

MORE COMMENTS BY HENRI HERZ
ON MUSICAL TASTE IN NINETEENTH
CENTURY AMERICA

HENRY BERTRAM HILL AND
LARRY GARA

Among that sizeable group of barnstorming virtuosi who turned a quick buck in the American market at various times during the nineteenth century was Henri Herz (1806-1888), composer, raconteur, concert pianist, teacher, piano manufacturer and author. No sane critic has ever accused Herz of being in the same league with Dvorak as a composer, or of comparing his stature as a performer with that of the legendary Jenny Lind or even with that of the remarkable violinist Ole Bull. Nor did he have P. T. Barnum as impresario, as did Miss Lind, although his manager, Bernard Ulmann, does seem to have had both a sense of flamboyant showmanship and a good working understanding of the naiveté of the American audience. But Herz received his share of adulation, remained in the country for the better part of a decade, and turned his experience to further profit by writing about it on returning to Europe. A Viennese by birth, Herz lived most of his life in France, where he published his American observations first in newspapers and then in a popular book, Mes voyages en Amérique (Paris, 1886). The passages which follow are translated from that work, and are published here for the first time in English. Other comments by Herz were published in this journal last year [Spring, 1960, 17-22].

--SGL

Musical taste in America has improved in recent years, so I hear. At the time when I traveled in the United States, however, artistic appreciation in general, and that of music in particular, left much to be desired, in spite of several good philharmonic societies and the efforts of a number of good musicians to popularize the works of the masters. For example, one day at a music store I witnessed the exhibition of a new method of testing pianos of which, up until then, I was totally ignorant. A lady entered the store saying that she wanted to buy a piano and wished to see what they had. Three pianos were shown to her. The lady energetically grasped her parasol by the handle and with the other end rapidly poked the keyboard of the first piano.

"The bass is good," she said majestically, "but I do not like the treble." (Her parasol had not touched the treble.) Turning toward the second piano she sent the tip of her parasol flying in the opposite direction, beginning toward the middle of the keyboard and descending to the lowest note.

"The high notes on this one are nice," she said, with the same aplomb and the same majestic tone, "but the bass is weak. Let's see the third piano."

This time she ran her parasol violently to the right and left across the keyboard, producing a confusion of loud sounds with a most disagreeable effect.

"Very well," she exclaimed enthusiastically, "this one is good in every respect and I will take it."

Just after this woman left the store I noticed a piece of music on the cover of which I read: Sonntags Walse, by Henri Herz. I turned the page; the piece was not one of my compositions.

"What is this?" I angrily asked the proprietor.

"What a question! It is the piece on which your reputation in America rests. Your other compositions are liked fairly well; this one is considered the brightest jewel in your crown of harmonies."

I would have liked to decline that honor, but Ulmann, divining my intention, took me to one side.

"Do not deny that you composed it," he said to me, "You will only upset him, and you won't be believed anyway."

I followed my secretary's advice, and if I still enjoy any fame in certain parts of America today it is probably due to the Sonntags Walse.

This is perhaps the place at which I should speak at some length about the music trade and the manufacturing of pianos in America. In all honesty I must report that the music trade is extensive, and that if the making of pianos has for some time left much to be desired, it is necessary to make an exception of Chickering pianos, which have an international reputation. Without having that great equality of tone, that homogeneity of timbre, and especially that power, that sweetness, and that distinction which make our leading French pianos the best in the world, the Chickering instruments do not lack brilliance, and their grand concert models can compete with English grand pianos whose good features they most resemble. I am speaking of grand pianos and square pianos, for the United States will probably be dependent for a long time on Europe for upright pianos, the production of which forms the principal branch of the French industry. For many years the English have let the best pianos be produced by foreign countries and the renown thus won has resulted in a wide distribution of their products. Today, those pianos we make expressly for America are regarded as superior not only in construction but also in the brilliance and harmoniousness of their timbre.

An artist-author who has lived for several years in North America has rightly observed that not only do the sudden changes in temperature have an annoying effect on certain pianos, but, what is more important, that the excessive heat from the furnaces used to warm rooms in the northern United States seriously damages pianos. Several Frenchmen have carried to New York and Boston pianos made for use in France, where the inconvenience of having furnaces does not exist, and these pianos have quickly got out of order. Because of this, Americans have concluded that French pianos were poorly made, or at least that they could not withstand the American climate. They have as a result combined in a common misunderstanding both good and bad instruments; those which we make for France and those which we make for export; as well as those which are made to sell at a low price by manufacturers without name or integrity, and those produced by our better known houses whose reputation is universally acclaimed.

I have said that the music business was considerable everywhere in the United States. There are, in fact, several publishers with stocks of sheet music running up as high as 200,000 pieces. This music, passably engraved and well printed, supplies the major needs of the country. Since up to the present the Americans have signed none of the international treaties protecting literary and musical property, they can publish with impunity all the works which appear in Europe, without paying any attention to the author's rights. This unjust privilege would result in a much more decisive advantage in the competitive market if the labor cost, generally higher in America than in Europe, did not balance things.

