BERNARD HOLLAND

A Cavalcade Of Pianists, And You Are There

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RCA/BMG (Rubinstein, Horowitz); ISA (Lefébure); Deutsche Grammophon: Lauterwasser (Kempff); Deutsche Grammophon: Jury Reichardt (Michelangeli)

AR-PNE-0833-02

MUSIC lovers rarely have a chance to be voyeurs. But "Great Pianists of the 20th Century on Film," a Lincoln Center series that has run for the last month and ends today, has given audiences at the sold-out Walter Reade Theater a glimpse of what performers look like up close and has on occasion let the same audiences overhear what pianists say about what they do.

Sixteen programs and, by my count, 59 pianists have offered interviews, musical snippets, sometimes complete pieces, even complete sonatas or concertos. Briefly, people were able to watch Paul Wittgenstein butcher Ravel's Left-Hand Concerto in silence; butcher, at any rate, in the opinion of the composer, who, helpless before the pianist's contractual rights as commissioner of the piece, could do nothing to stop the bloodshed. The conductorial hands seen in the film were Ravel's own.

Lincoln Center's inclusions have been as remarkable as the several prominent absences. Searches of film and television archives turned up no Rachmaninoff. Nothing, either, from Walter Gieseking or Dinu Lipatti. Sviatoslav Richter and Vladimir Horowitz, on the other hand, are everywhere. Horowitz became a virtual one-man media industry in the 1970's and 80's; Richter, despite protestations of puritan reclusiveness, seems to have placed himself in front of cameras at every opportunity.

We should be grateful for what Lincoln Center and its curator Allan Evans have turned up. Historians did them no favors. Getting the films here took sweat and serendipity; obtaining the rights was a gargantuan effort, played out many times in many places. We may never see some of these items again.

There have been delightful appearances from pianists on the margin of fame: Yvonne Lefébure, the teacher of choice in my days at the Paris Conservatory, and Guiomar Novaès, a Brazilian who in the postwar years played Schumann as gracefully as anyone who ever lived. (Her excerpts here were mostly Chopin.) One relished bedrocks of German style like Wilhelm Kempff, Edwin Fischer and Wilhelm Backhaus. Clifford Curzon, Solomon and the disgraced collaborator Alfred Cortot have appeared; also, Benno Moiseiwitsch and Mieczyslaw Horszowski.

The post-Liszt school of virtuosity was represented by Ignaz Friedman, Vladimir de Pachmann, Josef Hofmann and Josef Lhevinne. There have been exotic birds like Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli and Samson François; also, the eminent Soviet-era teacher Heinrich Neuhaus. Add to them an evening of jazz, including the 20th century's master of omission, Count Basie.

The ground rules for these events were curious, for here was often a live audience witnessing a filmed audience witnessing a performance. The nature of public playing, Claudio Arrau said in an interview, is the one-time nature of the exchange between player and audience. Yet here was unrepeatable spontaneity being repeated spontaneously again. No one, at least, seemed to insist on sitting at the left of the hall to watch the pianist's hands.

In a series of archival films, the repertory may be familiar, but the vantage point is not.

Mr. Arrau at one point addressed the ever enigmatic question of composer and interpreter, and how much of each should go into what the audience hears. Fifty-fifty was his answer: an unsatisfactory one, but then, so is every other. Perhaps the pianist was talking more to himself than to us.

Bernard Gavoty, Ms. Lefébure's television interviewer, took up the argument with words like "exécution" and "interprétation." But such verbal delicacies seemed less an explanation of musical performance than a descent into intellectual self-abuse. Language-obsessed as they are, the French have a hard time with music criticism and insist on translating musical thought into literary thought.

It was certainly the right place to ask such questions. The series, by definition more about musicians than about music, begged them. In terms of repertory, there was little to amaze the ear. Chopin showed up 44 times, Beethoven 28, including 4 concertos (the Fourth twice) and 14 sonatas (the "Appassionata" three times).

No explorations here; rather, well-traveled repertory used to to demonstrate the pianist's acumen. No surprises either. The culture of recordings has already turned us away from discovery and toward comparative shopping. It was hard not to overhear ardent cognoscenti in the lobby arguing the merits of Myra Hess's Opus 110 versus Lefébure's. (Not a word about Beethoven's Opus 110.)

The idea of composer as prop was abetted by some strong performing personalities. Richter's enormous assets, grimly applied, were a powerful presence: uniformly menacing, always deserving of respect, hardly lovable. Richter seemed to crush music with his integrity.

I wish I could speak more lovingly of William Kapell's appearances. I remember his electric energy, but electricity could not rescue performances of Scarlatti and Chopin that had little grace or color and only a halting sense of continuity. Kapell was magnetic for the excitement he generated in up-tempo music, and then there was the sad romance of his early death at the beginning of a successful career. Public reputation can be vague: Kapell on so many lips; Novaès, infinitely more talented and also well recorded in her time, virtually forgotten.

DID we ever attain Arrau's "50 percent solution"? We came close in Lefébure's masterly organization of Bach's A minor Organ Fugue (BWV 543, in the Liszt arrangement). Arthur Rubinstein may have done it outright when he played the Chopin Barcarolle for an audience in St. Petersburg. Rubinstein raised his hands, and all the silliness of "exécution" versus "interprétation" faded away.

For the playing of a piece of music is not the superimposition of an artist's personality on the composer's; nor is it a balancing act between the two. It is the executant's response to the music's concrete statement of needs.

How naturally, indeed how amorously, Rubinstein bent to the harmony's gravitational pull; how naturally he felt the end of a phrase when he was at its beginning. Witnessed here was something simple, divinely so: a song without words and a musician under its spell. Mr. Gavoty, go home.