

# FINDING THE ELUSIVE SOUL OF THE PIANO

Why So Many Artists Conquer the Pianist's Cerberus, Technic, Without Ever Discovering the Divine Spark—The Revelatory Playing of Rubinstein, Liszt and Paderewski—Artistic Balance as the Means of Achieving the "Appealing" Tone

By HARRIETTE BROWER

WHAT is the soul of the piano—or has it indeed a soul? Back in the beginning of things, the Onliest who directed my destiny used to express herself strongly on the subject of finding soul in piano music—of playing with soul—putting soul into the composition and the performance. To her thinking very few players, if any, ever found the soul in the piano or in the music. What was it that most performances lacked—which for want of a better word she called "soul"? I longed to know. I determined one day to know.

Now came the golden age of adolescence, of romance, of dreams, also the age of absorbing piano practice, hours and hours a day. The mighty names of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart became household words. In intervals of respite much fiction and tales of romance were devoured in cosy corners near the fire, or by an open window shaded by a lusty grapevine, through whose thick shade the sunlight filtered.

Ah, days of romance, of day dreams, of palpitating fancy; days in which the hard and fast realities of a workaday world seemed far removed and visionary! The world of fancy appeared the real, filled, as it were, with rosy light, in which one moved at will—did things and conquered obstacles with a wave of the hand.

But soon came days of storm and stress, of struggle to reach an ideal—even to discover the soul of the piano. Alas, that seven-headed monster, Technic, stood in the way. The creature had to be tamed first and bound to one's chariot wheels. Not an easy task. The dragon at large, untamed, was a constant menace. What moment might it not stop the way to success? Weary hours, days, months must be spent in trying to render it docile and tractable. It must be so subdued as to become the servant, not the master. As the servant, so ductile as to do one's bidding, to be always ready to serve, to find nothing too difficult for it to accomplish; in short, to make out of an erstwhile formidable dragon a powerful ally.

Meanwhile the soul of the piano seemed to recede farther and farther; where was it—how could it be found? Had others found it? If so where was the secret?

Now came the great search through hero ranks of the expounders of piano music. Many so-called great players were closely scanned dissected as they exhibited their art before the multitudes. Most of them had tamed the seven-headed monster, Technic, till it had become a cooing dove in their hands. But alas, they had not discovered the soul of the piano; their touch did not thrill, nor send you into an ecstasy. Yet they were all fine pianists; they could play very loud, very fast, very soft; they had wonderful fingers, powerful wrists and triceps. Some of them knew the whole literature of the piano—so it was said, meaning only standard literature, not modern things, appearing every hour. With all their getting, however, they could not get at the soul of the piano, so that it might rise to meet and speak to you!

What was the trouble? It was not because these players could not feel deeply, for some had wonderfully sensitive and poetical intuitions in all departments of art. Strange they could not seem to find the soul of their instrument.

## Rubinstein's Revelatory Playing

Very early in this search for the player who could disclose the heart of the piano, a very great pianist was heard—none other than Anton Rubinstein. It was the occasion of one of the last recitals he ever gave. His glorious career as a concert artist was nearing its close, though he doubtless knew it not. The infirmity of blindness had fastened on him, so that he must be led on and off the podium. But this calamity did not dim the fire of his playing. The hero of so many pianistic triumphs could not play tamely, though he must, perforce, hit many wrong keys. But what did we care for that; we came to hear him reveal the

soul of the piano, and for once we were not disappointed. How the highest in each of us leaped out in sympathy as those wonderful hands swept the keyboard. Rubinstein seemed to have penetrated the inner secrets of the heart, the highest ideas and aspirations, and was able to make you feel these things. So Franz Liszt must have played in inspired moments. Both these men had undoubtedly discovered the soul of the piano, and they will never be forgotten as long as piano playing exists and there are pianos to play upon.

The search for more such revelation of the soul of the piano went on, alas, however, with no success. Player after player of the highest renown came and went, but none of them seemed to touch the innermost depths. A few indeed approached the goal, but failed to reach it. Their performance never thrilled, so that it was unforgettable—so that you never could forget!

