

Henryk Szeryng and Gary Graffman

AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Sonata No.1 in G major, Op 78 (27:43) Johannes Brahms

- 1 I. Vivace ma non troppo (10:42) (1833-1897)
2 II. Adagio (7:49)
3 III. Allegro molto moderato (9:12)

Coolidge Auditorium, Library of Congress, December 3, 1971

Sonata No 1 in A minor, Op. 105 (17:17) Robert Schumann

- 4 I. Mit Leidenschaftlichem Ausdruck (8:01) (1810-1856)
5 II. Allegretto (3:44)
6 III. Lebhaft (5:32)

Coolidge Auditorium, Library of Congress, December 3, 1971

7 Andante, piu tosto allegretto (6:03) Ludwig van Beethoven

from Sonata Op. 12, No. 2, in A major (1770-1827)

Coolidge Auditorium, Library of Congress, December 3, 1971

8 Rondo: Allegro (5:03) Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

from Sonata in C Major, K. 296 (1756-1791)

Coolidge Auditorium, Library of Congress, December 11, 1970

Henryk Szeryng, violin
Gary Graffman, piano

Henryk Szeryng and Gary Graffman in Recital at the Library of Congress

I consider music as the noblest language, bringing comfort, joy, inspiration and peace to mankind.

I think that it's vital that peace be preserved, and if music can help--then let's have music!

—Henryk Szeryng

In another era, violinist Henryk Szeryng (1918-1988) would have been regarded as a fantastico, the equivalent of the Renaissance Man. A Pole by birth, a Mexican by circumstance and inclination, and a citizen of the world by political and artistic disposition, Szeryng carved out a unique career and gleaned many world honors. In his daily life, Szeryng was a cosmopolite, a true world traveler, a polymath of astounding proportions. Much of his early and middle life were marked by a certain reticence and personal distance; this changed drastically after fellow Polish musician Artur Rubinstein revitalized Szeryng's career and repute. Suddenly the man who, in the words of Roman Totenberg, "would play music with you but not converse," became elegant and garrulous,



Szeryng with portrait of Rubinstein at the Library of Congress

a bon vivant after the manner of Rubinstein. But the innate generosity of the man and the artist was unquestionable. When Szeryng donated his 1734 "Hercules" Stradivarius to Mayor Teddy Kolleck of Jerusalem in 1972, it was merely the most public of any number of philanthropic gestures he had made, including having given precious violins to Israel's Schlomo Mintz and to Esprin Yopez of Ecuador.

I had the pleasure of working with one of Henryk Szeryng's "adopted" musical groups in the 1980's—the Atlanta Virtuosi, an ensemble led by Juan Ramirez, whom Szeryng had coached in Boston and in Mexico. The many hours of rehearsal and coaching at Ramirez's home revealed not only musical aspects of Szeryng's art, but his attention to every kind of minute detail. Once, when attempting to influence a rhythmic pattern in a Boccherini quintet that the group couldn't quite maneuver, Szeryng, while in the kitchen, raiding the refrigerator for dessert, heard Juan's infant son, David, humming to himself. "That's it!" cried Szeryng. "The youngster's got the right meter." And Szeryng could be generous in his praise to other artists: one colleague, sporting an LP copy of the Brahms *Violin Concerto* with Nathan Milstein and Eugen Jochum, tried to hide the competition from Szeryng's view, only to be admonished, "No, that's quite all right; it's a wonderful performance." After a performance of the Beethoven *Violin Concerto* with Szeryng, conductor Yoel Levi called Szeryng "the best-prepared musician with whom I have ever worked. It's uncanny. I came to the hotel suite to rehearse, and there was Henryk, at a keyboard, his parts all laid out, with all of his markings for the violin part. Then, he sat down and played the orchestral score, merely turning his head once or twice to see if I agreed with his tempos. I began to wonder exactly what my role was."

Henryk Szeryng (né Serek) was born on 22 September 1918, of Jewish parents in Zelazowa Wola, the same Warsaw suburb where Chopin was born. Henryk's father was a wealthy, successful industrialist who also liked to sing. It was Henryk's mother, however, a fine pianist, who introduced the boy to lessons in piano and harmony beginning at age five. Older brother George played the violin, and the sound of the instrument captivated young Henryk. "I switched to the violin at seven-and-a-half," Szeryng explained, "because I was attracted by the mystery of where each particular sound comes from without marks on the fingerboard. I had mastered the Bach *Inventions* on the piano, but the violin became my lifelong passion. My brother George provided me the good example of vibrato that I was later to adopt as my own, with a perfect balance of finger, wrist and forearm." Henryk found his first formal teacher in Maurice Frenkel, a former assistant to Leopold Auer in St. Petersburg prior to World War I. Auer's own pedagogy had been Russian and Franco-Flemish, the Belgian influence a direct result of Wieniawski, who had played in the court of the Czar in St. Petersburg. So, Auer's high principles came to Frenkel, those same notions of good technique inherited from the French and Viennese violin school of Jacques Dont and



Szeryng at age five

Helmersburger. Dont wrote *Caprices* for the violin that became core of the musical-technical Bible for aspiring virtuosos. "We need this technical side if we hope to play well a concerto or a sonata before the microphone," proffered Szeryng. "I excelled in those exercises stressing finger shifts and exactness of intonation, with my playing Pierre Rode's *Second Caprice* very slowly, comparing my intonation with open-strings whenever possible, thus training my ear. But Frenkel, I must say, did not adhere to any one particular method, not even the Carl Flesch system, with its use of double-stopping to build up and maintain technical proficiency. Frenkel did give me a perpetual concern for purity of tone."