For Ulmann, financial music was music arranged for eight or ten pianos, which everywhere in America had the gift of drawing crowds, especially when the theme of the concert consisted of national airs. We had to give in to my intelligent secretary, and financial music, arranged for eight pianos and sixteen pianists recruited among the young ladies of Louisiana society, produced its customary results. There was a crowd to hear this harmonious squadron of fashionable ladies, all of them pretty and roundly applauded, as one would expect.

The selection played by sixteen pianists had produced such an effect that another concert was demanded. So we repeated the performance, this time for the benefit of the city's poor. The receipts were over \$4,000, or about 20,000 francs. For such accomplishments this form of music well merited the flattering title, financial music, which Ulmann had given to it. This last concert, however, was accompanied by a little episode which deserves to be told. At the moment when I was about to give the signal to begin the introduction and all the participating ladies were seated two by two at the pianos, I noticed that one of the pianists was missing. It was less the fingers of the absent pianist that I missed than the elegantly dressed young lady whose absence marred the symmetry which would otherwise meet the eyes of the audience. What was to be done? Great misfortunes

require great remedies, says the proverb, and you are about to learn of the great remedy to which I made recourse to meet so great a misfortune. I looked around the hall, and spotting, seated in a box, a young lady in evening dress I had once met, I walked boldly up to her.

"Madam," I said to her, "a most unfortunate thing has occurred, and I will be lost if you do not save me."

"Save you, sir!" she said, "How could that be?"

"By taking the place of the pianist who has failed to appear."

"You think I could, sir? Why I cannot play the piano at all."

"That doesn't matter. Any good musician. . . ."

"But I am not in the least a musician."

"Ah, me! Are you telling the truth?"

"I swear it."

"Well, it doesn't matter. Even if you cannot play the piano and have no notion of musicianship you can take the place of the absent pianist without trouble."

"Are you really serious, sir?"

"I am speaking seriously, madam."

"And what do you want me to do with a piano I do not know how to play?"

"Nothing at all."

"I can't understand you."

"It is simple. You will run your hands over the keyboard, gracefully as you do everything, lightly touching the keys but making no sound. People will think they are hearing you, and what is paramount in this instance, they will see you. Thus you will combine all the advantages, for in this way you will never sound a false note as many, too many, pianists do, and you will assuredly please all who look at you. There is, after all, a music for the eyes, and in that kind of music, madam, you are a virtuoso."

"But, sir, what you ask of me is simply impossible."

"I say, madam, that nothing is easier."

"I would be ridiculous."

"That madam, is something you could never be."

"If I only knew a little music. . . ."

"Then you would be afraid."

"But what would my friends say?"

"They will say that you have a great interest in the poor and that you saved me from great embarrassment."

"And if some time they ask me to play the piano?"

"You will reply that you know nothing by heart."

"And if they get some music?"

"You will say that you play only pieces written for sixteen pianists, no more, no less."

"And what will they say to that?"

"They can only say. . . . But time presses and the audience is getting restless."

"Oh goodness! I am afraid I would make a mistake, even though I would have nothing to do."

"You are, truly, much too modest, madam."

"Ah, well, if I agree, believe me, it is not for the vain pleasure of showing off before the crowd and receiving its applause, but only to please you and to help the poor."

"Madam, I kiss your hands."

And that kind lady then took her place at the piano beside a woman who, believing her an accomplished pianist, was not a little surprised at her silent playing. She did just as she was supposed to, and ran her hands over the keyboard with the rapidity of a swallow skimming the fields. But when a series of rests indicated that we all should stop for a moment, she continued to pretend to play alone, with a most laudable zeal. This caught the attention of a number of listeners, who were most astonished to see this pantomime without sound. To cut the story short, however, everything went off beautifully. The sixteen skillful pianists, including the one who did not play the piano at all, were called back at the end of the performance to receive the praises of the audience and to divide among themselves the bouquets enthusiastic young men had piled on the front of the stage. I have always thought that the obliging lady who thus sacrificed herself by feigning to play a part that another was really supposed to do, was not the one with the least right to public recognition. For my part, I am glad to repeat my thanks to her here.

I was received in Mobile with the same enthusiasm and the same curiosity as in all the other cities of the Union. It was there I had the rare honor of counting among my listeners a delegation of savages, and I learned later that they considered me a spirit descended from the world of harmony to instruct mankind, which I found extraordinarily flattering, as might well be imagined. Upon returning to their respective tribes they doubtless delighted their fellows by describing the marvels of my box which speaks amorously, for that is what they called my piano. . . . I will probably be long since forgotten by the palefaces of the great city of Paris--those great forgetters--when my box which speaks amorously will be still talkative and more amorous than ever in the memories of the redskins. This thought is consoling, since for the artist death is only an accident, while to be forgotten is the real death.

The University of Wisconsin
Grove City College