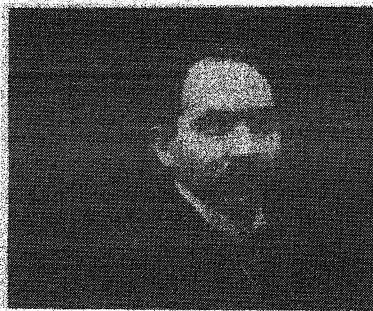


THE GODOWSKY SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER

volume 10 No.2



THE GODOWSKY SOCIETY

This, the twenty-second Newsletter, was going to be the last - it is also prodigiously overdue due to my having an extended Sabbatical.

This was going to be the last Newsletter because I was beginning to feel there is now really no need for it. There is now an excellent website (www.godowsky.com), a biography (which is still in print!!) and there are recordings galore with two complete sets of the Complete Piano Works under way - there is a choice of two complete sets of the Chopin/Godowsky Studies (ignoring the g.d. madge travesty) and no less than six recordings of the so-called unplayable Passacaglia (the old canard about Horowitz finding it impossible to play can, I think be discounted - it just wasn't his cup of tea). To end this way of thinking, there is the (almost) unbelievable news of Fischer re-issuing some of the printed (nowadays referred to as *sheet* music) in Four volumes with (surprise) literate and informative notes by Millan Sachania.

All this is an unbelievable advance in one aspect of civilisation since I started this so-called Society in the Dark days of Thatcherism (though I respect the unfortunate fact that some subscribers may believe in the tenets of that awful woman) so I suppose that I, with some reluctance, will no longer subscribe to the common 'oldie' theory so aptly cummunicated by the wonderful Evelyn Waugh 'death and decay all around us'.

I was greatly cheered the other day when I got a Naxos Historical CD of 'Great Pianists' playing Bach transcriptions'. The miracle appeared in the Producer's Note from which I quote the last paragraph: "For those transcription aficionados who wish to follow these historic performances with scores, Elkan-Vogel was the original publisher of the transcriptions by Kelberine and Samaroff, Oxford University Press published the transcriptions by Hess, Cohen, Howe and Lucas. The Moor edition was published by Universal Edition, Busoni was published by Breitkopf, Liszt is available by various publishers including Edition Peters and Schirmer, Rachmaninov's transcription was originally published by Charles Foley, Cortot's was issued by Foeitsch in Lousanne, and Rummel's is a Chester publication."

I can only hope that these publishers will reply to anyone requesting permission to photocopy, or for archive copies and willing to pay for same. My own experience with publishers has not, in general been a happy one encouraging one to photocopy music through the ever-helpful inter-library loan system. Helpful publishers include Schott, Peters, Boosey and Hawkes. The others I shall not shame.

PASSACAGLIA

Reviewing my collection of recordings of this magnum opus of Godowsky I find I have no less than six. It would seem timely to comment on these as well as attempting an assessment of the Passacaglia's standing in the literature of the piano.

Taking the easier task first - to review the recordings - they are as follows.

1. Stephen Glover. This, coupled with a recording of the Moszkowski Piano Concerto, was issued about 1975 in the International Piano Library series. It is a good, though not outstanding, performance. It was recorded at a live recital: there are one or two coughs. However, for me personally having studied the work virtually in isolation for many years, it was a tremendous thrill to hear it 'objectively' for the first time. (IPL 1001: The Young Virtuoso)

2. Marc-Andre Hamelin. Hamelin has recorded the Passacaglia at least twice. The first version was in 1988 on Musica Viva (a Canadian label). He subsequently recorded it in on CD. These are both performances of arresting technical command and virtuosity which are riveting to listen to. (The performance on CD is somewhat superior.) It has to be said, of course, that no pianist with less than first-class technique would be likely to attempt this magnum opus! Possibly the most difficult variation is no. 37: the "Erlking"; this is stunningly performed by Hamelin. There is plenty of variety of mood also; varn. 32 is played with wit and expressiveness. ; there is effortless bravura at the conclusion of the Passacaglia. As to the depth of the musical content I am less sure. Godowsky did state that "deep tragedy is the keynote of my Passacaglia". I question whether this is realised in either of Hamelin's performances.

3. Rian de Waal. de Waal recorded the Passacaglia on the Hyperion label in 1991. The tonal and the recording quality are good. de Waal choses a marginally faster tempo than Hamelin and there is plenty of passion and excitement. But this seems to be at the expense of accuracy and cleanness in some places, particularly in the Fugue. This sounds rushed with the virtuosic elements eclipsing somewhat the musical. This, to my ears, was not tragic.

4. Carlo Grante. Grante has made two recordings: the first, on Music and Arts (America) in 1997 followed in this year (1998) with another on the Altarus label.