Szeryng expanded on his pedagogy: "Flesch is probably the most meticulous and complete pedagogue of all—but he wasn't the only one who made a violinist of me. I had played for Hubermann shortly before I was ten, and he urged my parents to take me to Berlin and Paris for world-class teachers and to study counterpoint and composition. Hubermann suggested Willy Hess, Carl Flesch and Jacques Thibaud, and he provided me a letter of introduction to Hess in Berlin. My father maintained a residence there as well as in Paris. This was in 1928. Hess proved to be a solid yet obsolete musician, an old German taskmaster whose slides and position changes did not suit me. His execution of slides used the bridging fingers, so though he had technical security, he lacked dynamic and expressive projection. I stayed with Hess until 1932; then I acquired a special authorization to be admitted into the Berlin Hochschule for studies with Flesch. Flesch permitted discussion, even argument, from his pupils on matters of bowing and fingerings. He opened up to a spectrum of bowing sound from "oboe" tones near the bridge to "flute" sounds near the fingerboard. He rarely interrupted my lesson for demonstration,

taking notes that we would cover later. I found his own execution of a study piece solid and flawless, though the vibrato was to me slow. He could indulge in archaic glissandos that he would not permit his pupils. Perhaps his greatest gift, though, was his maintenance of a student's individual character and integrity as a person. He might eradicate the student's technical deficits, but he would never manipulate his personality."

Szeryng graduated from the Hochschule and accepted Nadia Boulanger's offer to study in Paris. "I felt it was a good idea to absorb several schools of pedagogy, so as to remain flexible—I thought of them as 'tendencies'—in case I should like to establish my own school some day, which I happily can say I did, in 1945, in Mexico. The French and the Russians cultivate a delicate, pure sound. The Germans are more concerned with musical expression. While some Russians did stress a big, ample sound, I found that I favored the Franco-Belgian school, which eschewed that large, forced sound which actually strangles the expressiveness. Gabriel Bouillon at the Paris Conservatory had something I wanted, even after Flesch. Bouillon had charm and a light touch, with a scintillating *saltando*. I also studied with the daughter of blind violinist Henri Berthelier, whom Kreisler admired. While Bouillon was an entertaining, social man, I remained with him only nine months, so it was Mlle. Berthelier who taught me more of the French spirit, through works like those of Lekeu, Roussel, Schmitt, and Pierné. One work Bouillon gave me for my repertory was the D major Concerto of Reynaldo Hahn, while for myself I found a beautiful piece in a concerto by Stan Golestan."

With the advent of World War II, Szeryng's career became suspended, and he traveled to London in 1939. He volunteered his services as a linguist and acquired an appointment as a liaison officer and interpreter for the

Polish government in exile by General Wladyslaw Sikorski. Between 1939 and 1945, Szeryng gave over 300 concerts for the Allied troops in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Since Mexico extended hospitality to Polish refugees, Szeryng decided to emigrate to Mexico in 1945, becoming a Mexican citizen in 1946. Even in relative obscurity, Szeryng managed to play new concerts and to learn and perform new, complex concertos from local composers, Chavez and Ponce. He set up classes in Mexico City, and he received the title of Mexico's Cultural Ambassador of Good Will in 1956. But it was in 1954 that Szeryng's fortunes changed, when Szeryng went backstage to congratulate fellow Pole Artur Rubinstein on a successful concert. Rubinstein invited Szeryng to see him and to play some Bach and selected sonatas, and immediately realized that Szeryng was a world-class talent. Among the telephone calls Rubinstein made on Szeryng's behalf, one was to impresario Sol Hurok.

Gary Graffman reminisced about Szeryng. "We played about ten concerts a year together for a period of about three years. He was an unbelievable person, so meticulous and formal, a real world traveler. He had always to be doing something, surrounded by people. He was forever late. And he, like me, loved to eat at all the good restaurants. He had played everything in the violinists' repertoire; and remember, as a pianist, I did not necessarily know this material, certainly not with the same breadth. Curiously, we did perform a work I never played again, the Chausson *Concerto, Op. 21 for Piano, Violin and String Quartet*, with faculty members from the Philadelphia Musical Academy at the Academy of Music. I would say he was an 'ambassador' in every sense of the word, always affable, eager to communicate with people, and music was his most universal language."

