

RAYMOND LEWENTHAL AND ALKAN

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Raymond Lewenthal was an exceptional American pianist who might have become more well known if he had played more familiar repertoire and not devoted his outstanding talent to worthy but lesser known composers.

He was also lampooned as an eccentric. He would dress up for concerts with a top hat, cape and cane. Some thought he was ringmaster at a circus. It is said that the programmes at his concerts were printed in mauve on a lighter mauve background and that on the stage he would have one soft coloured light.

If someone is said to be eccentric it means that they are unconventional or odd and behave in unconventional and odd ways.

And if someone is claimed to be eccentric, they are often unfairly shunned and treated without respect, even ridiculed and, as a consequence, friends and family may say that they are an embarrassment to them and that can be very hurtful to the 'accused.'

The word odd means unusual or peculiar. There cannot be anything wrong in someone being unusual, but, surely, being usual means being a regular type, being of the majority, ordinary and commonplace and so there must be something to be said for being unusual. Mozart was unusual by having a phenomenal talent even as a child. Do we complain that he was unusual and eccentric? The word peculiar means strange or odd but also means distinctive and special. Strange means odd and unexpected.

Here is a seven year old Chinese boy who sits at the piano and plays a very difficult piece of classical music from memory. That could be said to be strange and therefore eccentric, but it is not something to be condemned. I had an eleven year old boy at school who could do complicated sums in his head in a matter of moments and so, if I asked what was 447 multiplied by 986 was, he could answer 440,742 in a few seconds. That is strange and odd and certainly not usual, and so the term eccentric could describe him. But would that be fair?

There have been many people who could be described as odd but, surely, what is odd is a matter of opinion. The composer Zoltan Kodaly used to go barefooted even when teaching his students. He was also a vegetarian but does that make him odd or eccentric? He was a very fine musician and lived to a good age.

What is odd, strange and eccentric must be a matter of opinion. I had a friend who purchased a copy of every new record or CD if it contained a world premiere recording, and he did this for 55 years and built up a massive collection. Is this odd or eccentric?

However, there are people who, in their adult life, display unconventional behaviour but it may be because of some distressing event in their lives such as, for example, being abused as a child or having a phobia brought about by a terrifying experience. It seems unfair to call such people eccentric or odd.

Many people tell me that the actions of pop stars are not odd or eccentric, whereas others say that many of them are eccentric and weird. One group shovels and throws white powder from the stage on to the audience and sing songs about taking drugs and the white powder is a symbol of illegal drugs. Is this odd? Ali G, and others, sing and dance, clutching their private parts through their trousers. Elvis Presley used to thrust his lower abdomen in actions of simulated sex. Is this unconventional and odd? Some do not think so, and his female fans interpreted this as he making love to them. There is a male pop singer who calls himself Alice Cooper. Elton John has been a solvent abuser, had a wife, is now married to a man and wears weird spectacles and has worn dresses. Is this eccentricity? His fans would not say so. Robbie Williams has come on to the stage to perform with his top half completely bare but wearing a scarf. Is this eccentricity?

A famous violinist, Nigel Kennedy, once came on to the stage to play a Concerto dressed as Dracula complete

with cape and other accessories. The reviews of that concert mentioned this but did not say it was weird or eccentric behaviour, but that his performance was good.

We accept eccentricity in some but not in others.

If you are not eccentric you are said to be a regular type, but what is a regular type? Is it someone who sits for hours in front of a television smoking and eating crisps? Is it a man who goes regularly to a football match to shout, curse and swear? Is it a woman who is regularly engaged in shop therapy?, That is a stupid expression. Is it someone who watches all the soap operas on television? If these are examples of conventional and regular types, I am glad that I am not one of them and happy to be eccentric.

In the world of geometry concentric means having the same centre and I suppose we could say that applies to people if concentric is the opposite of eccentric. If you are concentric you are conventional and a regular type. This must be boring.

I have deliberately made much of the matter of eccentricity as I feel it is necessary to give a defence for great artists such as Lewenthal and to put the matter into context.

Raymond Lewenthal was never boring. As to his dress sense, there are people who dress up for particular occasions or occupations such as air hostesses, footballers, policemen, nurses even circus ringmasters! In the world of classical singers it have often been the case that female singers spent more time choosing the dress they are to wear at a concert, than rehearsing the music.

The fact is that many people feel better when they dress up for a concert. Sir Adrian Boult often said that if a woman soloist looked good she sang very well!

I could not countenance a pianist in a tee shirt and torn jeans playing Mozart!

One of the composers that Lewenthal championed was Charles Valentin Alkan (1813-1888) who was also an eccentric as most people would call him. He lived in a house in Paris and the ground floor was empty and he lived upstairs. If he did not want to see anyone he would not, and I suppose you could call him something of a recluse. He had many disappointments in life and stopped giving recitals in the 1840s but, about twenty years later, he did appear before selected audiences to play. He was a bachelor but had an illegitimate son, Elie Miriam Delaborde who later edited some of his father's work. As to the woman involved, this is a mystery as is Beethoven's Immortal Beloved. It is said that Alkan expected to be given an appointment as piano professor at the Paris Conservatoire but the post was given to Marmontal who, incidentally, composed some good piano music. Although Alkan was of Jewish descent he, apparently, was a keen reader of the Koran and it is said that he died reaching up to the top of a heavy bookcase to locate his copy of the Koran when the bookcase fell on top of him. It seems strange that a regular reader of the Koran who put this book so out of arms length.

