

CZIFFRA  
"Realities"  
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Cziffra György

Piano  
Forte

THE night before the Hungarian revolution broke out in 1956 all Budapest acclaimed a young virtuoso who, a few months previously, had been awarded the Franz Liszt Prize, the greatest distinction that can be bestowed on a Hungarian pianist.

As György Cziffra's admirers were returning to their homes, their heads still full of Bartok's score, the first shots rang out. Soon Russian tanks crushed the rebellious capital, and the exodus began. In Vienna representatives of Western countries greeted the tragic, harassed flood of refugees, among them Cziffra, his wife and their thirteen-year-old child who arrived at a frontier post staggering after a twelve-hour walk.

No one recognized them, of course, but when, on November 17, the Brahmsaal of Vienna announced that a recital by the pianist Cziffra would replace the Tatrai Quartet, "detained" at Budapest, seats were at a premium. Next day the critics were unanimous—the concert had undoubtedly been a historic event.

Two weeks later Cziffra was in Paris, where, at one of the popular Colonne Orchestra Sunday concerts, he played Liszt's *Concerto in E Flat*, an overworked concert item. One critic called it a triumph. Another said he'd heard nothing like it since the recitals of the young Horowitz. A third said: "It's Liszt come back to life."

Now the story moves to the charming little square of the village of Montigny-lès-Cormeilles, near Paris, only a few miles from the factory chimneys of Argenteuil, where the music-lovers' idol lives the life of a country gentleman. It is the first really peaceful home the pianist has known.

His childhood had been far from peaceful, in fact. When he was only two, his father, Jyla, a cymbalon player with a gypsy orchestra, sat him down at the piano. At four, little György gave his first concert, or rather, the sort of circus turn to which infant prodigies are always subjected. The public would give a melody as a theme, and the child in his little embroidered suit would improvise on it, just as the infant Mozart had done two hundred years before.

Often the child's earnings were all that allowed the family to eat of an evening, for the father could find no more work and they

were very poor. The boy's renown grew; he appeared in fashionable salons; a famous pianist gave him lessons. At thirteen he gave his first real concert. At sixteen he left on a tour of Scandinavia.

World War II tore him away from his piano and sent him to an anti-aircraft battery, but afterward, he would practise ten hours a day to make up for lost time. The new government was not interested in him. Falling back on his gypsy heritage, he earned an unofficial livelihood by playing in cabarets catering to foreigners. By now he was thirty-six and had been little heard of outside Hungary. Then came that tragic and glorious day of October, 1956. . . .

Since then, storms of applause have accompanied Cziffra on his travels. In December, 1959, the packed Théâtre des Champs-Élysées cheered the timid, uneasy man in his full dress suit, which becomes him less well than corduroys and a turtle-neck sweater. Cziffra seemed tired but smiled pleasantly. He acknowledged the conductor and the orchestra, then started to leave. But the applause grew stormier and, finally, Cziffra acquiesced. He sat down at the piano and the fireworks began again. The audience demanded still more. Only after the third encore, and despite the public's protests, did he retreat.

Once in Montréal he had to leave the moment the concert was over so that, in their enthusiasm, the people in the hall would not miss their last trains. There were not enough beds in the city for all of them.

Another time, in London, his departure touched off a demonstration in the street, and stage hands have often had to carry his piano off the platform under a storm of derisive hissing.

In the crooked little streets of Montigny-lès-Cormeilles there are only echoes of his glory. The baker's boy about his deliveries hums a passage of Liszt or Tchaikowsky instead of the latest "pop" song. And when the radio broadcasts a Cziffra concert, all the windows of the village are open in homage to the neighbour "up there."



The Cziffras do not entertain. Their only servants are a cleaning woman and a gardener. They never go out in the evening, except for Gyorgy's concerts and when the local cinema is showing a detective film.

Cziffra practises in a little second-storey room, his eyes half closed, seated before the curiously carved piano which is the only one in the house. His lips move, repeating the notes that will spring from under his fingers. A microphone links him to the rest of the house, for no one enters his sanctuary while he is playing. Nothing can stop him but total exhaustion. Three or four hours later his hair will be damp with perspiration and he will be as groggy as an athlete after a race. But later in the evening he will begin again. Depending on his engagements he spends five, seven or ten hours a day at the piano.

For Cziffra senior, his son is his greatest pride, and he declares: "Some day he will play better than I do."

1970  
New Yorkban azt beszélt, hogy amerikai turnéra jön Párisból Ciffra György zongoraművész. Ciffra valaha az otthoni viszonyok miatt kénytelen volt egy budapesti bárban zongorázni. Nyugaton tüne-  
ményes karriert futott be, minden hangverseny zenei esemény. Az egykori bárzongoristára úgy vigyáznak, hogy az impresszáriója óriási összegre biztosította a kezét arra az esetre, ha valami baleset érné. Ellenőrizni nem tudtam, de a benn-  
fentesek mondják, hogy éppen most, a tervezett amerikai turné előtt duplájára emelték a biztosítást. A biztosító intézet csak külön kikötésekkel vállalta az emelést. Például nem vehet a kezébe kalapácsot, fűrész, ollót, konzervnyitót és még több hasonló más feltételhez ragaszkodott a biztosító. Egyik kikötés: egy-egy alkalommal 30 embernél többel nem foghat kezét; nehogy megerősítse magát. Szóval, ha Ciffra György Amerikába jön, elmarad a "shake hands".