

Marc-André Hamelin Talks About Godowsky

BY PETER BURWASSER

It has been my pleasure to chat about music with Marc-André Hamelin many times over the last few years. I should disclose that the celebrated Canadian-born artist is also my neighbor, and so I bump into him while he is jogging along the streets of Philadelphia's Queen Village, as well as encountering his music-making, often as accompanist for his wife, soprano Jody Karin Applebaum, on local stages. A fairly regular topic in our conversations, an object of mutual fascination; is the composer and master pianist Leopold Godowsky. Hamelin's lavishly praised Hyperion recording of the Chopin-Godowsky Études is now joined by a new recording of the Godowsky Piano Sonata and the Passacaglia (reviewed in this issue). I suggested to Hamelin that the music of Godowsky has figured in the pianist's musical life for a long time.

M.A.H.: Yes, but I didn't come to him myself. It was really mainly because of my father. He was interested in him relatively early on because he had read about him in various books—whatever was available at the time—most notably Abram Chasin's *Speaking of Pianists*, and also *The Great Pianists* of Harold Schonberg. Both depicted Godowsky as an extremely interesting and desirable to know figure. But at the time that my father became interested in him, I would say maybe in the early to mid 60s, it was very difficult to find any of the music. Around 1970 my father was rather lucky to find a couple of music stores, one in Montreal and the other one in New York, which still had an appreciable cache of Godowsky's original sheet music. That started the collecting urge, wanting to amass as much original sheet music of Godowsky as possible. I helped him considerably in that regard, once I got to the States in 1980 and also traveling around the world, and found quite a few things for him. His collection came to include—I would say maybe 75% of it—was original sheet music.

P.B.: I thought you were going to say he found copies of recordings of Godowsky playing the piano

M.A.H.: No, I'm talking strictly about sheet music. At the time, there were a few reissues of Godowsky from 78s, but these were slow in coming. That really began in the early to mid 70s. I'm really talking about the discovery of the music itself. One thing, though, that he had not been able to even see was the Sonata. I believe in the late 70s he ordered a copy of the manuscript from the Library of Congress, where the manuscript is, and also got authorization from Godowsky's son to make a copy of the work. This piece really fascinated him. I never paid it that much attention until October of 2000. Up to then, I had sort of vaguely considered the piece as something that started very well and weakened with each movement. That was a very careless opinion, I realize now. In October of 2000, Robert Lienau, the original publishers, contacted me, and wanted me, on the heels of my success of the Chopin-Godowsky Étude recordings, to write a preface for a projected reprint of the Sonata. It took me aback—I was very pleased that they asked me, but since I didn't know the work I wanted to have some time to get to know it a little better. Then I did something I hadn't done before. I actually sat down and read the thing. All at once I realized that there was something there of great value. Unfortunately, I procrastinated, and they finally asked somebody else to do the preface. The new addition finally came out, reprinted by the original publishers.

P.B.: Another Marc-André got the job.

M.A.H.: Marc-André Roberge. He's actually a good friend of mine. He's a musicologist in Quebec City.

P.B.: You made recordings of Godowsky even before the first Hyperion issue.

M.A.H.: My second CD ever, actually, was with CBC (Radio Canada). They were looking for projects, at the time, that were at the fringes of the repertoire. They weren't looking for Schumann or Chopin. I suggested Godowsky, and they said yes.

P.B.: What year was that?

M.A.H.: I recorded it in 1987, and it came out in 1988.

P.B.: Given the legendary difficulty of the music, I assume you had already been playing it at that time.

M.A.H.: Yes, some of it, but I also learned some of it for the recording. It was not complete, but a small selection of things that I particularly liked. When you consider that there is a collection of the quasicomplete works of Godowsky, from Carl Fischer, under way—it's going to total something like five 300-page volumes—what I did on that CBC collection was a minuscule portion of what is available. I intended it to be a significant selection nevertheless.

P.B.: When did you start working on the Sonata?

M.A.H.: Soon after I received it from the publishers in October 2000. It did not take me very long, perhaps just a few days, to think about recording it.

P.B.: And at that point, the Chopin-Godowsky had been released for about a year?

M.A.H.: No, it had been only about six months.

P.B.: The Sonata is an odd and fascinating mix of styles. Strauss waltzes seem to appear, Bach and Handel are alluded to, and there is some Liszt-like passagework.

