

An Attempt to Define Ignacy Jan Paderewski's Performing Style *by Prof. Lidia Kozubek*

Prof. Lidia Kozubek, concert pianist and one of Poland's most prominent piano educators, is well known to music lovers in nearly all European countries as well as in Africa, both Americas, Asia, Australia and New Zealand. Besides concertizing and recording music, Prof. Kozubek is a faculty member of the Warsaw Academy of Music. She has also taught a number of piano students in other countries (such as Japan, Norway, Taiwan and Philippines just to mention a few) as a visiting professor or lecturer. For her artistic and educational achievement Prof. Kozubek received highly regarded national distinctions from Polish government, including the Chevalier Cross "Polonia Restituta."

An inquiry as to who was Paderewski seems to be a good starting point for a discussion of the pianist's performing style. Paderewski was without doubt a personality of his times. Even among the greatest contemporary musicians, Paderewski remains a phenomenon. He had extraordinary combination of virtues, a multitude of talents and, above all, personal charm, unusual honesty and decency. All of these qualities allowed him to be highly successful in a variety of fields. Paderewski was simply an exceptional human figure. The legend surrounding his pianism is justified not only by his musical genius, but also by the richness of his character, which certainly had an impact on his performing style. As a composer, Paderewski was not always appreciated, but he definitely had a solid theoretical background and developed a strong individual style in which the "Polish tone" is easily found. As a diplomat and politician, Paderewski played a significant role in shaping the reality of independent Poland after the First World War. As an ardent patriot, he frequently used his influence in the service of his beloved fatherland. These three principal facets of Paderewski's life (pianist, composer, politician) deserve separate, larger studies; some studies of this kind had already been published.[1] The present discussion will be limited to Paderewski's pianism.

Paderewski lived during the last four decades of the 19th century and the first four decades of the 20th century (he was born 11.06.1860, and died 06.26.1941). He was a witness to an end of an era and at the same time he experienced the birth of modern times, which was full of revolutionary changes in many areas of life. The pianist was born during the Romantic era, but the end of his life almost touches the atomic age. Great technical inventions of the time – airplane, radio, telephone, phonograph and film (of which Paderewski was a great supporter) – were not without influence on the arts. Paderewski also witnessed the emergence of several "isms" in the arts, such as impressionism, futurism, cubism, etc.

Although the era of Great Romanticism ended and was never to return, Paderewski was still under its influence. Chopin and Liszt, the two great masters of piano playing represented the unreachable pinnacles of piano art. Other romantic virtuosos included, Anton Rubinstein, Hans von Bülow, Mauritz Rosenthal, Eugene d'Albert, Ferruccio Busoni and Vladimir de Pachmann. The late romantic generation of pianists included Sergei Rachmaninov, Alfred Cortot, and Vladimir Horowitz. Thus, Paderewski was in challenging company. In spite of such daunting competition he not only successfully defended his position as a pianist but also managed to stay away from cheap showmanship, which so frequently appeared in the contemporary, neo-romantic pianism. Today such an aesthetic would be even less appreciated, as it neglects basic classical principles of balance between form and content. During

Paderewski's times, emotionalism frequently turned into sentimentalism, and great virtuosity became a sort of acrobatic sport. It all happened through abuse of expressive means, lack of sensitivity for balance and decline of good taste. The influence of these neo-romantic aesthetics was such that even the greatest pianists of the time were often unable to guard their art from those mannerisms.

At the beginning of his studies Paderewski did not have any well-known piano teachers. When he was twelve, he went to Warsaw to continue his education at the Conservatory. Then, he studied composition in Berlin and finally reached Vienna, where he became a pupil of Theodore Leschetitzky. Studies with this famous teacher put an end to his hesitations as to the choice of a proper career. At that point, somewhat late in his life – he was already twenty-five – Paderewski finally decided to become a pianist. Yet this lateness was a cause for many technical problems, which he was able to overcome only with enormous efforts – he often practiced eleven hours a day! Technically, Paderewski reached a level of complete command over the instrument. His education in composition helped him understand formal aspects of musical compositions, which, in effect, further enriched his great sensitivity and musical imagination.

Paderewski possessed an unusual combination of artistic intuition, intellect, and good heartedness. Above all, his artistic spirit was extremely strong – he was able to project his interpretations with enormous conviction and strength. This led to the legend of his "inexplicable magic," a term which so often appears in descriptions of his concerts. Indeed, some elements of artistic expression cannot be described or measured (like artistic individuality or personal aura); others, which can be described, named, or even evaluated, belong simply to the area of craftsmanship.