It is also said that when Chopin died, Alkan took over some of his pupils and, furthermore, it has been asserted that Chopin and Alkan were friends. I find this difficult to believe as Chopin hated the Jews with an insatiable venom.

Alkan must have been a fine pianist himself. Some of his piano works are fiercely difficult. But his eccentricity appears in his music or in the organisation of his music. For example, his opus 39 is twelve studies for piano in all the minor keys but items four to seven he calls a Symphony and items eight to ten he calls a Concerto for solo piano. Would Beethoven have written a symphony and called it Opus whatever, numbers 4,5, 6 and 7. Apart from early composers such as the Mannheim School, who would write a set of symphonies but exclusively within an opus number, the classical and romantic composers regard a symphony as a complete opus, as they would a concerto. The symphony of Alkan should have been called separate studies which is, in fact, what they are and the same applies to the concerto. Why give the works two titles? The fact is that the

Symphony Op 39 nos 4-7 is not a symphony at all because it does not conform to symphonic design. On the other hand, one could call it a symphony in the broad meaning of the word being 'sounding together' but the string quartet could be a symphony, an unaccompanied song cycle could be a symphony, a set of Czech dances could be a symphony and, heaven forbid, an album of pop songs could be called a symphony. Some pop songs are called classics even now. And so, the word symphony wrongly used could mean nothing, whereas the word symphony has with it the concept of a major work in sonata form for orchestra and this has been its meaning for 350 years.

Alkan calls Op 39 no 11 an Overture.

Whatever he calls each movement, the fact remains that the quality of the music is not questioned.

I have heard six recorded performances of the symphony and they are all very good but, Lewenthal's performance is the best with its attention to detail, strong and impeccable pianism and he is the only player who plays the third movement as a minuet. The others play it as a waltz.

It was the British composer Humphrey Searle who introduced the world to the music of Alkan. He wrote many articles in the mid to late 1930s when he was still a teenager advising the public to investigate this composer and his music. Searle did the same for Liszt and became the world's authority on Liszt.

It is a cause of great concern and incredulity that many so-called musicians and musicologists, as well as alleged music-lovers, disregard Liszt and dismiss him as a weak and ineffective composer. This attitude is also taken by some concert pianists, but this must be cases of sour grapes since many concert pianists find his music too difficult and they cannot play it. I am convinced that many pianists are also dismissive of Alkan because they are unable to play his music although it has to be said that some of Alkan's smaller pieces are playable as well as delightful.

But to return to Lewenthal. He was born of Russian-French parents on 29 August 1923 in San Antonio, Texas and because life as a child actor in Hollywood. He studied the piano with Lydia Cherkassky whose son is the famous pianist Shura Cherkassky. In 1945 he won all three major prizes of competitions held in California and continued his studies at the Julliard School as a student of Olga Samaroff. He later studied in Europe with Alfred Cortot and Guido Agosti.

Lewenthal's professional debut was in 1948 in the demanding Piano Concerto no. 3 in of Prokofiev.. This was with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Dmitri Mitropoulos who was himself a phenomenal pianist and had played the Prokofiev many times. I have his recording. Lewenthal's performance was outstanding and so, a few weeks later, he gave his New York debut.

His career came to a sudden halt in 1953 when he was attacked in Central Park, New York. It seems to have been a random mugging and the fact that his hands and arms were broken may suggest that the attackers knew that he earned his living by playing the piano and had seen his poster for a concert and had recognised him in his top hat, cape and cane.

The recovery was not only physical but emotional as well. While convalescing he began to study the works of Alkan and intended to write a book about this French composer. It remained incomplete at his death. His recovery was displayed in a two hour broadcast concert from New York in which he discussed the works of Alkan and played some of them. His first public appearance in New York for twelve years was in September 1964 in a recital of Alkan's music. This led to RCA recording his playing some of Alkan's music. Lewenthal also played works by other composers such as Dussek, Goetz, Czerny, Hummel, Herz, Henselt, Scharwenka, Rubinstein, Moscheles and Thalberg leading a revival in lesser known Romantic composers. He took an important part in many music festivals such as the Romantic Festival at Butler University in Indianapolis and the Newport (Rhode Island) Music Festival. He also taught at the famous Tanglewood Summer Festival and was on the staff of the Manhattan School of Music from the mid-1970s. He was justly admired.

For his part, Lewenthal was eternally grateful to Cortot for retraining his damaged hands. It is important to mention here this aspect of Cortot which is not well known.

But the musical public are fickle. They began to criticise Lewenthal for championing lost causes, the works of obsolete composers. But the unbiased are very glad that he did perform some of these rare works. However, had he performed and recorded the classical repertoire as well he would have fared better.

His critics grew in number and some said that his playing was rough and that he could not play quietly and that this was due to the results of his mugging in 1953. These criticisms are unfair and born of ignorance and jealousy.

He was also a workaholic determined to let people hear this unknown music. This industry eventually led to his death. In 1982 he gave five concerts in five days in New York which seemed to escalate his heart problems. He died in Hudson, New York on 21 November 1988 aged 65.

We must be thankful that we have recordings of this master. There are the Alkan recordings, the Henselt Piano Concerto, the Fourth Concerto of Rubinstein and the magnificent Liszt Sonata.

There is a rare quality in his recorded performances. They are alive and inspiring. The technique is quite amazing and, indeed, staggering and yet his playing has both heart and expertise.

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