

ERNST VON DOHNANYI

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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 Riading 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 and repetitive. 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. Liszt was always courteous about Chopin. 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. Chopin hated any musician that was better than he and that was a majority.

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.

The late Michael Kennedy, who is renowned for making erroneous and extreme and false comments about composers and musicians, 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, in piano and violin, who was professor of mathematics at the 'Gymnasium' and a good amateur cellist, as was Bartok's mother, and it was at the Gymnasium where his son received his general education. In 1885 he began piano lessons with Karl 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.

His Opus 1 was a fine piano quintet in C minor dating from 1895. Its first movement is restless and increased in intensity before introducing a more relaxed theme. and, like much of Dohnanyi's music compared to Brahms but such comparisons are odious. The second movement consists of warm and glowing music and the third is heartfelt while the finale begins with a rumbustious theme full of rhythmic drive and exuberance.

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 tradition 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 10 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 Bronislaw Huberman but then became Dohnanyi's

second wife and how the two men had come to blows in the street. Solti was a known troublemaker and unpleasant man known as "The Screaming Skull"

Dohnanyi's Piano Quintet no 2, Op 26 is in E flat minor appeared in 1914 and is another fine work. It was premiered by the composer and the Klinger quartet in Berlin of 12 November 1914. The work begins with a modal type theme with harmonic ambiguity. There is a stormy passage of fascination followed by more relaxed music and a discussion of both themes. The second movement is an intermezzo with two contrasting themes of charm interrupted by Mendelssohnian animation before the piano restores order. The final is the most extended movement which includes a slow fugue. Whether this movement comes off is a matter of conjecture.

The first of the Violin Concertos in D minor Op 27 appeared in 1915. The orchestra opens the work which is followed by a violin cadenza. The music is lyrical and it is often rather light which does not help. The slow movement is profoundly romantic. The third is marked Molto Allegro which starts in G minor and proceeds to B in which the soloist is accompanied by the harp and wind instruments. The finale begins with a version of the first movements cadenza and another series of variations. I am not convinced that variation finales are successful although Brahms Symphony no 4 is an exception.

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.

His Sextet in C Op 37 for piano, violin,viola, cello, clarinet and horn was written in 1935 and published in 1948. It must never be forgotten that Dohnanyi was an excellent composer of chamber music. The first movement is marked Allegro appassionato and is classical in tripartite form introduced by the horn over cello arpeggios and sustained piano chords. The motif is taken up by the clarinet, violin and viola as the movement proceeds and the piano part becomes exhilarating. The second movement begins in a tranquil style the string theme punctuated by piano chords and the piano introduces a sinister theme joined by the wind instruments and a dynamism from the strings finale is begun by the clarinet and is a set of variations and is rather sentimental and includes a waltz,

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. He was a decent man.

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.

The Symphony no 2 in F, Op 40, began life in 1944 and is a big work lasting just under an hour. This first movement is in sonata form and is a conflict between two themes, the first governed by the key of the symphony and the second by a contrasting key. In the middle of the movement the themes are in opposition to create an instability. At the end of the movement, the second theme is resolved into the key of F. The second movement represents Eve in the Garden of Eden and is subdued and pastoral. The third movement is a playful march full of dissonances and sarcasm and the finale returns to the profundity of the first movement with a quotation from Bach of Come, sweet Death although the composer said the composer was not speaking of actual death as such but the longing of death from an ageing man. It is a set of variations and the premiere was in London on 23 November 1948. The composer was not at all happy with this work and it was revised in 1957.

But to backtrack. For these political reasons, including the false accusation of being a Nazi sympathizer, Dohnanyi 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. This is probably his most popular work. The grandiose opening orchestra gives way to this simple nursery song and it is my belief that he lampoons the waltz.

The Violin Concerto no 2 in C minor Op 43 appeared in 1949 and was published in 1956. We have an early cadenza and the work takes on a lyrical style ending in a sort of nostalgia, The second movement is an Intermezzo which is a rondo with some Hungarian colouring and contains a hymn-like theme. The finale develops the early cadenza and thematic strands are interwoven.

We should consider the injustice done to the remarkable man which 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. It dates from 1887 and is dedicated to his mentor, d'Albert, and was premiered in 1899. It was a roaring success and it seems to have sunk into oblivion in the concert hall and that is shameful. The work opens with an adagio

introduction with what is , in effect , the motto theme and this music is interrupted three times by piano cadenzas and the work has a tragic feel about it. The allegro begins in a subdued style and some say it is Brahmsian. There is a mysterious brass chorale and the tension builds up. The slow movement has been compared to Bruckner and the piano entry is not unlike material in the first movement. The opening horn theme of the first movement may not be immediately recognised as the chorale theme, and the music in the piano part is rhapsodic. The motto theme is the basis of the finale and there is a fearsome cadenza and the music is utterly convincing and it is incredibly impression. There is a jolly Festive Overture Op 31, a well-written Konzertstück for cello and orchestra and a Harp Concertino.

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

He left three operas, which I have not heard. His music always has quality.