Paderewski's aesthetics had a strong connection with his ethical principles, which seem to be a source of the great nobility of his artistic creations. Today, in the era of recording technology, which favors performances that are cleaner but with no doubt more mechanical, the pianism of Paderewski often meets with harsh criticism and is not always appreciated. The cause of this situation lies in our inability to judge objectively these means of expression that are no longer in use, such as frequent arpeggiation of chords, or playing bass notes before notes of a right-hand melody. Indeed, abuses such as these – and a lack of moderation in tempo rubato – were typical for Paderewski's times. On the other hand, a complete abandonment of these means of expression weakens our artistic vocabulary. Today, it would seem reasonable to apply them wherever they seem appropriate, according to the character and logic of a musical composition, with good taste as our guide.[2]

Paderewski's repertoire was based on masterpieces of piano literature. A complete list of works included in his repertoire is not yet available. The names Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt appear most often in his concert programs. He also played many of his own compositions, as well as works by Bach, Mozart, Scarlatti, Haendel, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Hummel, Debussy, plus a number of works by contemporary composers, which nowadays are only rarely performed. From the works of Karol Szymanowski, Paderewski played only the Etude op. 4 in B flat Minor. He admitted that he did not understand modern compositions, and composers such as Schönberg, Webern or Berg did not interest him.

Paderewski's concert career began with a highly acclaimed debut in Paris, on March 3, 1888. The debut was preceded by earlier attempts to concertize, such as the one-

year long tour through parts of Russia, or appearances in Krakow, Warsaw, and Alsace. For Paderewski, the following years were very successful. They led him to several countries, to the most famous concert halls, and placed him in front of demanding audiences (for example, in London, where he initially was harshly criticized by George Bernard Shaw).

One can learn about Paderewski's performing style from the few available recordings of his playing. These recordings are quite flawed, as they were made when the recording technology was just beginning to develop. However, they provide us with objective facts about his playing and we are not forced to rely solely on subjective impressions left to us by the pianist's contemporaries.

The first striking element of Paderewski's pianism is his beautiful, elegant and strong sound, which is always well projected and full of clarity and color. The sound quality is a result of the pianist's fantastic dexterity and of the strength of his fingers (one can see Paderewski's well-built hands on some photographs). The pianist's excellent articulation is best observed in fast runs, where, in both piano and forte, Paderewski achieves clarity and lightness. His very even, resonating trills and scales give the impression of being performed with limitless ease. His phrasing confirms the pianist's exceptional musical imagination, fantasy and intuition. He shows unusual flexibility in shaping of a musical phrase, as well as an unconstrained, sometimes almost capricious way of dealing with a wide variety of nuances. Moreover, strong chords and octaves suggest that Paderewski was aware of the need to exercise his hands regularly, almost in an athletic fashion, so that he was able to express himself freely on modern pianos. All the above elements of the pianist's style can be easily heard in Paderewski's preserved recordings. Unfortunately a number of them are very limited.

Paderewski's recordings also attest to the artist's ability to deal with the architecture of a given musical work, an ability to distinguish properly between its more and less important elements and to precisely decode a composition's hidden life and character. This is seen first of all in Paderewski's choice of tempo, which is always perfectly accurate. This element of Paderewski's style becomes especially interesting in virtuoso works, for example, in Liszt's *Leggerezza*. The criticism of Paderewski's supposedly insufficient piano technique seems rather ridiculous. In my opinion, an evaluation of a musical performance in terms of "virtuoso achievements" is dangerous and lowers performing arts' high standards. Virtuosity in Paderewski's performances always serves musical expression and that is why it is not placed in the foreground. Even in bravura compositions, which seem perfectly suited for a display of virtuosity, Paderewski would concentrate on elegance, caprice, style, and charm (like in the Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 10*, which he played with unprecedented ease and lightness).

Critics of Paderewski's playing suggest that the pianist did not pay enough attention to musical text of a composition, for example, by adding octaves in the bass or sometimes even by changing the already existing musical text. One could easily have an impression that the pianist ignored composer's intentions or was not faithful to the notation. One must, however, consider previous performing traditions only to conclude that, in performance practices throughout ages, there always existed a certain margin of freedom left to the performer's knowledge, good taste and intuition. This margin of freedom includes, for example, ornaments in the music of J.S.Bach (the ornaments are not written out, therefore their execution is left to the good taste of performers), the *Afektenlehre* - performance mannerisms during the

baroque era, or improvised cadenzas in solo concertos, which were still popular during the lifetimes of Mozart and Beethoven. During Romanticism, virtuosos frequently displayed their keyboard skills by adding ornaments or variations to already existing musical material. Such practices were considered as the performers' right and privilege. They opened doors for further displays of musicality and artistic inventiveness. On the other hand, one must be aware of how much this practice was abused. Chopin, who, according to his contemporaries, "never played the same way twice," put enormous effort into writing down exact final versions of his works. And he used to get very upset with Liszt and others when they did not pay enough attention to his markings.