The Friends of



Paul Badura-Skoda Remembers...

Paul Badura-Skoda is one of the foremost pianists of the century, renowned for his interpretations of the Viennese masters and more. His books (in conjunction with Eva Badura-Skoda) on Mozart and Bach are classics in their fields. He has edited many new editions and studied the repertoire and performance style of the piano as have few others.

What were the circumstances of your first meeting with Gunnar Johansen? How did you come to join the faculty in Madison?

I met Gunnar Johansen for the first time in 1962 or 1963 when he proposed my visit to Madison, Wisconsin. This could be realized in 1964 and was so successful that I received the invitation to become artist-in-residence for five years, starting 1966. Gunnar was instrumental in convincing the vice-president, Mr. Robert Clodius and the Faculty that my visit as well as that of Mrs. Eva Badura-Skoda would be useful.

Gunnar Johansen recorded the complete works of Bach in what must be both the earliest such venture and the most unusual given the instrument used. How would you evaluate these recorded performances and what comments might you make about them?

The complete works of Bach recorded by Gunnar Johansen were a magnificent undertaking, using at times his two-keyboard pianos. Unfortunately, I heard too little of it to give a true evaluation. He sometimes approached Edwin Fischer, but he was more austere.

During your residence in Wisconsin you undoubtedly had the opportunity to observe Gunnar Johansen up close as a teacher. What would you say were the salient characteristics of his teaching style? How did the students and faculty react to him?

Gunnar Johansen's style of teaching was unconventional. What he tried was to instill the love of music as well as the respect for the great composers to his students. They loved him. He taught more by example than by carefully worked-out details and he nearly always gave rather high grades to his students. The Faculty respected him, but was not always apt to understand the magnitude of his visions.

From the vast bulk of his recordings, what do you think were his most representative performances?

I would place his complete Liszt as a truly monumental enterprise of consistently high level. Among other things I remember his *Fantasy on B-A-C-H*, the *Variations on Weinen, Klagen*, the Sonata in B-minor, also many transcriptions. Other fine recordings: Very fine Johann Strauss transcriptions, if I remember by Godowsky and Rosenthal. If his recordings will be re-released - as we all hope - there should be more reverberation (echo). His studio had very dry acoustics. Obviously the recordings of his own works should rank above everything else. Several of his sonatas, including the Pearl Harbor Sonata ought to be made known to a wider public and particularly so his piano concerto, a great composition which unfortunately had only one performance with himself as soloist. His Busoni recordings also deserve mention and praise.

How would you describe Gunnar Johansen's public performances? Were there any that you attended while in Madison that stand out in your memory?

Of course I heard many of his public performances, all of them at the highest level and an enormous variety of programs. His playing was of the grand "romantic" style, however, without the exaggeration one usually connects with that style. The greatest performance for me was the Busoni concerto.

How do you think Gunnar Johansen will be seen by history? How should he best be remembered?

This question is impossible to answer. Many a genius has disappeared from the public image and only a few have been rediscovered after centuries. I can only hope that Gunnar Johansen will be remembered as a truly universal artist worthy of his aim, the Leonardo da Vinci Academy. Like Leonardo he was ahead of his time working on projects to reduce pollution: His dream was the engine which would be operated by water, split into H₂ and O.

Gunnar Johansen was also a prolific composer. What place do you see these works occupying in the history of the 20th century?

I believe he is a composer of international standing whose value will be appreciated in future years. He was a non-conformist, creating his own style.

Gunnar Johansen was resident in Madison from 1939 until his death in 1991. What do you think he contributed to the musical and intellectual life there?

Gunnar Johansen's presence was a great enrichment for the cultural life of the University and the whole state of Wisconsin. His influence on the intellectual life was considerable; like Rudolph Kohnisch he brought international fame to the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

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This interview was published in Issue Number 3 of the *Friends of Gunnar Johansen Newsletter*.

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Gunnar Johansen

Gunnar Johansen (1906-1991)

Pianist, Composer, Scholar, Humanist and Founder of the Leonardo Academy

One of the foremost pianists of his time and an immensely prolific composer, Gunnar Johansen was born in Denmark on January 21. He was closely associated with the Busoni circle in Berlin in the 1920s and studied with Egon Petri. After tours in Europe, Johansen emigrated to the United States living on the West Coast. He was a major figure in the musical life of San Francisco and gave weekly radio concerts for NBC. In 1939 he joined the faculty at the University of Wisconsin as the first performing Artist-in-Residence in America.

Based just outside Madison, Wisconsin Johansen undertook unparalleled activities as a pianist and recording artist while simultaneously composing a vast body of imaginative works for the piano. His music has rightfully been compared with that of Kikkhorji Shapuji Sorabji, and his achievement is gradually being reevaluated.