M.A.H.: It's a pity he didn't leave any program notes. It would have been interesting to see what his thinking was behind this. His wish was, perhaps, simply to emulate some of the great Germanic

sonatas of the 19th century. I have a feeling that's a large part of it. There is, if not a stylistic imitation, a spirit of Brahms very much in the work, among other people.

P.B.: Brahms wrote waltzes, and loved the form, but you don't think of the Viennese waltz as part of his more serious style.

M.A.H.: No, but it clearly was a significant form for Godowsky. He wrote tons of pieces in the genre. There is a series of 30 pieces and another series of 24 pieces, all in three-quarter time.

P.B.: But isn't this what sets him apart from Brahms and his ilk, that he allowed an admixture of these forms where Brahms kept them separate?

M.A.H.: Yes, but I wouldn't say that the waltz in the Godowsky Sonata is whimsical. It is somewhat nostalgic and graceful. The middle section is more energetic and animated, but I don't really find any overt humor there. As a whole, the work is rather lofty, in all of its parts.

P.B.: While reading through the score, I was struck by the relative ease of some of the music, considering the composer's reputation.

M.A.H.: You have the slow movement, which doesn't demand much. The only really difficult one is the third one, although I did find other portions of the work, for instance, the beginning of the waltz, difficult to bring off. As you see, (points to the score) the texture is really rather thin, which actually is part of the problem. It doesn't look difficult, but it took a long while before I could find the right atmosphere, the right tone.

P.B.: The last movement is practically a sonata by itself.

M.A.H.: Almost. It is quite a construction. I found it extraordinarily difficult, although it's not difficult to play, but just to find a balance between the components. It's a formidable experiment as far as bringing a closure to a large sonata like this. I don't think anything like this had been done before, or since.

P.B.: The Passacaglia is another unusual work. The theme is a teaser. He uses the bass lead-in to the Schubert Eighth Symphony's first movement and not the very famous main theme.

M.A.H.: Well, it's an extremely suitable theme for a Passacaglia, so perhaps that was enough for him. And it's a potent musical idea, even though it is not used very prominently in the movement of the symphony. The suitability of the theme is simply that it can be used as a ground bass, and thus as a basis for variations. A well-known relative of this theme would be that of Bach's Organ Passacaglia in C Minor.

P.B.: You spoke of Godowsky's connection to German academicism. There is also the matter of his fascination with the left hand. He seems to have had a deep pedagogic streak.

M.A.H.: Godowsky was dedicated to the training of the left hand. He was very conscious of the fact that pianists' left hands are generally underdeveloped and he wanted to give them an education. He did it more thoroughly and more inventively than just about anybody. If you look at the Saint-Saëns études for the left hand, for example, on a purely pianistic point of view they are not very imaginative. Some would say from a musical point of view as well. But Godowsky really sought to give the illusion of two hands playing when only one hand is. And his particular brand of contrapuntal thinking and feeling for textures at the piano really allowed that.

P.B.: And when he wrote for two hands, there was the illusion of three, or even four hands playing.

M.A.H.: Oh yes, well that was his aim. Apart from the possible benefit to pianists, he also wanted to benefit composers. He wanted to open the possibilities of future piano writing, such as making two hands sound like four.

P.B.: Despite his reputation as one of the great piano technicians of all time, the Sonata and the Passacaglia are not bravura pieces. Although there is a lot of density.

M.A.H.: Oh, very much so. Godowsky thought this way, contrapuntally, naturally. This was his way. He could write very simply as well, but he always gave great attention to harmonious counterpoint. But there is no exploitation of virtuosity because I think that he didn't think it had its place in his music. The only movement in the Sonata, for example, that could be called difficult, in a digital way, is the Scherzo, the third movement.

P.B.: In a way, even the Chopin-Godowsky studies are not bravura in the Lisztian sense, and the people who fall off of their chairs when they hear your recording of them tend to be connoisseurs.

M.A.H.: I suppose so, and many people consider this transparency a drawback. Some pianists like to spend their time learning things that will show them off and make the toil and trouble invested in the learning process apparent to the listener, and they want people to appreciate what they've gone through. But I've always thought that the music comes first. Whatever I have to go through, I do so willingly, and whether it's apparent or not is out of my control. To me, it's not that important.