In his art, Paderewski showed a strong connection with the above tradition. However, he applied these practices with a thorough knowledge of the subject and only at such moments where he considered it to be psychologically justified. His artistic genius and unprecedented musical sensitivity, as well as broad knowledge and education, allowed him to move freely in the area which is known to be so dangerous for other pianists. Striking logic and clarity always dominated Paderewski's interpretations. For us, who have been educated in the ideals of simplicity, the versatility of his expression seems at times somewhat exaggerated. In the name of rigid aesthetic and theoretical ideas, one could easily accuse Paderewski of mannerism. Naturally, he was not free from the fashion of his times. Yet luckily, it does not play such an important role in his pianism. Attempts to undermine Paderewski's artistic authority on the basis that he applied means of expression that nowadays are out of use must be considered unjustified.

Possibly Paderewski's use of tempo rubato is the most controversial. He understood rubato perfectly and applied it naturally and with great taste; his understanding of rubato can be seen in his article on the subject,^[3] as well as in preserved recordings; the best examples of Paderewski's rubato are the recordings of Schubert's Impromptu op. 142 in B flat Major, Chopin's mazurkas, or Des Abends and Warum? from Schumann's op. 12. If one has the impression that the rubato is sometimes exaggerated, it is the result of the great flexibility of the pianist's artistic expressiveness, or possibly an outcome of his excitement on stage.

In his performing style, Paderewski concentrated on melody as the main bearer of emotional content. Even in dances – for example, in Chopin's Waltz op. 34 – Paderewski played all fast runs melodically. He never overlooked modulations, progressions or cadences. His was a very creative performance style, one can say, it was a "compositional" approach. Probably his creative spirit provoked him at times to "improve" compositions, by ornamenting melodies and enforcing cadences. Adding octaves in the bass line was probably a consequence of playing on modern pianos, an assumption that the composers themselves would have done exactly the same.

Arpeggiated chords represent yet another controversy about Paderewski's pianism. For Paderewski, this performance practice was not a general rule, and therefore it was not a mannerism. His use of arpeggiated chords depended on internal "action" of a given piece and on the work's character. Paderewski applied such chords mostly in lyrical, delicate moments, to emphasize important parts of a measure and to fill them with feeling and emotion. In moments of higher drama or tension, such a means of expression does not appear; all the chord tones in such moments are played simultaneously.

The expressiveness of Paderewski's pianism has a grand emotional scope. From seriousness, majesty, dignity and heroism, through drama and tragedy, to lyricism, poetry, intellectual reflection, dance, or even caprice, and humor. In order to assess Paderewski's art properly, one would have to analyze all of his available recordings. There is no space for such an endeavor in the present sketch. It is only possible to bring the reader's attention to certain aspects of his playing and to signal their importance.

In general terms, Paderewski's performance style can be described as romantic, declamatory, and based on the prosody of human speech. Here again, Paderewski approaches Chopin in his understanding of music. Paderewski was also an alumnus of the Polish piano school, as it can be seen in his special kind of lyricism and melancholy, patriotic or heroic tone and noble pride. In Paderewski's interpretations greater musical forms assumed monumental frames and a classical balance of expressive means. All his interpretations and each note in them were filled with noble feelings. In romantic works, such as Chopin's or Schubert's, emotions were usually heightened. Paderewski carried out his interpretative ideas with utmost accuracy, intelligence and highly impressive consistence.

The outstanding qualities of Paderewski's spirit and heart were present not only in his art, but also in his generosity and friendliness towards his compatriots and all young artists in need.[4]

The following quotations from press reviews of Paderewski's concerts will probably best summarize my discussion: [5]

"A resurrected Chopin" – so was called Paderewski after his debut in Paris. Another review says: "Last Monday the Erard Hall witnessed the greatest success of its season. Mr. Paderewski, a great pianist, was worshipped as both composer and virtuoso. He is without doubt one of the most outstanding pianists whom we know." After a concert with the orchestra Lamoureux, where Paderewski played the Saint-Saens Concerto in C Minor, the following was printed: "This pianist has so many high-quality assets; his virtuosity is extraordinary, his playing full of contrasts..." Another review of the same concert says: "Mr. Paderewski is a first class virtuoso." Another review states: "We would like to remind you...about the newest success of Mr. Paderewski, a most outstanding pianist, who came this year to us from abroad." Yet another: "His talent is beyond dispute, and his virtuosity overcomes the greatest difficulties with complete ease."

