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Rudolf Serkin : A Life, and: Lost in the Stars: The
Forgotten Musical Life of Alexander Siloti, and: Vladimir de
Pachmann: A Piano Virtuoso's Life and Art (review)

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Rudolf Serkin: A Life. By Stephen Lehmann and Marion Faber. pp. xiv + 344; CD. (Oxford University Press, New York, 2003, £20. ISBN 0-19-513046-4.)

Lost in the Stars: The Forgotten Musical Life of Alexander Siloti. By Charles F. Barber. pp. xix + 429; CD. (Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Md., 2002, \$49.95. ISBN 0-8108-4108-8.)

Vladimir de Pachmann: A Piano Virtuoso's Life and Art. By Mark Mitchell. pp. 231. (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2002, £26.95. ISBN 0-253-34169-8.)

‘Accounts of the lives of performing musicians are not necessarily engrossing’, say Stephen Lehmann and Marion Faber, throwing down the gauntlet; and, quoting their subject, Rudolf Serkin (1903–91), they add: ‘Why should anyone write about me?—all I did was practice, practice, practice.’ Serkin was unquestionably a great pianist, but his biography is not one that I would have read were I not reviewing it.

Serkin’s LPs, cassette tapes, and CDs are still in circulation and valued for their sobriety and intellectual strength. By contrast, Alexander Siloti (1863–1945) never recorded, and is only mentioned occasionally for his arrangements and published editions. Vladimir de Pachmann (1852–1933) is known now more for his eccentricities than for his playing in the early days of recording. It can prove serendipitous to be pointed in unwonted directions, according well with my exploratory philosophy for *Musical Pointers* (<http://www.musicalpointers.co.uk/>). A fascinating musico-social history emerges from following the vicissitudes of these three distinctive personalities, whose lives spanned collectively a century and a half, and who by political necessity and by choice were wanderers around the globe.

Because this is a review of three books, not of three pianists, I prefer to consider them in reverse chronological order, for reasons that will become apparent. The authors of these substantial books are all diligent collectors of facts. Those about Rudolf Serkin are comprehensive (he retained every trivial scrap of paper) and will be a valuable source for future generations. But his joint biographers have been hampered by a subject who avoided interviewers and resisted biographers.

In their first hundred pages or so, Lehmann and Faber take us through Serkin’s early years in Eger (Bohemia) and Vienna, his study with Schoenberg and immersion in contemporary music (1918–20) and the later rift, leading him to move on to Berlin and form the enduring ‘venerable firm of Busch and Serkin’, recalling

his devotion to his senior partner and their unique collaboration; their recordings together are still venerated. In 1938 Serkin moved to Switzerland, and the following year to the USA, where he became ‘an American pianist’, and was closely involved in creating the Leventritt Competition.

We learn that Serkin needed to practise harder and longer than many pianists and an element of struggle, both technical and against pervasive nervousness, communicated itself in his performances. There are substantial accounts of his performing, teaching and forty years’ association with Marlboro, ‘a gathering of professional musicians for the purpose of studying chamber music’, which had been relatively unappreciated in America before the 1950s. The programmes of fifty years of Carnegie Hall recitals are followed by forty pages of discography, listing Serkin’s recordings—both official and other—on 78s, LPs, and CD, but not the many preserved on 45s, tapes, cassettes, laser discs, and video-cassettes. There is no evaluation here of those recorded performances, or of the numerous re-recordings of Serkin’s core repertory—there is scope for much future writing on a famous pianist who is so thoroughly documented in sound.

Lehmann and Faber offer, however, a flat style of writing that fails to take wing to penetrate the inner world of this private man. Nor do his friends and colleagues, whose edited contributions and tributes form a large part of the book, come through as vital personalities. So, while reading this book it was a relief to turn to some of Serkin’s recordings: Beethoven concertos and, from less central repertory, Schumann’s *Introduction and Allegro appassionato* and Strauss’s *Burlesque*. Lastly, I listened with considerable pleasure to the CD that comes with the book, presenting live recordings of Bach, Mendelssohn, and Chopin’s Op. 25 *Études*, selected from recitals at the Library of Congress; it brings Serkin vividly alive in a way that the book may not do for those who did not know him.