Works with Opus Number

- Op.1 Piano Quintet No.1 in C minor (1895)
- Op.2 4 Klavierstücke (1897)
- Op.3 Waltz for Piano Four-Hands (1897)
- Op.4 Variationen und Fuge on a Theme of Emma Gruber , for Piano (1897)
- Op.5 Piano Concerto No.1 in E minor (1898)
- Op.6 Passacaglia in Eb minor for Piano (1899)
- Op.7 String Quartet No.1 in A major (1899)
- Op.8 Cello Sonata (1899)
- Op.9 Symphony No.1 in D minor (1901)
- Op.10 Serenade in C major for String Trio (1902)
- Op.11 4 Rhapsodien for Piano (1903)
- Op.12 Konzertstück in D major for cello and orchestra (1904)
- Op.13 Winterreigen for Piano (1905)
- Op.14 6 Gedichte von Victor Heindl
- Op.15 String Quartet No.2 in D-flat major (1906)
- Op.16 Im Lebenslenz, 6 Gedichte von Wilhelm Conrad Gomoll, for Voice & Piano
- Op.17 Humoresken in Form einer Suite for Piano (published 1908)
- Op.18 Der Schleier der Pierrette, Mime in 3 Parts (1909)
- Op.19 Suite in F# minor for Orchestra (1909)
- Op.20 Aunt Simona, Comic Opera in 1 Act (1912)
- Op.21 Violin Sonata in C# minor (1912)
- Op.22 Three Songs for Voice and Orchestra (1912)
- Op.23 3 Stücke for piano (pub.1913)
- Op.24 Suite in the Olden Style for Piano (1913)
- Op.25 Variationen über ein Kinderlied for piano and orchestra (1914)
- Op.26 Piano Quintet No.2 in Eb minor (1914)
- Op.27 Violin Concerto No.1 in D minor (1915)
- Op.28 6 Konzerttüden for Piano (1916)
- Op.29 Variations on a Hungarian Folksong for Piano (1917)
- Op.30 The Tower of the Voivod, Romantic Opera in 3 Acts (1922)
- Op.31 Festival Overture for Orchestra (1923)
- Op.32a Ruralia hungarica for Piano (1923)
- Op.32b Ruralia Hungarica (based on Hungarian folk tunes) for Orchestra (1924)
- Op.32c Ruralia Hungarica for Violin and Piano (ca.1924)
- Op.32d Ruralia Hungarica for Cello and Piano (1924)
- Op.33 String Quartet No. 3 in A minor (1926)
- Op.34 The Tenor, Comic Opera in 3 Acts (1927)

- Op.35 Szeged Mass (1930)
- Op.36 Symphonic Minutes for Orchestra (1933)
- Op.37 Sextet in C major for Piano, Strings, and Winds (1935, pub.1948)
- Op.38 Cantus Vitae, Symphonic Cantata (1941)
- Op.39 Suite en valse for Orchestra (1943, pub.1946)
 - Op.39a Suite en valse arranged for 2 Pianos (1945, pub.1948)
 - Op.39b Valse boiteuse (Limping Waltz, third movement of Op.39) arranged for piano solo (1947, pub.1948)
- Op.40 Symphony No. 2 in E major (1944, rev. 1956)
- Op.41 6 Pieces for Piano (1945)
- Op.42 Piano Concerto No. 2 in B minor (1947)
- Op.43 Violin Concerto No. 2 in C minor (1950)
- Op.44 3 Singular Pieces for Piano (1951)
- Op.45 Concertino for Harp and Chamber Orchestra (1952)
- Op.46 Stabat Mater (1953)
- Op.47 American Rhapsody for Orchestra (1953)
- Op.48 2 Pieces for Flute (1958-59)
 - No.1 Aria for Flute and Piano
 - No.2 Passacaglia for Solo Flute

Works without Opus Number

- Albumblatt for Piano (1899)
- Cadenza for Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.3 (ca.1915)
- Cadenza for Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.4 (1897)
- Cadenza for Mozart's Piano Concerto K.365 (1920)
- Cadenza for Mozart's Piano Concerto K.453 (ca. 1906)
- Du und Du (Strauss) for Piano (1928)
- Fugue for Piano left hand/2 hands in D minor (1913)
- Gavotte and Musette (1898)
- Pastorale on a Hungarian Christmas Song for Piano (1920)
- Piano Exercises
- Piano Quartet in F# minor (1891) (published 2010 by Doblinger, poss. earlier)
- Rondo alla Zingarese, trans. from Brahms (1927)
- Schatzwalzer for Piano (1928)
- Sextet for Strings in B flat major (1893)
- Symphony in F major (1896, unpublished)
- Valses nobles, trans. from Schubert (1925)
- Waltz for Piano from Delibes' "Coppelia" (1925)
- Waltz for Piano from Delibes' "Naila" (1897)
- 2 Waltzes of Strauss for Piano, "Treasure Waltz" (The Gypsy Baron) and "Thou and Thou" (The Bat)
- Wedding March from the Op. 18 Pantomime, Pierrette's Veil (1910)

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