

HENRI HÉRZ'S COMMENTS ON
MUSICAL TASTE IN NINETEENTH
CENTURY AMERICA

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In 1846 the French pianist and composer Henri Herz¹ began a five-year tour of the Americas. Herz had recently lost heavily in a European piano manufacturing venture and he hoped to recoup his losses during his American trip. In the United States he gave concerts in various cities along the east coast, from Boston to New Orleans. To add further to his income he penned sketches of life in the United States which he published first in a French newspaper and later in book form.²

Herz was a performer who did not hesitate to use a certain amount of trickery in order to attract a crowd. His manager, the impresario Bernard Ulmann, persuaded him to stage a concert in Philadelphia in which eight pianists performed on four pianos. He gave another concert in the same city in a hall lighted by a thousand candles.³ But he balked at Ulmann's idea for a patriotic concert of "financial music" to be performed by five orchestras and eighteen hundred singers and to include a ceremonial crowning of a bust of George Washington during the closing bars of the cantata. In Baltimore, however, he agreed to improvise on themes provided by members of his audience.⁴

Herz excelled as a raconteur and his American concert experiences provided many good stories for his book. In it he discussed buffoonery at concerts, musical taste, and piano manufacturing in the United States. His book is not a rarity today, which suggests that it must have had a good distribution in its day. Because he had an extensive French following as a virtuoso, his comments undoubtedly helped create an impression of American musical taste in the minds of numerous contemporary readers. Today they constitute an interesting source for the social historian. The following parts of Herz's book are published for the first time in English translation.⁵

In spite of being accustomed to playing in public, I was nervous when I appeared for the first time in an American auditorium.⁶ The audience was large; every seat was occupied. It had even been necessary to bring in benches. My first selection, which was my concerto in C Minor, was preceded by an orchestral overture. It was played in the midst of general distraction and the tumult caused by late comers, who had difficulty in finding

their places. When it came my turn to appear I made appeal to all of my artistic courage, and presented to the public an air of calm and satisfaction. Universal and enthusiastic applause greeted my entry. People were speaking of my burned hand which had healed so rapidly, and the inventor of Pain Extractor,⁷ who was in the audience, was doubtless not a stranger to these preoccupations. Finally there was silence and the orchestra began the tutti of the concerto. Nothing encourages, they say, like success, and this sympathetic greeting was a preliminary and most flattering success for me. As a result, I felt perfectly at ease. I played my best, and in spite of the severe character of my first solo, it produced so happy an effect on the assemblage that I was required to play it over again.

I will pass over certain details of that evening, much too flattering towards me to be reported by myself, and stop only to describe an episode which is an example of characteristically American manners. At the moment when I finished the playing of my concerto and was going to retire from the stage, I saw one of my listeners climb on a chair, and, waving his arms, begin in an impassioned voice to deliver a discourse in my honor. When the orator terminated his speech, I believed I had nothing more to do on the platform, but the French consul, who was seated near to me said:

"Well, are you not going to reply?"

"Reply to what?"

"Why, to the flattering words just addressed to you. Custom requires that you reply."

"Impossible; to reply to a discourse requires another discourse, and I am not familiar enough with the language of Lord Byron, of which he himself said one does not speak it, one spits it."

"Oh, nonsense! And if someone is willing to reply for you?"

"It would get me out of a tight spot, as they say."

The consul spoke a few words to a gentleman, who replied for me. From time to time he turned in my direction in order to assure himself that his speech was not displeasing to me. More than once he waved his hand toward me to give more force to his words. I was ill at ease in this singular position, and the enthusiastic cheers which overtook the last phrase from my eloquent interpreter most happily put to an end such torturous deification. I could at last escape from public view.