Lost in the Stars is an admirable attempt to recover from the past a shadowy figure whose historical importance in the musical life of Russia and later America is not to be underestimated. Accounts of Alexander Siloti attest that as a pianist he was relatively close to Serkin, and poles away from the personality cult cultivated and enjoyed by his flamboyant contemporary Pachmann.

The procession of great names in Charles F. Barber’s biography owes nothing to mere name-dropping, for Siloti became a central figure in St

Petersburg until the October Revolution. His activities are documented in the fullest detail, with rounded pictures of the famous personalities encountered along the way. He studied with Liszt, who remained his champion, and he developed an interest in conducting. He was close to Tchaikovsky, premiered his First Piano Concerto, and was entrusted with editing it for publication, with his own alterations, which the composer welcomed; more controversially, he revised the Second Piano Concerto in an edition that Emil Gilels always played.

We learn about Siloti's incompatibility with Vasily Il'ich Safonov, director of the Moscow Conservatoire from 1889, his departure in 1891, and how the following year he began to establish his European and American reputation as a virtuoso pianist—in Richard Taruskin's words, 'the greatest pianist who could have made records but didn't'. He introduced to the USA his young cousin Sergei Rachmaninov's C sharp minor Prelude: 'two reputations were born'. He was crucial in making Rachmaninov's career possible, saving his life by paying for medical treatment and afterwards for composition tuition. Later Siloti supported him during the crisis following the disastrous premiere of the latter's First Symphony and continued to do so during the composition of the Second Piano Concerto, which, as is well known, Rachmaninov was able to complete only after treatment by a hypnotherapist. Together, the two men premiered Rachmaninov's Second Suite for two pianos.

Back in St Petersburg, Siloti dominated an era as conductor and pianist and as impresario of the Siloti Concerts (1903–17), in which he introduced Casals and composers including Stravinsky (crucial for his early success), Prokofiev, Skryabin, Elgar ('Enigma' Variations, 1904), and Schoenberg (*Pelleas und Melisande*, 1912). All, however, was disrupted by the October Revolution: Siloti was jailed briefly, and his apartment ransacked; most of his belongings and music library were never recovered (some of his important music manuscripts survived because his daughter spotted them being used to wrap meat and bought the butcher's entire stock of wrapping paper!). Barber graphically describes the privations of this period.

In 1919 Siloti was briefly rehabilitated by the Soviet regime, taught the piano at the Petrograd Conservatory, opined that the 13-year-old Shostakovich had 'no musical abilities' (Glazunov came to his rescue), and was helped by an extraordinary British spy to flee to Finland with his family, and later on to Berlin, Antwerp, and Paris. In 1920 the Silotis established a home

in London. Reviews of his appearances at the Wigmore Hall there emphasized his apparent effortlessness, controlled rhythm, and tonal gradations, and 'deeply musical restraint'. Tendinitis in his right hand, relieved only by rest and restraint, led to his aversion to excessive practising. He was clearly a superb player, but his platform manner was studiously economical, undemonstrative, and free of eccentricities—too much so for the American public later in his life.

Barber analyses why Siloti's career was eclipsed by 'lesser pianists and less-daring conductors' and why, until this book, he had become virtually forgotten. Marketing favoured 'the vastly entertaining foolishness of Vladimir de Pachmann' and the growing importance of recording. Siloti's post-1917 career never gained lasting momentum—his modest demeanour, uncompromising stance, and reluctance to record at a time when 'a great artist could be in 100,000 homes at once' all told against him, despite some perceptive reviews, which Barber quotes at length.

