with noted violinist Adolf Busch, both as a duo-sonata partner, and with the Busch Chamber Orchestra (and, from 1935, as Busch's son-in-law). An American debut in 1936 with the New York Philharmonic under Toscanini led to Serkin's decision to relocate to the U.S. in 1939. Invited to join the piano faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music, he quickly rose to become head of the piano department, and, from 1968, president of the Institute. He devoted his summers to cultivating several generations of young musicians at the Marlboro Festival in Vermont.

Many observers have remarked that Serkin was not a natural pianist. Indeed, he seemed rather to play by force of will alone, and the strength of his musicianship lies more in the deep insight that he brought to the music of the composers he holds dearest -- traditional Austrian and German masters -- than in virtuosic pianism. In the sonatas of Beethoven, Serkin finds particular inspiration. His Beethoven interpretations do not necessarily please the listener in terms of superficial "beauty," but rather convey the unique mixture of logic, violence, and spiritual transcendence that he feels is the essence of Beethoven's work. In the Brahms concerti, Serkin's vision is nothing short of titanic.

Rudolf Serkin's discography is impressive, spanning most of the general repertory from Bach to the early/mid-twentieth century, and including such relative novelties as the F minor Concerto of Max Reger, a composer Serkin had an abiding affinity for. His work at the Curtis Institute, and, during the summers, at the Marlboro Festival, has made him one of the most influential American teachers of the post-World War II era. Serkin's son Peter is also a pianist of considerable renown.

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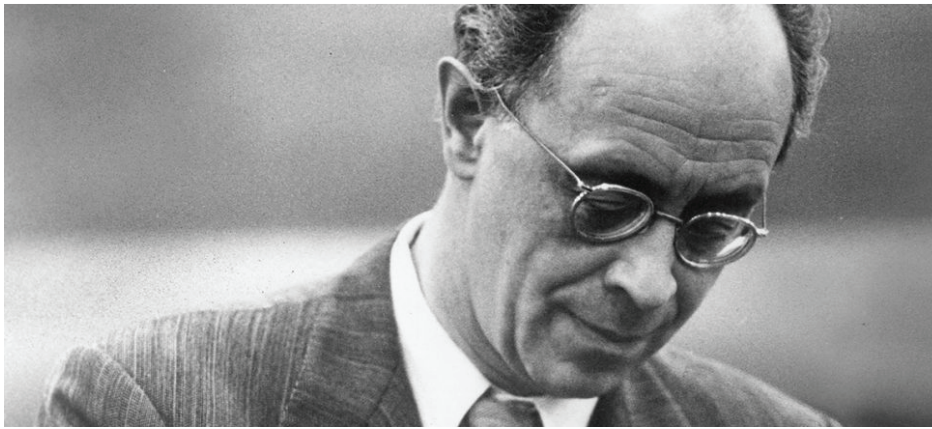
Rudolph Serkin



Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 5 "Emperor"

Leonard Bernstein / New York Philharmonic Orchestra

It is a truism to say that Ludwig van Beethoven changed the course of music history. However, it is another matter, and a more exciting one, to hear a Beethoven composition that actually did change history. The "Emperor" Piano Concerto is such a work.

Before Beethoven, the role of the performer was more creative than in later times. Performers were expected to improvise not only ornaments and filler passages but, in a solo concerto, also a whole cadenza (long solo near the end of the first movement). It was the performer's job to "finish" the composition for the audience (in the same way, today, that an interior decorator finishes the work of an architect and a builder). Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto wrested that decorative privilege from the performer, who often took too much license with it anyway. In this concerto's first movement just before the conclusion, where the soloist's cadenza is expected, Beethoven wrote in the score, "Non si fa una cadenza, ma s'attacca subito il seguente" ("Do not play a cadenza, but immediately proceed to the following"). With those fateful words, Beethoven seized full control and forever closed what one analyst has called "the saddest chapter in the story of the concerto." The movement continues with Beethoven's own written-out cadenza, briefly treating the two principal themes and gradually bringing in the orchestra for a triumphant ending.

The second movement projects a nocturnal atmosphere through its song-like theme and following delicate treatments of it. At the soft, sustained ending, the finale bursts forth exuberantly. This movement has an ingenious architecture in which the main theme keeps reappearing between episodes, always growing and evolving. However, despite the analysis that such formal genius invites, the concerto's finale is impetuous and spontaneous, written with the exhilaration and pure joy of a creative artist making a modern form out of an old one.

The "Emperor" Concerto was written in 1809, the year of the French siege and occupation of Vienna, when Beethoven's patron and student, Archduke Rudolf, suddenly had to leave the city to protect his safety. This was the occasion of Beethoven's Les Adieux piano sonata, dedicated to Rudolph, as was the concerto. By 1809, Beethoven had grown too deaf to perform at the piano, and perhaps for that reason the "Emperor" was his final piano concerto. Probably because of the war, the work had to wait until 1812 for its premiere. At that occasion, the press was ecstatic, calling the work "one of the most original, imaginative, most effective but also one of the most difficult of all existing concertos." The exact origin of the nickname "Emperor" is unknown, but a story persists that a French army officer attending the premiere enthusiastically dubbed it "an emperor among concertos."

Rudolf Serkin emerged from the environment of post-World War I Austria to become one of the most profound and challenging pianists of the century. Childhood studies in Vienna with Richard Robert (piano), and Joseph Marx and Arnold Schoenberg for composition, led to a 1915 debut performance with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra at the age of 12. After 1920, Serkin was associated

Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 5 "Emperor"

Leonard Bernstein / New York Philharmonic Orchestra

Rudolph Serkin, piano

1 Allegro 19:31
2 Adagio Un Poco Mosso 8:46
3 Rondo (Allegro) 9:56

Recorded by Columbia Records at Manhattan Center, New York, 1962

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