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Philippe Entremont



Philippe Entremont On Tour

BY DEAN ELDER

"Almost 30 years ago I swore I wouldn't judge competitions anymore, and here I am doing it again," confesses Philippe Entremont after serving on the jury of the 1993 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. It was only his fourth in 28 years. "I was on the Paris Marguerite Long jury in 1965 and 1979 and the Santander International Piano Competition in Spain two years ago.

"The Santander invited me again for last year's competition, which was part of a celebration of the arts in Spain. I said, 'No way,' so they engaged me as conductor. I went with my Vienna Chamber Orchestra not only to play at the festival but also to accompany the Mozart concertos at the competition. These contestants played Mozart beautifully; at the Cliburn no one played Mozart well."

Heir to Debussy's sobriquet *musicien français*, Philippe Entremont lives in Paris. "I lived in Vienna for 12 years," he says, "but moved back to Paris last year. I remain the conductor of the Vienna Chamber Orchestra but also was appointed principal conductor of the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra in Amsterdam. With those two orchestras, it's good that I live in between. How did a Frenchman survive living in Vienna? No one survives," he exclaims laughing. "A tenure approaching 20 years as I've had in Vienna is unheard of. Most people last no more than two years."

Although Entremont conducts often it has never taken him away from the piano. "I haven't played many piano recitals recently in the United States, but I play many in Europe. Next week in Saarbrücken I will play an all-Ravel evening, including most of the solo piano works: the *Pavane*, the complete *Miroirs*, the *Sonatine*, and *Gaspard*. That's enough."

Entremont's many recordings include superb performances of the Mozart sonatas for Pro Arte and the Franck *Symphonic Variations* with Charles Dutoit. "That's my latest recording of the Franck," he avers. "I have done it a number of times, including one with the French National Orchestra and Jean Martinon for Erato."

In his recording of Franck's *Symphonic Variations*, Entremont increases the tempo from the first variation, even though no tempo change is marked. "The theme is Allegretto, the first variation *sempre dolce*. I start increasing the tempo from letter G in the first variation and continue at letter H, the start of the second variation. If the tempo is the same at letter I as it is for the theme, it's dead.

Var. 1

G

sempre dolce

p

cellos

Var. 2

H

mf legato

cellos

I

I

sempre *ff*

Tutti

sempre *ff*

In the slow middle section at letter N Entremont plays the 16th notes as duplets throughout, even though the cellos enter in triplet rhythm against the piano's duplets. Some artists play these 16ths in between duplets and triplets up to the final run at measure 34 of this variation and then go into duplets to lead into the Allegro non troppo. "I feel these 16ths as duplets all the way," observes Entremont.

"One reason this work is not played more is that it's only 16 minutes long, too short to program alone; purists typically play it with a Mozart or Ravel concerto. Like all of Franck's works, *Symphonic Variations* has large stretches for the left hand; as an organist he was used to adding the foot to the hand.

Dean Elder is Senior Consulting Editor of Clavier.

N Molto piu lento

"Young pianists prefer playing works like the Rachmaninoff concertos, what I call the shrinking repertoire. As a conductor I get repertoire suggestions from pianists who play with me; their lack of imagination as well as repertoire is incredible. I can't criticize young pianists too much, though; I played the Rachmaninoff Second Concerto for the 1952 Queen Elisabeth when I was 17 and the Brahms First for the 1953 Marguerite Long Competition at 19."

This *musicien français* has recorded the five Saint-Saëns concertos and speaks of them with enthusiasm. "They are the works of a great pianist, one of the greatest pianists of all time. According to Liszt, he may have been the best organist too. His concertos are amazingly well written for the instrument; they are not easy but playable and sincere. Compared with the music of the time — the Anton Rubinstein concertos, the Litolff, all those showy pieces — the Saint-Saëns concertos are far better. The fifth is splendid; the fourth may be the most consistently fine.

"Arthur Rubinstein played the second frequently. Today few play the fourth or fifth; only number two is played, which is too bad. I enjoy playing them. In 1996 I will tour Europe as soloist with the Manchester B.B.C. Orchestra and plan to play the second, fourth, and fifth."

