

1972



Lili Kraus: To translate all the songs "would take too long, and besides, some of them are very naughty, and I do not have the courage, not yet, to translate them."

Busted Flat In College Park

By Paul Hume

What a way to begin a week-long festival and competition centering on the piano—to have the piano refuse to cooperate right in the middle of Bartok!

Lili Kraus was the star of yesterday's opening event at the University of Maryland where the piano is to be kingpin for a week. But the great hero of the afternoon was Ned Dobson, the wizard

piano technician whose skills saved the day when the recalcitrant Steinway grand on the Tawes Theater stage refused, right in the middle of the last of 15 Hungarian Peasant Songs and Dances by Bartok, to behave as any well-brought-up concert grand should.

As she was working mira-

Washington Post 1972 July 31.

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cles with Bartok's music, of which she is surely today's supreme sovereign, a look of puzzlement crossed Kraus' face. Not unmixed with humor, it spread as she slowly stopped playing, rose, leaned into the piano, fiddled around with one of the hammer-and-felt gadgets in the lower reaches of the damned thing and then turned to the 1,000 or so in the audience:

"What shall we do?" she asked. "It won't work. It's the B flat, and I can't play the end of the piece without it." Turning again to the piano, she jiggled the loose-flopping thingamajig up and down and then, with an inspired thought, asked, "Does anyone have a piece of paper? Or Kleenex? Kleenex would be fine, I hope." Up came the Kleenex, but it proved not to be the final answer.

By now one official of the competition was on the phone in search of a piano

technician, while another, with several helping hands, was down on the floor in the piano's crawspace.

By the time they had made sure the trouble was IN and not UNDER the piano, Stewart Gordon, whose superb dream these piano fests are, was onstage to say the technician was on his way and would be there in 10 to 12 minutes.

So it was, somewhat later, that Gordon came out again, with Lili Kraus, who is surely one of the world's most gracious and witty pianists, along with her well-established gifts of genius in the playing department, to say that she had consented to say something about the Schubert Sonata which she would play once the piano was fixed.

While she was talking beautifully, out came Dobson. Believe it or not, he is not even a Steinway man! He works on Baldwins. But out of the goodness of his heart he arrived, took out the offending innards, fixed



things up, put it all back together, and to one of the year's louder ovations, left the stage.

It is important to say that Maryland University does not own the Steinway, paid the customary rental for what should have been an excellent piano and got a lemon which was in poor condition before Kraus even walked onto the stage. Badly regulated, its tone was less than attractive. Steinway has some homework to do.

You would not have known it from the way Lili Kraus played, working to make a poor piano sound radiant in Mozart's variations on Gluck's "Unser dummer Poebel meint," his early B Flat Sonata, K. 282, the Bartok dances and two of the great works of Schubert: the first set of Impromptus, Op. 90, and the A Minor Sonata, Op. 42, one of the most difficult and problematic of all his piano compositions.

To the variations, Kraus brought the wit and humor

that sparked her comments on Bartok. The variations for crossed hands, with grace notes sparkled, and the one toward the end with its *cadenza* had all the flair of a great aria. The sonata, too, so much neglected, was filled with life and grace, its touching opening a dream, and its paired minuets sheer joy.

Lili Kraus and Bartok make something of a special category, though to say that should not imply that the same is not true of her Mozart and Schubert. Before the Bartok dances she told the audience, "Since many of these are songs, I will translate some of them for you. I will not translate them all, because it would take too long, and besides, some of them are very naughty, and I do not have the courage, not yet, to translate them. Maybe when I am older."

The knowledge, the nuance, the shadings and interior messages that then

poured out of them were miraculous.

The Schubert Impromptus are endlessly fascinating, yielding up different secrets depending upon the way they are approached. Kraus let the first, in C Minor, speak freely of "Die Allmacht," which it echoes; the inner whirrings of the E Flat were held to an often indistinct murmur. There are elusive patterns in these, out of which new songs emerged yesterday. Always beautiful, they were often a revelation.

The sonata is one of the most difficult works in all piano literature. Not technically, but in form and repetition, in making musical sense of its striking freedoms. All this Kraus knows and transmits. How startling in the finale to hear Paganini's final violin caprice. There is something in the playing of this rare artist that always assures you of hearing the composer's true essence. Is there any greater way of making music?