From 1922 until his death in 1945, Siloti's home base was New York, where he taught at the Juilliard School of Music, and enjoyed critical acclaim, documented by Barber in the fullest detail, especially during three 'golden years' from 1929 until 1931, when he gave his last public recital at Carnegie Hall. His comeback ultimately collapsed because of his failure to sustain complete public acceptance, for the reasons mentioned above.

Siloti's teaching methods are described by his pupils, notably his emphasis on restraint and avoidance of 'body rhetoric'. He came so to resemble Liszt physically that a legend about his 'father' actually started circulating; but that notion had already been scotched long before by Liszt himself, who, having done the necessary calculations about time and place, concluded: 'My dear Alexander, to my great regret it is not possible.'

The book ends with seventy pages of appendices, including concert programmes, lists of publishers and editions, a full bibliography, and a necessarily limited discography (piano rolls and recordings by other artists), preceded by an examination in detail of one of Siloti's Bach transcriptions, which are still sometimes played. However, as an indication of his near total eclipse, none of them has been included by Angela Hewitt in her recent performances and recordings of Bach transcriptions, and the ill-fated CD of fourteen of them, inserted into the cover of Barber's book, is less than persuasive: the pianist, James Barbagallo, died just before

the Naxos recording could be completed, and so it will not be released commercially.

Charles Barber marshals his information (two full pages of acknowledgements indicate the magnitude of the task) persuasively, and his writing style carries one forward—as satisfyingly for the general reader as for academics. The book is a pleasure to handle, there are conveniently placed chapter-by-chapter footnotes, and key personages are brought to life in some thirty evocative photographs and illustrations, including splendid cartoons of Casals with Siloti, and of Liszt presenting to the piano-maker Julius Blüthner on a plate his pupil Alexander Siloti.

Close acquaintance with Vladimir de Pachmann's life has proved to be a most rewarding and enjoyable experience, right from the first sentence of Mark Mitchell's engrossing book. He introduces Pachmann by quoting 'a young journalist' (who was to become the great novelist Willa Cather) being told before a concert to expect to 'fall under the enchantment of the man—a mystic cult—but listen!' This encapsulates the contradictions of a famously eccentric pianist. Mitchell regales us with anecdotes, both familiar and unfamiliar, about his outrageous behaviour, but never loses sight of the quality of the musician behind the mask. That is vouched for in many lengthy and thoughtful accounts of Pachmann's performances by the best critics of the period, some of them as eloquent as Cather; he was ranked among the finest pianists during his long career and was the best-known Chopin specialist. He anticipated what has become commoner nowadays: recitalists talking to their audiences. He annotated the music as he played, teased and clowned, amused his audiences and annoyed the more strait-laced, and congratulated himself ('who will play like that when I am gone?'). Thus his reputation grew, so that he filled the largest venues all over the world, routinely selling out London's Royal Albert Hall. Chopin was central to his wide repertoire, but not the fashionably effete, sickly, and emaculated composer: he incorporated, to quote Edward Said, 'the compelling role of tension, occasionally even sadism' in Chopin's music.

Born in Odessa in 1852, Pachmann 'invented himself'—'My father is a Rabbi, my mother a Turkey, and I am a pianist.' In childhood he practised long and assiduously; assigned two Bach fugues for his first lessons in Vienna, he returned to show that he could play all of the '48' from memory, and transposed into any key, and by the next lesson he had memorized all twenty-four of the Chopin *Études*! Any key and every country. . . We are taken with Pachmann

to Paris, to London in 1882 as 'Chopin apostle but not enough of a man for Beethoven'; back there in 1883 'he executes as he feels'. He was in the USA in 1888, and he toured back and forth between there and Europe thereafter; his first recital at the Royal Albert Hall took place in 1903. His playing, which divided opinion, came to be 'representative of its historical moment—defined by fin-de-siècle literature and the 1897 Secessionist exhibition in Vienna'; indeed, many aspects of his life and his art correspond to the preoccupations of those writers and artists.