P.B.: Come to think of it, considering something like his paraphrase of the Strauss waltz *Artist's Life*, he was certainly capable of writing bravura music.

M.A.H.: I'm not sure he didn't regret doing the paraphrases, because at one point in his career he was widely criticized for them. To certain ears they can be a bit overloaded. I've been used to them since childhood, so I actually like them a whole lot.

P.B.: I think it's fair to call *Artist's Life* over the top.

M.A.H.: (laughs) But if it's really played for what it's worth it can be a delightful experience.

P.B.: Both of the aforementioned sources, the books by Chasins and Schonberg, talk about Godowsky's problems with public performance.

M.A.H.: Yes, he was at his best playing for friends at home. There was a desire for perfection that he was never able to couple in public with a sense of freedom.

P.B.: Do you think that this persona of performance is reflected in his music?

M.A.H.: It's certainly the way he saw music. He was extremely careful. When he prepared for a recording, he consulted all editions, he revised fingerings, he took every possible technical limitation of recording apparatuses of the period under consideration. So I think that is largely the kind of thing that constricted him.

P.B.: How familiar are you with his recordings?

M.A.H.: To a certain extent. I do not really regard them as successful. I don't return to them very often. If you listen to his Chopin Nocturnes, the sonorities are beautiful but—it's hard to find

the right adjective for them. You expect florid surfaces, and his surfaces are totally blank. It's very beautiful, but there's nothing to it, really.

P.B.: Did he record any of his own music?

M.A.H.: Unfortunately almost none. Most of the very few recordings that exist are private issues, or unreleased recordings. They do give us a glimpse, but certainly only a very tantalizing one. There are a couple of really wonderful recordings of the song transcriptions, Schubert's *Gute Nacht* and *Morgengruss*. They are probably his best recordings. He did actually record a number of his works, but those are piano rolls. As far as I know, not all of them have been found. I'm sure tons of them have been destroyed. The rolls mostly date from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century and not much later. Among the things he recorded were some of the Chopin-Godowsky études. I've never seen one of these rolls, and they've never been done on LP or CD. They've never turned up.

P.B.: Nobody knows where they are?

M.A.H.: That's right. I think these things were issued in very limited quantities. You have to realize that these piano rolls were only available to the rich. You look on the boxes and the price for one roll can be anywhere from three to five dollars. At the time that was enormous.

P.B.: Do you find any value in piano rolls?

M.A.H.: It's very difficult to appreciate them now. The great majority of piano roll transfers that are available to us are not done well. Some are really done atrociously. My father was quite knowledgeable about piano rolls, and I learned quite a bit from him. Also, my grandparents, his parents, had a player piano. It was a foot pumper, but still, it allowed me to find out about what wonderful things these machines could do. I appreciate them more for popular music than for classical music.

P.B.: Did the sound of Godowsky's piano playing influence you at all?

M.A.H.: No. I use the music. That touches upon something that I find regrettable. I, as a musician, have access to the music, the score itself, to evaluate a piece of music. Other people use other recordings. That's something I'm always up against, and I can't do a thing about it. Even if I try to be as true to the score as possible, that's not what most people are going to judge me by. They're going to judge me by other recordings.

P.B.: That is absolutely true in the case of standard repertoire, but what about Godowsky?

M.A.H.: It is even true in the case of Godowsky, with other people who have recorded the same things. There's going to be four recordings of the Sonata, including mine, to appear in the space of a year. That's incredible! It had been recorded only once before, in 1990, and the first movement appeared on an LP in 1970, and that's it. There was also a piano roll, which I believe was hand punched. It wasn't anyone's performance, and that was cons ago.

P.B.: A final question. Is it part of the appeal of Godowsky that there is something almost antipublic in his use of complexity in such a subtle way?

M.A.H.: But he was such a sincere musician! I can't imagine for a moment that he would have wanted to be antipublic. He wanted appreciation above all else, and for the greatest period of his life he did get it, although he was criticized for certain things, notably the Chopin studies, from people who didn't know what he was all about. Those studies, above all else, strike me as very beautiful music. I manage to set the pianistic angle aside when I listen to them. It's extraordinary to think, and some people won't believe me when I say, but I think the technical challenge is almost secondary. I mean that, first and foremost, Godowsky set out to write aesthetically beautiful music.