

## **ERNST VON DOHNANYI**

Dr David C F Wright (2001)

Someone wrote, "Franz Liszt was unique. He is the greatest pianist of all time. No one before him and no one who came after him could be such a great pianist. Liszt is and will remain the greatest pianist of all time... but, now Dohnanyi has come along, and his playing is sensational and, perhaps, as good as that of Liszt".

Dohnanyi was nine when Liszt died at Bayreuth in 1886. Had they been exact contemporaries there would have been comparisons between these two giants of the keyboard as there had been in the days of baroque and classical composers. Both Liszt and Dohnanyi were Hungarian and exceptionally talented performers and outstanding composers.

Liszt, who was born at Raiding in 1811, was a child prodigy giving his first recital at the age of nine. He had the privilege of studying in Vienna with the finest teacher of the time, Antonio Salieri. Schubert was also a pupil of Salieri but he was a dreadful and inattentive student more concerned with one night stands at the local brothels than learning music and this is evident in his work which is very poor, repetitive and often fraudulently acquired from other composers. Liszt also had lessons from Carl Czerny. Liszt performed both in Paris and London as a young man and at the behest of George IV. He composed an operetta *Don Sanche* and lived in Paris between 1823 and 1825 where he knew both Berlioz and Chopin.

Chopin was ruthlessly jealous of Liszt but the Hungarian supported Chopin, when he did not deserve it. There is absolutely no doubt that Liszt was vastly superior both as a performer and composer than Chopin and, regrettably, this caused Chopin to have some of his famous bad moods and has led to the claim that he was a manic depressive.

Liszt lived with Countess Marie d'Agoult and they had three children, one of whom, Cosima, who was born in 1837, was to become the wife of Hans von Bulow and then of Wagner.

Liszt went on many concert tours and took a new mistress, Princess Carolyn Sayn-Wittgenstein. He became kappellmeister at Weimar in 1848 and he proved himself to be a fine conductor. He premiered Wagner's *Lohengrin* in 1850 and later became interested in religion and took minor orders in the Catholic Church and was known as Abbe Liszt.

Michael Kennedy, who is renowned for making erroneous and extreme comments about composers, wrote that Liszt's compositions took a long time to win a rightful place and how his support for Wagner caused the great schism in nineteenth century music with its dreadful effects on Brahms and Schumann.

There is a lot of tosh written about musicians. Grove writes of Dohnanyi, "His music has no individuality. His craft borders upon slickness and academicism and is voluble rather than eloquent".

The Oxford Companion to Music by Percy A. Scholes, ninth edition, states of Dohnanyi, "Some of his orchestral music has found favour and there are songs 'and an opera or two."

This statement is dismissive and condescending and is saying that Dohnanyi was, at best, only an average composer proving that some music journalists, musicologists and reviewers do write rubbish and are prejudicial deliberately expressing their own opinions as fact.

Erno (Ernst von) Dohnanyi was born in Poszony (now Pressburg) on 27 July 1887. At first he was taught by his father who was professor of mathematics at the 'Gymnasium' and a good amateur cellist, and it was at the Gymnasium where his son received his general education. In 1885 he began piano lessons with Carl Forstner the cathedral organist.

Later, he studied harmony with Forstner remaining under his tutelage until 1893 when he entered the Royal Hungarian Academy of Music in Budapest. His tutors were Stephan Thoman for piano and Hans Koessler for

composition.

In his years at Poszony, Dohnanyi had composed a String Sextet, three String Quartets and a Piano Sonata but, in Budapest, he wrote his Symphony no. 1 in F, a work without an opus number. It was awarded the king's prize and performed in 1897.

In July and August of that year he had piano lessons with Eugene d'Albert.

D'Albert was born in Glasgow in 1864 of Anglo-French parentage but was German by adoption. He studied under Liszt and composed twenty operas, two piano concertos, a cello concerto, a symphony and chamber music. He succeeded Joachim as the director of the Berlin Hochschule in 1907. D'Albert was an exceptionally difficult man and married six times. He died in Riga in 1932.

Ernst was a stunning pianist and made his debut in Berlin on 1 October 1897 and then went on to perform in Vienna. He also played in all the main venues in Germany, Austria and Hungary. His first appearance in London was at the Queen's Hall on 24 October 1898 playing Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 4 in G under Hans Richter. Dohnanyi first visited the USA in 1899..

He was said to be a performer in the romantic traditional but it is often forgotten that he played all the Mozart Piano Concertos when they were unfashionable and unpopular.

