

Böszörményi Nagy Béla

PIANISTS, BEWARE!

Don't Vary the Variations

Béla Boszormeni-Nagy, the Hungarian pianist who last Sunday opened the summer concert series of the Catholic University School of Music, was a great disappointment.

It was not so much that his command of the piano was modest, for it is not only virtuosos who give excellent piano recitals, but rather that he drew his audience to the hall by false pretenses. When a man announces that he will play five pieces of piano music, each in its way an unexcelled exemplar of its particular style, and no one of which will be found in every professional's basic repertoire, it is reasonable to assume that the pianist will approach his music with respect and love.

Boszormeni-Nagy showed in the pedestrian treatment of the music and in the gross liberties he took with it that his announced program was nothing more than a trap to capture an audience.

THE GENESIS of Beethoven's 33 variations on a waltz by Anton Diabelli, Op. 120, is well known. In 1821 Diabelli, a publisher and composer, invited 51 outstanding German musicians to contribute each a single variation on a simple and characteristic waltz of his own. Fifty did; Beethoven, who saw in the unpretentious little dance several features, both harmonic and melodic, that made it highly suitable as the basis of a large-scale work, remarked that he never collaborated, but that he was willing to provide an entire set of variations himself.

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Diabelli, naturally, was overjoyed, and, two years later, published two volumes of Diabelli Variations — one by Beethoven and the other by practically everybody else, including Liszt and Schubert, both of whom by coincidence were represented on Boszormeni-Nagy's program. (The pianist also played music by W. A. Mozart — son of the Diabelli variations is by W. A. Mozart — son, of the famous Wolfgang.

The 50 variations are very interesting in that they af-

ford an insight into the style of the time. Today we know only Clementi, Beethoven and Schubert, and therefore cannot discriminate between their idiosyncratic genius and the universal idiom of the time. Beethoven's 33 variations are something quite different — his longest work other than the third and ninth symphonies, the two masses, "The Creations of Prometheus," and "Fidelio," and a compendium of every facet of his style.

THERE ARE four ways to vary a tune, artistically no one superior to the others. You can keep as the constant only the length of phrase and the harmony, as Bach does in the set he wrote for the harpsichordist Goldberg; you can embellish the melody, as Schumann does in the Abegg Variations, and as Mozart does invariably; you can change almost nothing but intensify the feeling by subtle changes of orchestration and arrangement, as Haydn does in the G major symphony No. 88 and the variations on what was to become the Austrian national anthem.

Or you can do as Beethoven does in his Diabelli Variations played by Boszormeni-Nagy — adhere to no constant throughout the piece but relate each individual variation to the theme in one of many ways.

No matter how remote Beethoven is from the waltz, there is not a single variation of the 33 that is not based on it. The relationship may be shown only by the tune, or the bass, or the harmony, or in the remote transient modulations from C through F and G to A, or in the swing of the two halves of the 32-bar theme, or merely in the ornamented upbeat, in the fall of a perfect fourth or fifth, or in other ways, but the relationship is always to be found.

The two halves of the theme are sometimes repeated, sometimes not, sometimes repeated with further variation, sometimes curtailed. Sometimes a variation does not come to a full close but runs into the next; two distinct features

of the theme are combined in the subjects of a double fugue.

NEVERTHELESS, the whole is unquestionably a unity, and you cannot, as Boszormeni-Nagy did, choose first or second endings out of laziness or caprice, accelerate andante dotted half-notes to allegro, or rush through a sustained legato fughetta. You cannot play a 55 minute piece in 35. There is no law which requires a pianist to play the Diabelli Variations. Dozens of first-rate recitals have done without it. If, however, you do play the masterpiece, you have to give it a modicum of attention. I have heard the Diabelli Variations in more than 30 recitals — never before with cuts.



The pianist also made cuts in the Schubert B flat sonata (Opus post.), and in the Liszt "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen" prelude. To shorten the Liszt is defensible, for our interest in this great work may be somewhat historical — we do not have to listen to all of it to appreciate the novelty of its pianism and its harmony.

To cut the first ending of the Schubert, on the contrary, is wrong, for not only is music thus left out that is never elsewhere heard in the movement, but the wild modulations of the fantastic development come before we can savor the contrast. The Olympian calm and reserve of the first part of the movement can be abbreviated only at the expense of the later excitement.

The Mozart A minor Rondo was played in a manner that was at best slovenly — the piece needed more practice. Boszormeni-Nagy's best work of the evening was in Liszt's "Jeux d'eau a la Villa d'Este." This marvelous little tone poem might have been written by Debussy or Ravel. If it had so been it undoubtedly would be more frequently heard in recital today, for most pianists when they think of Liszt think only of his earlier works. In his later years Liszt not only spoke of the music of the future, he wrote it.

—DAY THORPE

