

V LADIMIR ASHKENAZY

THE LIFELONG PROCESS OF MUSIC

BY NANCY S. GRANT

EXCEPT FOR THE PIANO technician, two orchestra assistants monitoring acoustics, and some widely scattered observers, the house seats are empty. Vladimir Ashkenazy, on the last leg of his November 1986 American tour, has come to rehearse Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini*, Op. 43, with Kentucky's Louisville Orchestra. He heads for the piano, oblivious to the bank of twenty-foot-high mirrors lining the front of the rehearsal hall. His wife, who often travels with him, taps her foot as she reads the morning paper. Conductor Lawrence Leighton Smith gives the downbeat.

During one of the 24 variations, a new one creeps in: The orchestra and Ashkenazy are a fraction of a beat apart. Smith cuts off the orchestra, but Ashkenazy, apparently enthralled with the passage, continues for a few measures before Smith gets his attention. Maybe the orchestra was too slow, the conductor suggests hesitantly. "No, no, I was too fast," the pianist replies. He leans over the bench and peers into the darkness to address his wife. "What do you think—wasn't I a little fast?" "Too fast," comes the soft-spoken confirmation. Ashkenazy directs the conductor to stop blaming his orchestra. They start again; this time the performance is flawless.

It is no wonder that Ashkenazy lacks pretension: Every fiber of his concentration goes toward his music. From time to time in the rehearsals with the Louisville Orchestra, he springs up from the bench for whispered conferences with the con-

ductor, suggesting a change in dynamics here, an adjustment of note values there. During a fifteen-minute break, he approaches the piano technician to request that he not tune it as tightly before the next rehearsal; it took a lot of force today, he explains, to get the thicker sound he prefers. He adjusts the height of the piano bench several times before deciding to try another that has better padding, and then it's back to work.

At 50, the Russian virtuoso has topped the classical music profession in several areas. Since appearing on the cover of the June '77 *Keyboard*, he has built up a hefty catalog of recordings on the London label that covers most major piano works by Beethoven, Chopin, Rachmaninoff, and Scriabin. In recent years he has performed and recorded as a chamber musician, most notably with violinist Itzhak Perlman and cellist Lynn Harrell. And he has garnered praise as a conductor, whether working from the piano bench or the podium, with such orchestras as the London Philharmonia, the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, and the Cleveland Orchestra. The one musical area he has not tackled—and has no desire to—is composition: "I am not endowed with that great gift, that great tortuous gift." Recent developments in his personal life include a move from Iceland, to which he emigrated from Moscow in the early '60s, to Lucerne, Switzerland, where he lives with his wife and five children.

As we arrived for the interview, Ashkenazy was standing at the front desk at his hotel, reading a telex with an uncon-

monly studious expression. Fearing bad news, we asked if it were something requiring his attention. He folded the telex neatly, replaced it in the envelope, and replied matter-of-factly, "Everything requires attention." In the following interview, his comments seem to echo that theme.

* * * * *

HOW DO YOU VIEW TODAY'S CLASSICAL scene?

I can't complain of the number of people who come to my concerts, but I don't know whether it's because of me or because there's a general interest in classical music itself. What is very gratifying is that I see many young people who come to concerts, because they come backstage. Scores and scores of them, so that shows at least that classical music has roots in the general population and not just in what we call the older generation, which is, of course, very good.

I think "great music," or what is called "classical music," is a misleading term. What is classical? People coined this term to describe anything that's played on instruments other than for jazz or pop purposes. It's a misnomer. Classical music is the greatest music of the world. I think people often get turned off from it because "classical" suggests something scholastic, something boring. You know how it is—even from school age, mention "classical" and people reply, "Oh, what do I care about that?" It's a pity it's called "classical"; it should be called "the music."

People come to hear *music*. All over

the world I see young people who are extremely interested. They collect records, they go to orchestral concerts. I think if there's any future for mankind, it is in people who are interested in these forms of art, not in stamping your feet and shouting the names of pop stars who just appeal to the lowest instincts in us—which are destructive, never constructive.

After rehearsing today with the Louisville Orchestra, you stayed behind to practice. Was there a particular passage you needed to go over?

Journalists always want to find something to put their finger on, something unusual, but life is not like that; there isn't that much unusualness in life. The life of a concert artist is basically a routine. It's very hard slavery, that's what it is! There isn't much glory and brilliance about our life.

If you're serious about your art, what you want to express, it's a constant struggle, constant slavery. Of course, there's a lot of gratification and satisfaction when things go well, when you feel you've done something. Maybe you achieved something at least for that particular evening, that performance. But then, there's always another one—you have to do it again and again and again. What's the point of my telling you what I practiced in the half hour that I stayed behind? I practiced the same pieces, some places that I thought could be better, some notes that I think are more important. There is always something to practice; there is no end to it! It's an everlasting process of self-improvement.