Gary Graffman was born in New York, of Russian parents, and began to play the piano at age 3. His father, a violinist, had given him a small fiddle, but when the instrument proved too cumbersome, piano lessons were substituted, though a return to the violin was planned. The young Graffman's affinity for the piano soon became evident, however, and at 7 he was accepted by the Curtis Institute for study with the renowned Isabelle Vengerova—exactly 50 years before he would become the school's director, following in the footsteps of luminaries Josef Hofmann, Efrem Zimbalist, and Rudolf Serkin. After graduation from Curtis, he worked intensively for several years with Vladimir Horowitz and, during the summers, at the Marlboro Music Festival with Rudolf Serkin. In 1948, Graffman won the prestigious Leventritt Award, which launched his international career. A highly acclaimed series of recordings soon followed, for Columbia (CBS) and RCA, including concertos by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Brahms, Chopin and Beethoven with the orchestras of New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Chicago and Boston, and with such conductors as Leonard Bernstein, Zubin Mehta, Eugene Ormandy and George Szell. In 1979, right hand injury briefly curtailed Graffman's performing career, until he decided to limit himself to the left-hand repertory mostly composed for Paul Wittgenstein. But Graffman soon expanded the range of this small circle of concertos, playing the North American premiere of the Korngold *Concerto* (1924) in 1985 with Zubin Mehta, and then the first work composed for him, Ned Rorem's *Piano Concerto No. 4 for Left Hand* in 1993. In 1996, Graffman and Leon Fleisher performed William Bolcom's *Concerto for Two Left Hands*. Other composers associated with the Curtis Institute who have composed concertos for him are Richard Danielpour, Daron Hagen, and Luis



Prado. Recently, Graffman premiered the *Concerto Nicolò for Piano Left Hand* by Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, recording it for Reference Recordings.

In the summer of 2005, Gary Graffman was invited to head the piano department at the new Canton International Summer Music Academy in Guangdong, China, giving him an opportunity to explore his love of education, chamber music, and Chinese culture.

Gary Graffman is the author of the highly praised memoir, *I Really Should Be Practicing*, published by Doubleday in 1981. He has also written popular articles on non-musical subjects and found time to pursue a scholarly interest in Asian Art (which he collects) and photography. He has received honorary doctorates from the University of Pennsylvania and the Juilliard School, among others. He has been honored by the City of New

York with its Handel Medallion, by the City of Philadelphia on its Walk of Fame, and by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as recipient of the Governor's Arts Award, recognizing him for his varied accomplishments, including his "leadership of Curtis."

The Library of Congress concert of 3 December 1971 brought Henryk Szeryng and Gary Graffman together for a program that included the *A minor Sonata*, Op. 105 of Robert Schumann and the *G major Sonata* of Brahms. The Brahms G major Sonata was composed in 1880, with

Ferdinand David's greatest pupil, Joseph Joachim, in mind. Brahms took thematic and rhythmic tissue from two of his *Regenlieder*, Op. 59 for his motivic development in the outer movements. The second movement, an *Adagio in E-flat*, is particularly sweet and melancholy, perhaps an evocation of the death of Brahms's godson, Felix Schumann (1854-1879). Graffman opens this movement with a finely wrought piano solo until the violin's entry and their procession to the B minor eulogy at bar 30. Both Szeryng and Graffman are concerned with dynamic nuance, attending to Brahms's insistence on gradations of



mezzo-forte and mezzo-piano. The emotional anguish in the *Adagio* intensifies within a strict parameter of restrained intensity. Graffman accounts himself with clarity of rhythmic detail in the dotted figures that permeate the last movement, a rondo in G minor. The Szeryng singing line has rarely been more expressive than it is here. The hints of the opening movement, with its troubles and melancholy reflections, provide the bittersweet ethos of this music and its intimations of mortality.

Composed in 1851 for a circle of friends that included violinists Ferdinand David and Josef Wasielewski, the Schumann *A minor Sonata* is relatively brief but extremely condensed emotionally. Schumann seems to have decided that a constant interweaving of sixteenth notes would carry both the beauties and the disturbances in this music, a propulsion that marks the last movement, *Lebhaft*, as well. The second movement lies in a nervous and brittle F major; but the music hovers more in the dominant key, with only a quick butterfly's landing on an F major cadence. Its two episodes are in the minor key and have an alternately introspective and aggressive character. Achieving a wonderful balance of parts, Szeryng and Graffman communicate the lovely but obsessive riffs in the outer movements, moving towards an inexorable sense of finality in the conclusion, with its hint of the Hungarian gypsy that no less influenced the Brahms ethos.

The slow movement of Beethoven's *Sonata in A*, Op. 12, No. 2, announced by Szeryng from the stage, provides an encore for an audience thoroughly beguiled by two artists of equally compelling musical stature. The Mozart encore, from a concert the duo gave at the Library a year earlier, is taken from the *Sonata in C*, K. 296. It is pure *buffa bel canto*, an

effervescent piece of vocal music written for the instrumental medium.

Notes by Gary Lemco

Dr. Gary Lemco is a music and literary critic. He is the author of Nietzsche as Educator. San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992.

The sources for this essay include:

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