Until one day—and this was years ago too—one autumn evening, an orchestral concert was announced, and the soloist a new star in the pianistic firmament. Those present will never forget his entrance—that slim, youthful figure, with the nimbus of golden locks. And how he played! Those white, virile fingers seemed to draw the very heart out of the instrument, producing tones at once vibrant and melting; tones which, for sheer beauty of quality, have never been surpassed, no, nor matched by other performers. The young stranger had every virtue that could be thought of; his playing thrilled that breathless audience as no one else had thrilled it since the days of Rubinstein. When those perfect tones at last melted into silence, the great hall rang with acclaim. The soul of the piano had been again revealed.

Was it any wonder, then, that whenever a recital by Paderewski was announced halls were filled to suffocation, and additions were always demanded? The listeners recognized that rare quality of sympathy and soulfulness in his playing, attracting the ignorant and learned alike. It was the divine spark that kindled a response within each one who heard.

From much thinking over the wonderful effects produced by these world renowned artists arose the great desire to learn their secrets. Did they feel differently from all other men and women who played the piano? Did they touch the keys or pedals in other ways? It is plain that one may have the "soul of an angel," and yet not find the soul of the piano. One may feel deeply yet have a harsh touch.

It is self-evident that the touch must be rich, full, deep, sweet, in order to bring out the inner beauty and sympathy of the instrument. Both Rubinstein and Paderewski had this beautiful, appealing touch—a touch that won all hearts as soon as they put fingers to keys.

There is much said about the ease with which the piano can be played; tones are made by simply depressing the keys, while with stringed instruments or the voice each tone has to be formed. In one sense this is true, in many others it is not. Tone on the piano must be produced with as much care as on the violin. Piano tone production is a deep study, whose secrets elude even those who might otherwise belong to the elect. The two artists referred to had solved this mystery of tone production—in which lies the soul of all great playing.

How did they do it? By constant thinking, constant testing, listening, comparing, experimenting. We remember the answer Rubinstein gave the unsympathetic player. He swept him off the chair, seated himself and struck one deep, rich tone, saying that one tone was worth more than all the tones the young man had played for him. And well he might say so, for the one tone represented the sum of all his struggles to secure a perfect tone production. He had given years of thought to this very thing, whereas the student had considered it but little.

## Artistic Balance the Secret

Those who had opportunity to watch these two great pianists in action, who thoughtfully considered their tone production, looking for causes and prin-

ciples, must have noticed the position and movements of arm exemplified by them. With both the arm seemed poised over the keyboard; the arm always flexible, always plastic, ready to descend with its own weight on the key. The picture is vivid in memory of Paderewski, with one arm suspended ready to drop, but held poised for many seconds, while the other hand was at work on the keyboard. It could be seen that his arm was relaxed from the shoulder, yet poised and in position. Did no one connect this condition and position with his beautiful singing tone and soulful tone production? Plastic yet firm condition, in artistic balance, is necessary to produce lovely tone; they are the things which reveal the soul of the piano; they must be present, or the soul of the instrument will never be discovered.

This condition of arm and wrist, which renders them weighty and relaxed, yet poised and controlled at the same time, is a condition which every player who would play sympathetically and "soulfully" must realize for himself. No amount of talking will give him this condition unless he apprehends it mentally. Tons of words will not make it clear, unless he grasp the idea and the feeling of this state of poise and balance.

Given this consciousness, together with the many qualities of mind and experience which melt into the great artist, there is no reason why such an one should not find the soul of the piano and reveal it to a listening world.

There are a few at this hour who have discovered this secret. Their demonstration of it goes far to raise piano playing to the nobility of a great art.

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## SANDBY IN COPENHAGEN

'Cellist as Soloist in Orchestral Concert—Royalty Applauds

COPENHAGEN, DENMARK, May 23.—Herman Sandby, the well-known 'cellist and composer, who recently returned to his native land after a successful season in America, was the assisting artist with the Palä and Tivoli Grand Orchestra on May 7 at the Strass Hall of the Concert Palais. A large and distinguished audience attended this concert, including the King and Queen and members of the court. The program began with an excellent reading by the orchestra, under the direction of Fr. Schnedler-Petersen, the conductor, of the Boëllmann Variations Symphoniques, followed by Dvorak's Concerto, Op. 104, in which Mr. Sandby did his usual masterly playing. Two of Mr. Sandby's own works made up the rest of the program: the first a Nocturne and the second arrangements of Scandinavian folk-music. Both were well constructed, of fine tone color and were so applauded as to receive repetition.

Mr. Sandby will be heard in concert in Sweden, Norway and Finland during the autumn season and will return to the United States the beginning of next year for his customary recitals.



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