Entremont considers it unfortunate that the Salle Pleyel and the Théâtre des Champs Élysées are still Paris's two principal concert halls. "Paris is the only cultural center in the world that doesn't have a new concert hall. The Théâtre des Champs Élysées was not built as a concert hall; the Salle Pleyel was built as one but has never been good. I didn't like the Palais de Chaillot; its acoustics were too dry. Paris has no hall like Vienna's Musikverein or Amsterdam's Concertgebouw. Even London has two halls, the Royal Festival and the Barbican.

"In Amsterdam I perform at the Concertgebouw. Going down and up those long stairs, from the top of the steeply-tiered stage to the piano at the bottom, in front of the audience, may be good physical conditioning, but it can be hard. If artists don't have the stamina to go all the way, they stop midway and then come back. The Concertgebouw produces the most gorgeous sound of any hall. It's hard to play badly there."

Another of Entremont's favorite halls is the Musikverein in Vienna. "In the United States I like Symphony Hall in Boston. Carnegie Hall has something special; I like to be on its stage. I don't yet know the new hall in Dallas but am opening the symphony season there next September; I have heard excellent things about it. Some of the new halls in Japan have extremely good acoustics.

"Spain has some magnificent new concert halls. The large auditorium in the Palau de la Musica in Valencia is outstanding, and the new hall in Madrid is good. There is a beautiful new hall in La Coruña; Santander and Seville have new concert halls. That country has done so much in the last 10 years. I love Spain.

"A hall I like very much is the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires. It's an amazing place. Giving a recital there feels like playing in your bedroom, yet there are 4,000 seats.

"I haven't seen the new Paris Conservatoire building. I'd like to, but I left the old Paris Conservatoire in 1950 and have never been back. Isn't that terrible? They offered me a professorship; to their surprise I turned them down on the spot."

Recalling his early study, Entremont says he had rocky relationships with his teachers, Marguerite Long and Jean Doyen. "I wasn't a good student and only took piano playing seriously after winning prizes at the Paris Conservatoire. Usually young performers are so happy to win prizes that they stop practicing. That wasn't my case; I started to work hard after I was 15. Until then my inborn technical facility let me get away with murder.

"Without a certain ability to start with, a pianist can't make a career. I played all the Chopin études by age 15 without fully appreciating them. My love for them developed later when I realized they are amazingly beautiful pieces of music, not just a technical *tour de force*. Even the Etude in C# minor, Op. 10, No. 4, is beautiful if you take the time to play the notes. I hate it when it's played too quickly, like a sterile exercise."

Charles Timbrell's book *French Pianism* quotes Entremont as saying that he still does "very slow practice, deep into the keys with high fingers," a practice technique he learned from Marguerite Long. Now he emphasizes that he has changed his technical approach and advocates keeping the fingers close to the keys.

"I believe that when you practice slowly you should make exactly the same movements as when you play up to tempo. I no longer raise the fingers high; I have changed a lot. Most great pianists play close to the keys; their hands make no unnecessary movements. Videotapes show that Arrau and Serkin stayed on the keys. Horowitz was special; I could never understand how he could play so incredibly with such an unorthodox technique, but I think his position resulted from the shape of his

hands. We all have different hands and have to cope with what God gave us.

"When practicing, I don't do exercises, but I know how to play a scale." Entremont jumped to the piano and played a marvelously fast, even scale. "I get plenty of exercise in the repertoire I play. The thing most pianists have to practice is big jumps. The Brahms concertos, some Liszt, even Chopin have dangerous spots. I practice jumps as close to the keys as possible. The seating position at the piano is important; the jumps are easier if you don't sit too close. Many great pianists have more problems with jumps than with fingerwork.

"I am tired of performers who play too fast. Clarity is more important than anything else. A pianist can give the impression of playing very fast by playing cleanly. There is no need to play like a maniac; you should take time to let the music speak. The Germans have the expression *Luftpause*: a pause for breathing. Few pianists breathe properly. Those young kids at the Cliburn Competition tried to play as rapidly as possible, but didn't allow time for the phrasing to breathe.