If you live with the music you play, then obviously you think about it all the time. In fact, I just got a CD player for my car. Most of all, it's thinking about the music, living with it, and leading a full, stimulating life. There's a constant identification with what you're doing in life that sometimes brings you to a re-evaluation of something you're playing.

So even after you've mastered a piece you continue to fine-tune it.

There's always something. Now, for instance, I've played the [Rachmaninoff] *Rhapsody* quite a lot in my life and I thought I knew it very well, yet today at the rehearsal I

found one note in a slow variation that shouldn't really be there. The cellos play a D against the piano's D \flat , so I asked the cellos to cut their note off a bit earlier. You know, I've conducted some symphonies many, many times, and each time you come to

rehearsal there's something you find out that you didn't think of. Or an orchestra player asks you, "How about this place?" and you think, "Ah, why didn't I think about this before?" Especially in something like Beethoven's *Fifth* or Tchaikovsky's *Sixth*, you think, "Ah, yes, there is something." Today it was that note with the cellos. I fixed it now, once and for all [laughs], and now I'll always remember it.

If you are constantly re-thinking the music you play, do you ever consider re-recording something from ten or fifteen years ago because you now think of it differently? [Ed. Note: From 1971 through 1981, Ashkenazy recorded the complete Beethoven sonatas, which were held to be released as a set in September, 1981. A few months before the release, he decided to re-record four sonatas: the Pathétique, the Appassionata, and Op. 31, No. 3.]

No. You see, you're not always aware that you think of a piece differently, because it's not really a revolutionary process, it's an evolutionary process. In evolutions you often don't notice how you develop your thinking, how you've departed



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from what you thought before. That applies to everything we do in life. Your attitudes and relationships with people will change, but you can't say, "Today I thought like this and tomorrow I will think like that." Maybe ten, twenty years later, you will think back and say, "How could I possibly have treated somebody like that? This happened to me and now I know better than that." But it doesn't happen overnight. So yes, I may look back at some of my performances and think, "What an idiot I was. Why on earth did I play it like that? Like a complete fool!"

But that doesn't mean I will want to re-record it; just because I think of a piece differently doesn't mean I'll go back to the record company and say, "Oh, please, let me remake it again." I don't operate like that. There are many other things to do—learn new pieces, play concerts, and so on. You just can't deliberately or arrogantly decide, "Now I know everything; I should do it again." It's not that simple, because it's one thing to know and another thing to communicate this knowledge when you do it again. Sometimes a remake is a flop—you might think you do it better and, in fact, you do it worse. Heaven knows! You can't put your finger on it; it's all unpredictable. Art is such a thing.

Do you judge piano competitions?

If I can avoid it, never! They're so boring. Oh, I get so exasperated! I fall asleep. It takes some extraordinary talent to make me listen and say, "Now, that is something." I just fall asleep, and I think it's such a waste of time for me—I mean, I could be doing much more worthwhile work by playing or learning something. But sitting as a member of a jury? Anyone can do that. There are many wonderful people in music who can judge, no worse than I can, so why not them? I'd better practice, play and conduct. I think that's my vocation.

Sometimes it's very difficult to refuse. Once I had to agree because it was a friend of mine who really begged me to do it. Another time, it was the widow of a famous pianist who begged me. I couldn't say no. Now I'm being asked to adjudicate for the International Chopin Competition. They've asked before and I said no. But at least there is some value I attach to that competition. [In 1955, at the age of 18, Ashkenazy took second place in it.] I wouldn't call it sentimental value, but the Chopin Competition was my first important exposure, and I'll never forget my visit to Poland. I feel I owe Poland, the Poles, and Chopin a lot. I love the country, and now they're asking me again.

They wanted me to come for ten days to judge the solos and the concertos. I was very clever in my reply: "I just don't have the time, ten days. I can come maybe one day before the finals to listen to the tapes of the best six people or whatever. I could certainly listen in one day and have an idea

of how they play. On the basis of that and the concerto that I'll hear during the next few days, I can adjudicate." Well, they couldn't say no. They said, "It looks like we'll arrange three or four days." It came up to five in the end for some reason. I might just go, because I think I owe them a lot. Also, I have great respect for the country, especially regarding politics now. They stand up to the Soviet Union, which I think is so courageous, so fantastic. It's a combination of these things that makes me feel I should do it.

Do you view these competitions as important for young pianists trying to establish careers?