But, perhaps surprisingly, his most idiomatic music was written for string instruments. His Serenade in C for string trio Opus 11 of 1902 is a case in point. It is in five movements and is beautifully written and a delight to hear. There are few excellent string trios such as those by Roussel, Francaix and Lennox Berkeley but the Dohnanyi is quite superb. Ten years later he was to write his only Violin Sonata, Opus 21, set in C sharp minor which is unique in that none of three movements are slow and that the movements are played without a break thus eliminating the awful propensity for tuning up between movements which is always annoying.

He became professor of piano at the Berlin High School of Music (the Hochschule) in 1908 remaining there until 1915 when he went to live in Budapest.

The conductor, Sir Georg Solti has written that Dohnanyi was a dreadful teacher and that studying with him was a complete disaster, but then Solti always had something negative to say about everyone. He was a thoroughly unpleasant man. He used to delight in telling the story of Elsa Glafres, a ballerina, who was married to the violinist Bronislav Huberman but then became Dohnanyi's second wife and how the two men had come to blows in the street.

In 1919 Dohnanyi was appointed Director of the Budapest Conservatory and became the conductor of the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra.

He visited the USA in 1925 and conducted the New York State Symphony Orchestra

He became the director of Hungarian Radio in 1931 and, in 1934, the director of the Budapest High School for Music.

No one worked harder in Hungary than Dohnanyi to perform and uphold the culture of music. He was a workaholic giving 60 to 100 concerts each year with the orchestra and as a recitalist. Bartok commented that it was exclusively Dohnanyi who made music available in Hungary.

But because he was so dedicated and sincere, jealousy arose and his enemies, suffering from cowardly jealousy, influenced people unfairly against him. Although Dohnanyi was not a wealthy man by any means, he gave a third of all his annual income to charity. Dohnanyi did this because he wanted Hungary to be prosperous and, being a humanitarian, he wanted to help good causes within the country and those of his compatriots that needed financial help. It was not a ego trip or self-promotion and for many years his generosity was not

disclosed and, when it was, it was not by himself but by some benefactors.

In the Budapest orchestra were many Jews. Dohnanyi protected them with a devotion that knew no bounds. When the Nazis invaded Hungary in 1944, Dohnanyi still protected his Jewish colleagues and displayed acts of great courage. He actually prevented one Jew from being removed to a concentration camp and the gas chamber. He took great risks to protect his colleagues and together with his financial charitable acts he showed the fundamental goodness of his character.

But he made a mistake, albeit unintentionally. When the Nazis were in control of Budapest, Dohnanyi could not stand their violation of his beloved city and, as he hated the Nazis he packed his bags and went to Austria. In wartime one could not travel far, and, although the Nazis were in control of Austria and had been for several years, the situation there was more stable.

Dohnanyi going into occupied Austria caused his enemies to brand him a Nazi collaborator which simply was not true and one of the ringleaders of this hate campaign was the Jew whom Dohnanyi had saved from arrest and almost certain death in a concentration camp's gas chamber. Dohnanyi never went to Hungary again. His music was banned. His name was despised and for the rest of his life he was abused everywhere. He was branded as a traitor and as a *persona non grata*. He was described as an enemy -alien and even denounced in the New York Times.

For these political reasons, he went to Argentina in 1948 and settled as a piano teacher in Tucuman. The following year he was appointed composer-in-residence at Florida State University at Tallahassee where he was also professor of piano and composition. It is reported that he inspired many South American musicians to become composers.

But still he was hounded both by the people of Hungary and by Jews as being a Nazi sympathizer. There was a worldwide scandal. It distressed Dohnanyi and he was under the supervision of doctors for the last years of his life. There is the story that when he recorded his Variations on a Nursery Song with Sir Adrian Boult in 1956 there was a recurring strange noise throughout the recording. Some said it was a squeaky piano stool. Others said it was a bottle of tablets rattling in his pocket.

The injustice done to the remarkable man is unforgivable. Because of his unsurpassed ability in music he was the subject to jealousy since people felt diminished by his proficiency. The problem still exists today.

Not only was he a fine pianist and a great conductor he was a very good composer. His chamber music is exemplary and, for example, the String Quartet no 2 in D flat has a unique quality. The Serenade is another glorious masterpiece. The Piano Concerto no. 1 in E minor is nothing short of staggering and the Symphony no. 2 is a truly superb work and among the composers favourites. It is a wonderful big romantic work of impeccable orchestration and telling melodies.

He died in New York on 11 February 1960 during a series of recording sessions.

He left three operas, three symphonies, three string quartets and other chamber works, two piano concertos, the hugely entertaining nursery variations, a violin concerto, a cello concertstucke and some splendid piano music such as the Opus 11 rhapsodies. His music always has quality.

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