"I'm concerned with phrasing, with not cutting the line into little pieces. Conducting for more



than 20 years has changed my approach to music, giving me a better understanding of phrasing and helping my piano playing."

Italian pianists won both the 1992 Rubinstein and 1993 Van Cliburn Competitions. Entremont says the Italians have always produced outstanding pianists, notably Michelangeli and Pollini. "Italy has conservatories in even the small towns, such as the Scala school in Imola, where both Enrico Pace and Simone Pedroni have coached. It's hard for me to be entirely pro-French after so many years of contact with other countries. I had to play the music of those countries. In Vienna I had no choice; I had to play Mozart, Schubert, Schönberg, and Berg. There is nothing wrong with that; I've always had a good affinity for those composers. I have no difficulty adapting to a new country."

Although Entremont says he thinks about music even in his sleep, he doesn't have to work much at the instrument. "Playing the piano should be simple; it is the most comfortable instrument. You sit down, put your hand on the keyboard, and let the fingers move; the fingers love to move. People sometimes try to make too much of it. Contortions at the instrument are unnecessary.

"Memorizing is easy, too. I use visual as well as aural and finger memory. The fingers memorize what they play; if they didn't, it would be impossible to play. Memory is not a sure thing; everyone draws a blank once in a while, even a lapse of concentration. I don't think about memory; if you do, you are *kaputt*. I rarely dream when I sleep, yet I often have a recurring nightmare of going on stage to play a recital of works I have never seen before — and I wake up in a cold sweat.

"Bach and Ravel are difficult to memorize, especially 'Le Gibet' from *Gaspard de la Nuit*, with all those double flats. If you don't play *Gaspard* for two or three years, you have to learn it again. Debussy is not so difficult to memorize.

"In my time at the Paris Conservatoire, students were forced to learn the preludes and fugues of Bach's *Le clavier bien tempéré*. Learning them is wonderful not only for developing finger independence but also for understanding architecture.

"On tour I think about the works I am performing. This week it is Leonard Bernstein's *The Age of Anxiety*; I gave the premiere of the revised version. I also think of what is scheduled for the next week and the week after that. I like to be ready far in advance but give certain works a little rest to keep them fresh. I am hard to satisfy and never happy with myself. Sometimes I say, 'Let's stop now and see how it goes later.' Usually this works.

"Sometimes there are works I don't like to practice. For example, I love to play the Ravel Concerto in G yet hate to practice it. It's in my fingers; I just have to think of it more than practice it. On the other hand a pianist always has to practice

'Scarbo,' the Rachmaninoff concertos, Beethoven No. 4, Brahms, some passages in Chopin. I play the four ballades a lot, and some spots stay in good shape only with practice — the codas for example."

Passages that bedevil ordinary students, however, hold no terror for Entremont. He never has problems with the G minor scales at the end of the Chopin first ballade. "I am what you call a natural scale player and have no problem keeping the hands together, whether the scales are in octaves, 10ths, or whatever. I don't pedal any final scales in Chopin: the ending of the Winter Wind Etude, the Scherzo in E, the B \flat minor scale in the A \flat Polonaise. The pedal would blur the whole thing, so I am light with the foot. Pianists should take time to play the notes; every note is important. You have to make room for every note and after that, shape the phrase.

"I find it atrocious that pianists pedal but don't practice pedaling. I was appalled at the way the Cliburn contestants pedaled. Some played for three or four bars without lifing the foot. Mozart should be played with almost no pedal; you should make the legato with the fingers.

"When I practice all the configurations at the ending of the Chopin first ballade, I practice them slowly, always thinking of the next note. You have to be in position to play the next note before you play it.

"Many pianists are deficient in using the thumb as a pivot. They move the hand from one position to the next rather than connecting with the thumb under the hand, what we call in French *Le passage du pouce*. Have you heard their scales? Brump, brump, brump by blocks. French pianists use *le passage du pouce* to ensure a continuous, smooth scale. This is why the scales of our best-trained pianists are pearly and even.