In British reviews, one can find a description of Paderewski's concert from June 30, 1891 at the Saint James Hall:

"The Chopin Recital of Mr. Paderewski...attracted probably the largest and the most enthusiastic audience since the time of Rubinstein. Undoubtedly both the popularity of the repertoire and its perfect interpretation were a good enough reason to be there... the playing of Mr. Paderewski has a strong national character, indeed always a great attraction, but nowhere this character is seen so clearly as it is in his performances of works by Chopin. It was not the Chopin to which we are used to; where the composer said *giusto* we dealt with delicate and capricious hesitations, and passages expected in *forte* were sometimes played in *piano*...In some works it seems as if gracefulness took place of melancholy, and passion had a shadow of cruelty, but when a Pole is interpreted by such a talented compatriot, it would be

risky to make assumptions who of those two more appropriately understood the musical text. In any case, these were the interpretative characteristics of the Fantasy in F minor, the Sonata in B flat minor, as well as sixteen other compositions, in which all the genres of Chopin's music were represented. The Etude in G flat op. 25 was repeated, and the Waltz in D flat was played twice. There were three additional pieces at the end, after which we saw the wildest display of enthusiasm that ever happened at St. James."

In a sense, the reviewer accurately addressed the issues of the performer's interpretative liberties. This review confirms the reputation of Paderewski as a genius-chopinist. Another review from the same concert states about the repertoire: "it was dedicated entirely to works by Chopin, in whose music the pianist excels...The Berceuse was, among other works, the most successful piece on the program."

After Paderewski's concert at her residence, Queen Victoria noted in her diary: "He plays wonderfully, with strong expression and deep emotion. I truly think that he equals (Anton) Rubinstein."

Many years later, when Paderewski returned to Great Britain, he was welcomed with no less enthusiasm. His interpretation of Chopin's Concerto in F minor was described as follows: "The pianist showed in this work an entire range of grace and fantasy, connected with mastery of technical details...The convincing strength of his artistic expression, as well as spiritual and physical qualities of that expression, were simply unmistakable. From the beginning to the end of the work – a work which he personally really understands and was able to project that understanding onto listeners – he unflinchingly kept the audience's attention."

Reviews of that kind can be quoted indefinitely. They all show a complete approval of Paderewski's playing; many of them are enthusiastic. They all praise the great virtuosity of the master, the gift to win audiences through his art, and the ability to communicate the inner depth of the performed music. From all these individuals who were fortunate enough to participate in his concerts, real feasts for the soul, Paderewski's pianism brought him not only admiration of his listeners, but also genuine respect for his person. It is widely known that monarchs and princes bowed in front of this Great Artist and many renowned diplomats and politicians were his close friends.

For us, Paderewski's art will always remain the highest expression of Polish pianism.

Translation from Polish: Dr. Slawomir Dobrzanski

[1] Marian Marek Drozdowski "I. J. Paderewski. Zarys biografii politycznej." [I. J. Paderewski. An Outline of Political Biography] (Warsaw: Interpress, 1979).

[2] *The pianism of Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli is a good example of such understanding of the issue.*

[3] I. J. Paderewski. "Tempo rubato." *Słowo Polskie [The Polish Word]*, (Lvov: October 1910); *Scena i Sztuka [Stage and Art]*, (1910); *Przełom Muzyczny [Musical*

review], (1977), no. 8, pp.1-5. Possibly the most recent publication of the article is found in the journal *Chopin in the World* (Warsaw: International Federation of Chopin Societies, 2000), pp. 10-12.

[4] Among the individuals who benefited from Paderewski's help was the young Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, who was supported by Paderewski at the beginning of his career. Paderewski was a jury member at the Geneva Piano Competition in 1939, at which Michelangeli was awarded the top prize. For some time, Paderewski's manager took care of Michelangeli, and the Master himself provided a piano for the young pianist. As a student of Michelangeli myself, I had the opportunity to take notice of Paderewski's influence on my teacher, not only in the area of music, but also in the area of his relationship to young students.

[5] All quotations are from: *Władysław Dulęba, Zofia Sokołowska, Editors. Paderewski. Album.* (Krakow: PWM, 1976).