From the *Journal of the American Liszt Society* :

Gunnar Johansen: The Tragicomedy of a Life

account based upon original research yet published.

by
wa Skoda Remembers Gunnar Johansen

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These pages designed by [Gordon Rasmus](#)
Last updated Jan. 2001

Music.

Some time ago, it will be remembered, I had occasion to remark on the improper and undue influence exercised in musical affairs in this country by the "recognised" teaching institutions, and how those who were not products of these, no matter how able and gifted, found their way barred and impeded in all sorts of ways. Now, I am happy to see, Dame Ethel Smyth, in her last book, "A Final Burning of Boats," speaks out very much more strongly than even I upon this shameful abuse, making some most direct, trenchant, and pointed remarks upon it. Further confirmation, if that were needed, came to my hand recently in the case of a well-known and talented singer *not* a product of a "recognised" institution, who is constantly being passed over in favour of all sorts of hopelessly inferior nonentities who happen to possess the correct background. In the case of composers, the working of the system is particularly flagrant. There is a certain very talented composer of English nationality of the younger group whose name is but the rarest occurrence upon a programme—and its occurrence becomes progressively rarer. Yet the one or two orchestral works of his which are thus rarely played are not only most brilliantly successful achievements, but are invariably received with enthusiasm, so that no excuse about his not going down with an audience can possibly pass muster—but—here, of course, is the explanation of all the matter—he has had the bad taste to belong to no institution—having studied privately on the Continent. The treatment of Delius is, of course, notorious, as a reviewer in the *Universe* rightly points out in speaking of Dame Ethel Smyth's book. It is only through efforts of individual conductors in the face of passive and active opposition that his work has ever reached the public in England at all.

Bach. St. John Passion. (Queen's: Good Friday.)

With a small number of the Bach Choir as nucleus, this very lovely work received a competent performance as far as choral singing goes and the conductor, Vaughan Williams. By far the best of the solo singers was Arthur Fear, who has the makings, if he will only work to develop his capacity, of a first-rate Bach singer. Mr. Eric Greene (the Evangelist) sounded as though he were singing under the obsession of Schönberg's special breed of Sprech-gesang—the timid, colourless manner of it was in the authentic English oratorio tradition which, unhappily, is still not dead. Miss Silk sang in the manner her admirers admire, and that those who understand the requirements of eighteenth-century vocal writing do not. Again one remarked the possibilities of the voice, but its immaturity and the lack of solid foundation or good breath technique are as apparent as ever—and yet again one repeats that good musicianship and musical sensibility achieve here naught without a first-class technique. Miss Helmrich again also has the making of a good singer, but she has got to get rid of her wobble first.

Godowsky. (Queen's: 21st.)

An interesting Passacaglia on the first eight bars of the "Unfinished" a theme well made and pianistically interesting and distinguished as a whole, but weakest in the final fugue, which does not grow sufficiently, but peters out into free treatment just when it ought to get closer knit. The use of the accompaniment figure to the first subject of the first movement of the "Unfinished," in the coda, is clever, tasteful, and appropriate, and quite convincing in the natural way in which it arrives.

Some fine transcriptions of Schubert songs followed, with an exceptionally noteworthy and perfectly played version of *Die Forelle*. The great pianist himself in his foreword to his arrangements has so completely exploded the sentimental muddle-

headed thinking of the "purists" who rail at arrangements that nothing is left to do except to underline his remarks and emphasise a point here and there. Transcriptions like these are *new compositions*, just as variation is a new composition, though starting from possibly someone else's material. The result stands or falls on its own merit, independent of and apart from its starting point. Godowsky shows his own right instinct about his own especial province, by including, as he does a good number of his own transcriptions and free variations of other works, for as Mr. Newman is most right in pointing out, he is much more interesting as a player when playing his own inquiries into whomsoever it be than when playing original untouched work. Godowsky in this aspect of him is a great scholiast like Heinrich, Anthon, or Scartazzini, and the supreme interest of his recitals is just this, his commentary on, and development of, the thoughts of composers on whose work he is thus engaged. The original Strauss Waltzes, with which he has done such superb, magnificent, and dazzling things in his three great *Symphonic Metamorphoses*, have become through him, three very important works in modern piano literature, that can be disliked, but not possibly ignored, by anyone who studies the development of modern piano music. The second of these, *Heldentanz*, was played very fascinatingly on this occasion though one regretted a big cut containing some of the most delicious contrapuntal jugglery of the whole work. The subdued browns and greys that are the tones of this pianist's predilection produce a monotony that approaches too near dullness and prevail in places where higher and intenser colouring is called for. But he is a deeply interesting and significant musician, and a very distinguished mind, for all that a glowing imagination, poetry, and high fantasy are not his.

KAIKHOSRU SORABJI.