"If the Cliburn Competition is any guide, the most famous schools — the Moscow Conservatory, Paris Conservatory, Julliard — are not producing the best pianists today. The six finalists came from strange places; none came from the established schools. Maybe the screening process eliminated some good contestants." □

Biography

Philippe Entremont, world-renown conductor and pianist, was born into a musical family in Rheims, France. His father was a well-known opera conductor. At the age of eight, he began studying the piano with his mother, continuing his education with Marguerite Long in Paris two years later. At 12, he entered the Paris Conservatoire where he studied with Jean Doyen. It was there that he won the Harriet Cohen Piano Medal, as well as first prizes in chamber music and piano. He made his professional debut in Barcelona, at 15. The recipient of first prizes in both the Belgian State Competition and Jeunesses Musi-

Continued on page 44

Philippe Entremont

Continued from page 44

cales, he also became the first grand prize winner of the Marguerite Long/Jacques Thibaud Competition. At the age of 19, Entremont made his American debut at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., going on to appear in New York with the National Orchestral Association the next day.

Entremont has recorded with many labels as both pianist and conductor. Some of his more recent recordings include:

Pro Arte: Mozart, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, Vienna Chamber Orchestra, CDS 579; Piano Quartets, soloists of the Vienna Chamber Orchestra, CDD 469; Piano Sonatas, Vol. 1, CDD 498; Piano Sonatas, Vol. 2, CDD 499; Piano Sonatas, Vol. 3, CDD 3410; Piano Sonatas, Vol. 4, CDD 3411; Symphonies Nos. 40 and 41, Vienna Chamber Orchestra, CDS 578. Mussorgsky/Ravel, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Denver Symphony, Philippe Entremont, pianist/conductor, CDS 544; Schubert, "Trout" Quintet, soloists of the Vienna Chamber Orchestra, CDD 470; other recordings, *Bolero and Other French*

Masterpieces, Denver Symphony, including Debussy, *Prelude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, *Printemps*; Ravel, *Alborada del Gracioso*, *Bolero*, *Rapsodie espagnole*, CDD 361. *Vive La Liberté*, Denver Symphony, including de Lisle/Berlioz, *La Marseillaise*; Chabrier, *Marche Joyeuse*, *Espana*; Berlioz, "March to the Scaffold" from *Symphonie Fantastique*, *Roman Carnival Overture*; Ravel, *Pavane for a Dead Princess*; Dukas, *Sorcerer's Apprentice*; Saint-Saëns, "French Military March" from *Suite Algérienne*.

Naxos Recordings: Tchaikovsky, *Serenade in C for Strings*, *Souvenir de Florence in D Minor*, Vienna Chamber Orchestra, 8.550404.

Schwann Musica Mundi Recordings: Mozart, Oboe Concerto; Haydn, Oboe Concerto in C, Pierre Feit, oboist, Vienna Chamber Orchestra, CD-11002. Mozart Piano Concerto Nos. 12 and 14, Philippe Entremont pianist/conductor, Vienna Chamber Orchestra, CD-11001.

Entremont is on tour in the United States on the following dates: February 1, Naples, Florida, Philharmonic Center of the Arts. February 2, West Palm Beach, Florida, Regional Arts

Foundation, Kravis Center. February 4, New York, Carnegie Hall. February 5, Storrs, Connecticut, University of Connecticut, Jorgenson Auditorium. February 6, Greenvale, Long Island, Tilles Center. February 10, New Brunswick, New Brunswick Cultural Center, Palace Theater. February 11, Wilmington, Delaware, Grand Opera House. February 12, Fairfax, Virginia, George Mason University, Center for the Arts. □

Glenn Gould Prize

Canadian pianist Oscar Peterson received the \$50,000 international Glenn Gould Prize and thanked Canadian audiences for their support by performing a two-hour concert broadcast on the C.B.C. stereo network. Peterson performed as soloist as well as with his trio, bassist Ray Brown, guitarist Herb Ellis, and drummer Jeff Hamilton. As part of his prize, Peterson chose a protégé as first recipient of the \$10,000 City of Toronto Glenn Gould International Protégé Prize in Music and Communication. He named Benny Green, a 29-year-old American pianist, to receive the prize.