I said above that speeches at concerts in America are a feature of the national character; I have, in fact, listened to many discourses appropriately graced with cavatinas and brilliant fantasies. There are two among them which merit saving, and I have done so. They occurred at the benefit of an able pianist, who was also a composer of much talent. After the first part of his program, a man dressed in black appeared, holding the artist by the hand. He made a sign to the audience, which was restless, indicating that he wished to speak. When silence was established, and after the usual salutations had been given, the orator expressed himself somewhat in this fashion:

"Ladies and gentlemen" (American gallantry requires that one refer to women before men when speaking in public, and that the names of women be placed before those of men on programs and notices), "It is not because I am a lawyer and wish to profit cunningly from every means which offers itself of showing to the public the easiness with which words come to me, the force of my argumentation and the charm of my diction that I speak to-day before a numerous and well disposed audience; no, gentlemen, I have, God be thanked, more clients than I could hope for; I have, in fact, only the embarrassment of choosing among the many cases offered to me, both criminal and civil. My office is always crowded with deceived husbands who demand divorces, with deceiving wives who wish to appeal, and with dupes and rascals; it is a pretty scene. If then I speak to you at this time it is solely to obey a sentiment which animates me and to share with you the enthusiasm which is excited in me by this great composer whose hand I hold. (Applause.) To think that such happy and beneficent moments have not passed me by, oh great man, after long sessions of the court! Oh, music! Oh, my friend! Oh, procedure! If you did not exist, my supreme artist, it would be necessary to invent you for the glory and happiness of humanity." (Prolonged applause.)

It was in the middle of the confusion of bravos from the audience and the orchestra that the beneficiary began to make his speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen! I should like to be permitted to reciprocate in regard to my friend the great orator here (the lawyer bows) some of the much too flattering compliments which it has pleased him to bestow upon my feeble merits. What can I say to you, gentlemen? I love lawyers; and after the piano, the clarinet, the cornet and the bugle, the instrument most gentle to my ear as well as to my heart is the voice of an appreciative lawyer blended with the approval of the public."

This last speech was received with unanimous applause, and everyone considered it quite natural for these men to deliver face to face in public compliments on their respective talents as lawyer and musician, and so add variety to the pleasures of the occasion.

Nothing, not counting a speech, resembles a concert so much as a concert, so I will spare the reader from the story of the six or eight musical performances which I gave in New York before going to Philadelphia.

My young but already knowing secretary⁸ had made a shrewd estimate of the future. I could not help but think of him when several years later someone sent me the program of a concert given by one of the best known pianists of our time--better known, perhaps, than talented. In order to arouse the cultural lethargy of American audiences he felt constrained to make recourse to means he would certainly have disavowed in Europe. For this particular concert the audience was offered an orchestra of four hundred and fifty musicians, a royal hunting song complete with trumpet fanfares and all the musical episodes of the chase, a romantic symphony ac-

accompanied by tamborines and six harmoniums, a fantasy arranged for forty pianos (Ulmann's very figure), a military march with eighty bugles and drums, and finally to vary a program already so varied, a comedy in two acts.

Another pianist even more celebrated, a pianist of the very highest order, who plays as Lamartine speaks, as Michael Angelo painted, was captivated by the spirit of speculation in America and opened a restaurant while still continuing his musical career. I found this fact in a work of known authority,⁹ from which I quote:

"The restaurant might have succeeded without the music, but not the music without the restaurant. With a chicken leg in one hand and a glass of madeira in the other, one listened to the chief of the modern school of pianists. Between an oyster stew, a slice of ham and a fruit tart, the ladies marvel at the talent of the artist and beseech him to play again one of the beautiful passages from Moses, Don Juan, or La Mulette. How, I pray you, could one resist the pleas of diners so gracious and so hungry? Well, the great pianist did not resist. He would smile through the steaming vapors from the kitchen and go back to playing to the accompaniment of spoons rattling on plates, glasses banging against each other, diners calling, waiters replying to the diners, and the corks of champagne bottles popping as if joyfully celebrating the inauguration of this admirable association of stomach and ear, of melody and beefsteak."

"But," continues the same writer, "to what lengths have artists had to go in all parts of the Union in order to rise above the indifference, even the frigidity of Americans, so given are they to crassly commercial interests! One violinist, when he was to appear in a western city, conceived the notion of dressing himself in a costume representing the devil, complete with horns and a long tail, so that he would look the part when he played the so-called diabolical variations on Paganini's Carnival of Venice. In addition, he posted several hidden violinists about the hall who, one at a time, in the fashion of a Russian chorus, echoed the melody."