It depends on the individual. You give so much money to a few different people,

and see what each one does with it, eh? You can't say for sure what's going to happen. For instance, sometimes you might win the competition but not deserve it. You played particularly well that time and somebody who might be better didn't play well. It's happened many times. Now, let's say a person who didn't win—took fifth prize, maybe—is extremely talented. He'll probably show it somehow in the long run, still get where he belongs. People will help him because the real talent is always helped somehow by other people.

Are you interested in jazz?

I enjoy jazz, but I don't play it; I just don't have the time. I enjoy a lot of old jazz that seems to be inventive and stimulating,

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not just jazz because it's jazz. I don't think I would particularly want to listen to jazz for any inspiration. I still consider it entertainment more than anything else. It's certainly more sophisticated entertainment than pop music, which I wouldn't even mention in the same breath, but it still is entertainment. I don't think it's an art of communication, really, or of expression; only very occasionally it can be so.

Are you referring to anyone specifically?

There have been great people in that medium over many years. Of course, Armstrong has been one, Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie—I like his band very much. He's a very inventive man, very talented, and there are some others, too, that don't

come to my mind straight away because I'm not that knowledgeable in jazz. I just like some things in jazz, but no pop music.

Pop music, rock and pop, 99.9 percent is a complete waste, really, and rubbish! It's utter rubbish, and I'm not afraid to say that. I wouldn't even call it necessarily music; it's just some sort of organized noises. Because they play it in a certain pitch or a certain key, people call it "pop music." It's not really music; it's just a lot of noise. But as has always been the case with almost any art form, as soon as it becomes more accessible than other forms, more people take a liking to it. It becomes a very strong business proposition. It becomes very often a vehicle for a quick buck, a quick career. Especially if somebody is a good "show biz" personality—then he or she can stay on the top longer than others

and make millions of dollars. So it's in fact playing on the lowest instincts of mankind. But that's life—there's not much we can do about it. It would require a major genetic change of mankind. No point complaining about it—you just have to state this fact and live with it. But it doesn't make this so-called music any more worthwhile because it's so popular.

Are there any contemporary composers whose works you would like to perform?

Not really. I'm somewhat pessimistic about current music. It may be going to a dead end. It's lacking something from inside. The inspiration is there, but there's still not enough feeling. People have had the same emotions for thousands of years; I don't think these composers are looking far enough inward. I'm not a philosopher, so I can't tell you exactly.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

I go for walks. I read. People always use the term "hobby." I don't know what "hobby" is. I think very often people create hobbies for themselves because

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Chopin: *Nocturnes*, London Records, 414564 LH2; *Piano Works, Vol. 12*, London, 411896 LH.

Mozart: *Piano Concertos Nos. 18, 20*, London, 414337 LH.

Rachmaninoff: *Cello Sonata* (w. Lynn Harrell), London, 414340 LH; *Piano Concertos Nos. 2, 4* (w. Bernard Haitink & Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam), London, 414475 LH; *Piano Concerto No. 3*, London, 417239 LH.

As Conductor:

The Glory Of Mozart (Georg Solti & Neville Marriner also conduct), Jubilee (dist. by London), 417201 LJ.

Rachmaninoff: *The Bells, Three Songs* (w. Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam), London, 414455 LH.

Sibelius: *Symphony No. 1, Karelia Suite* (w. Philharmonia Orchestra), London, 414534 LH.

Reissues On CD:

Beethoven: *"Waldstein," "Les Adieux,"* London, 414630-2 LH; *Piano Sonatas Nos. 28-32*, London, 417150-2 LH2.

Chopin: *Ballades, Scherzos*, London, 417474-2 LH; *Sonatas, Fantasie*, London, 417475-2 LH.

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they feel they have to fill up their free time somehow; they don't know what to do with themselves. Therefore, they invent a hobby, and say "I do golf," or "I do that," and eventually they develop an interest in the thing. It becomes a need they have. Naturally, they become involved in relationships with perhaps the playmates in the game, and then it becomes a genuine interest, but I think to start with it's always a little artificial.

If you don't know what to do with your free time, why not think? Think about life, about what you are here for, your existence, and read accordingly. There are a lot of things you can do to exercise your mind. People forget about this. People leave their minds behind somehow and invent so-called "hobbies." I'm suspicious of it; I don't take it at its face value.

You like to keep your free time free.

Yes, I'm delighted when I have free time! Sometimes just to lie on top of the bed, not in bed even, just to lie down for two or three hours when I know I have nothing to do. The best is to rest. I just lie down and think. Oh, maybe I read a little bit, study a score a little bit. But sometimes if I go for a walk I just think about life. Life is a very wide subject. [Smiles.] There's a lot to think about; people don't think enough. ■

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