

Kraus, Lili, pianist

1970

Texas Christian University

'A Cross and a Privilege'

By RAYMOND ERICSON

SOONER or later a conversation with Lili Kraus will take a theological turn. It is perfectly natural for her to speak of "the soul versus God, the soul versus oneself, the soul versus the cosmos." Religious terms extend to her discussion of music. "If you have truly moved an audience, it has been touched by grace. . . . Listening to Beethoven's music is sometimes to understand redemption. . . . A performer must expose himself to shame, and it is both a cross and a privilege."

This is only one aspect of the pianist who will open a series of three recitals devoted to Viennese music (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert) on Wednesday at the Hunter College Playhouse. She can be just as specific as she can be mystical, so that she will spend several minutes describing the "shock of an ambiguous note" in Schubert and analyze why there is a shock.

Miss Kraus, who neither looks her age (62) nor like a grandmother (she has seven grandchildren), is a truly international character. Born in Hungary, she studied there (with Bartók and Kodaly) and in Vienna (with Steuermann and Schnabel); she is a British citizen, travels on a New Zealand passport and

makes her home, when there's time, with a daughter and son-in-law in this country.

She survived three years in a Japanese concentration camp during World War II, but it did not change her affection for the Japanese people. At Texas Christian University, where she is artist-in-residence, she has a wonderful Japanese assistant whom I taught.

She is very like her playing, extremely vital, and her speech has a typical share of sforzandos for emphasis.

Artur Schnabel, her teacher and a great Beethoven interpreter, is quite naturally a frequent reference point in her conversation. "He was always uncomfortable onstage. I am perfectly comfortable because I love to play. It makes up for all the discomforts of traveling between engagements. . . . Schnabel never played the music of such composers as Liszt and Schoenberg in public, yet he could play it perfectly in the classes he was teaching."

Miss Kraus regards Americans as a super-race, principally because she "can't understand how they find their way on the highways." She says the students at her

university have a "terrific amount of talent" and she is constantly amazed at those who work so hard at learning to play the piano even though they do not intend to become professional musicians. However, she adds that most young pianists play the classics well and musical-ly but emptily. "The phonograph has provided an escape into a machine, where everyone wants to seem perfect but loses the compulsion to share."

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