"This satanic concert was advertised in a way likely to arouse the interest of the most phlegmatic souls. Finally the day of the concert arrived and the devil appeared. His entry was greeted by unanimous applause; his costume was perfect; his horns were beautiful, his tail long and trailing, his skin as red as the shell of a boiled lobster. If a devil can be beautiful, this one was. For several minutes he walked back and forth across the stage, from time to time stopping to strike a pose calculated to put the spectators in the proper frame of mind for the first notes of the satanic melody. Then all of a sudden he ended his promenade, slowly put his violin to his shoulder, looked at his bow, and, as if on a signal from hell, abruptly began the infernal Carnival of Venice. Hardly had his bow drawn the quivering last notes of the first part of this ghastly piece than a strange and invisible instrument continued the melody, and in turn this was repeated successively by other

instruments in other parts of the hall. During these dialogues by what seemed to be infernal spirits, the devil walked about the stage in long strides, interrupting the music from time to time with sardonic laughs and in his turn playing, with horrifying variations, the fatal melody which now echoed and re-echoed about the hall. The concert finished with all the violinists playing in unison with a frenzy that made peoples' hair stand on end. For some days that concert was the talk of the town, and it is still spoken of."

"The imaginations of concert artists have been exhausted. They have tired of everything. They have given concerts in costume, concerts combined with lotteries, religious concerts, concerts with dancing, historical concerts, concerts composed of improvisations, serious concerts, comic concerts, concerts with fireworks, surprise concerts, bacchic concerts, and, as we have just seen, gastronomical and diabolical concerts. One man, endowed with a detestable voice, has given successful three-hour solo concerts without accompaniment by chanting the sporadic hymns of all the religions and sects. I myself heard the man in Boston. A composer hit upon the idea of writing an animal symphony with the title of Noah's Ark. In this romantic and imitative work one listens to the braying of an ass, the bleating of a sheep, the bawling of a calf, the grunting of a pig, the hissing of snakes, the twittering of birds, the roaring of a lion, not to mention the human voice, all accompanied by a descriptive program worthy of the same attention posterity is likely to give to any other odontological compilation. Nor can I omit mentioning an Italian violinist who mistakenly thought he might make his fortune by playing his violin in imitation of an old woman in a fit of rage. The result seemed to me to be only slightly amusing."

Footnotes:

¹ Heinrich Herz (1806-1888) left his native Austria as a child prodigy. He identified himself with France, his adopted homeland, and used the professional name Henri Herz. During his long career he made extensive concert tours of Europe and America, held a professorship at the Paris Conservatory, twice ventured into the business of manufacturing fine pianos, and built a concert hall. Although some critics claimed that Herz lacked first-rate ability, many of his more than two hundred musical compositions were very popular in his day.

² Mes voyages en Amerique (Paris, 1866).

³ A description of the concert with a thousand candles is included in Henry B. Hill and Larry Gara, eds., "Henri Herz in Philadelphia," in Pennsylvania History, xxv (January, 1958), 58-65.

⁴ For the material on improvisation at the Baltimore concert consult Henry B. Hill and Larry Gara, eds., "Henri Herz's Description of Baltimore," in the Maryland Historical Magazine, lii (June, 1957), 120-123.

⁵ Herz's book was translated from the French by Henry Bertram Hill.

⁶ Henri Herz played his first American concert in the New York Tabernacle.

⁷ Just before his first concert Herz burned his hand severely on a hot metal plate used to regulate the draft on a fireplace. The inventor of a special salve heard of the mishap and persuaded the pianist to try his remedy. Herz was pleased with the result and he publicly acknowledged his debt to the inventor of Pain Extractor.

⁸ Herz referred to the impresario Bernard Ulmann.

⁹ Herz identified the book as Trois ans aux Etats-Unis, by Oscar Commettant.

Further comments by Henri Herz on musical life in America will appear in a future issue of the Journal.

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