expression - and sometimes do so by attempting to imitate great stage personalities such as Horowitz, but in the end aping only their mannerisms. We might do well to remember these words from Horowitz: 'Imitation is a caricature. Any imitation. Find out for yourself. There is an old Chinese proverb which says "Do not seek to follow in the master's footsteps; seek what he sought."'

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