

GODOWSKY'S "RENAISSANCE"

by Lionel Salter

(from a BBC Radio 3 broadcast)

There have always been arguments about the ethics of transcription -- translating a piece of music from one medium to another -- but they're usually very confused and inconclusive. We don't jib at Bach transcribing as harpsichord concertos not only his own violin concertos but Vivaldi's too, probably because there was no essential change in the music's character. And even when Handel transformed a light amatory duet into "For unto us a child is born" in Messiah, though the character was certainly changed the musical style remained the same. No, it's when a transcriber allows himself any creative ideas of his own in someone else's music that the trouble starts. And yet intelligent music-lovers have always found interest in the reactions of an alert, inventive and tasteful musical mind musing on, savouring, and as it were commenting on, existing material; hence the fascination of Bach's chorale preludes or (in a very different sphere) of a great jazz pianist like Oscar Peterson clothing a familiar tune with new harmonies and quicksilver melodic invention. Even when the original musical stimulus is absorbed and transmuted into a quite new work in a different, not to say alien, style -- such as the Pergolesi -Stravinsky Pulcinella or Hindemith's Symphonic metamorphoses of themes by Weber -- there's no sense of outrage (not nowadays, at least), because the end product is itself a work of art.

So -- to come to the present case -- there's no point in protesting that Leopold Godowsky's free transcriptions don't sound in the least like Rameau: they weren't meant to. In calling these, and another dozen-and-a-half pieces based on the French clavecinistes, Renaissance he wasn't out merely to exhume these then-forgotten works, but wanted to give them re-birth ("re-naissance") by presenting them to audiences of his day in a form they could more easily appreciate that what would have sounded to them something coldly remote. Regarded objectively and as a whole, Godowsky's paraphrases cannot but inspire awe by their masterly skill and their marvellous combination of enriched texture with delicacy and taste. In the case of his treatment of trifles like the Albeniz Tango or Saint-Saëns's The Swan he indubitably improved on the originals, but the sheer range of his transcriptions was extraordinary -- Chopin's Waltzes, lieder from Schubert to Strauss, an elaboration of Albeniz's Triana (as if that weren't complex enough already!), three symphonic metamorphoses on waltzes by Johann Strauss, Bach solo violin sonatas and cello suites, and 53 studies of fantastic ingenuity and diabolical difficulty based on the Chopin studies -- the "black keys" study for the left hand alone, for example, the so-called "Aeolian harp" in the left hand with a new counterpoint above it, or the two G flat studies combined. Some of these reach the utmost limits of piano virtuosity; and some indeed might well be considered impossible of performance if it weren't for the fact that he himself, one of the greatest virtuosos of the early 1900s did perform them. He was a pianist's pianist par excellence, and those who were fortunate enough to hear him spoke of the "unruffled perfection" of his playing and his Buddha-like calm at the keyboard.

The diversity of his treatment is astonishing. The full range isn't shown by his Rameau transcriptions (which were written before 1905), but they are indicative of his approach, with the introduction of new counterpoints, changed harmonies and fresh figurations, and the selective extension of phrases -- all of course conceived in idiomatically pianistic terms. In the Minuet based on two minuets in G major and minor in Rameau's Deuxième Livre -- a relatively straightforward example -- it is the minor-key piece which sparks off Godowsky's fancy, and so he turns the shape inside out, starting off with the minor minuet (to a pattering accompaniment and with chromatic inner parts).