Mitchell places his narrative in the social context of Pachmann's varying surroundings, deals sensitively with his difficult relationship with his pianist wife, their foundering marriage, his homosexual tendency, and, crucially, his gullibility. This left him in thrall to an exploitative chancer, Cesco Pallottelli, an Italian waiter (perhaps) who became his 'secretary', later manager, and gradually took over his life and fortune, in a *ménage à trois* after Pallottelli married. Mitchell draws his references widely, and likens this set-up to E. M. Forster's with Bob and Mary Buckingham. Immensely rich from his concert-giving, Pachmann had one particular self-indulgence: he could not resist seeking out and purchasing the most precious jewels, and he amassed a fabulous collection worth millions of dollars which he named after composers and compositions ('My love for gems is ideal—I have named them, Bach my best diamond, Brahms a dusky emerald', p. 110). He treated them recklessly, carrying priceless stones loose in his pockets. In his final illness with prostate cancer his collection 'disappeared' into the hands of Pallottelli and/or a relative whom Pallottelli engaged to nurse him. When he died in 1933, he had virtually no personal possessions.

By the time he was about 70, playing had become difficult for Pachmann, with tired and stiff muscles, and he devoted himself to a self-invented 'new method' of playing, which developed into an obsession. The quirks of his 'obsessive, paranoid and self-dramatizing' character increased beyond eccentricity to frank mental illness, with bizarre compulsions that showed up in concerts and alienated his audiences; latterly 'he gave abundantly of all that was most intolerable in him and sparingly of that which seduced and charmed'.

There is much to enjoy and amaze on every page of Mitchell's book, and, as with Barber's biography of Siloti, his selection of illustrations adds a vivid dimension to reading about a larger-than-life character. Of the critics whom

Mitchell cites extensively, Olin Downes of the *New York Times* strikes a perceptive balance. At Carnegie Hall in 1924 'it is not to be forgotten that underneath his fooling . . . lies a profound knowledge of his art that often constitutes revelation in a single phrase—he gives performances of a unique poetry and beauty which will die with him' (pp. 169–70). Not quite so, because Pachmann was an enthusiast for the early gramophone, and in Mitchell's book there is a substantial discography by Allan Evans (pp. 195–9). Arbiter Records intends to issue at least one recording of every work that Pachmann committed to disc. Arbiter 129 confirms Pachmann's 'originality, technical command, tonal imagination, style sense and sinuous legato' (Robert Dumm in *Piano Journal*, no. 70 (Spring 2003)). Listening to passages from Chopin's Waltz Op. 64 No. 2 and four of the Nocturnes on *amazon.co.uk*, one finds that one's ears are quickly engaged by the lyrical beauties behind the surface noise of the 1907–27 recordings, and the brief extracts online will surely determine readers to acquire the Arbiter CD *Pachmann, the Mythic Pianist* as a companion to Mark Mitchell's admirable biography.

The fascination of defying the seeming limitations of hammers striking strings, diametrically opposite to the essence of the human voice, continues to exercise the ingenuity of piano makers and players. Pianists working from the same scores are as infinitely various in their interpretations as are human personalities. Received tradition, and quests for individual expression and recognition, will long continue to counterpoint a debate that, in these last two thought-provoking biographies, takes us back to the heyday of the grand piano and the beginnings of its recorded history.

Looking forward to the mid-2000s, will Steinway still dominate how we listen to keyboard music of the last three centuries in concerts and on recordings and on the radio? Andras Schiff recently challenged audiences to his 'Chopin and his Idols' recitals (each programme given twice to full houses) by deploring the commonly held assumption that 'pianos should always be black and made by Steinway . . . Wigmore Hall used to be called the Bechstein Hall—when did we last hear a Bechstein, Bösendorfer or Ibach here?' With a beautiful, rich brown Pleyel of 1860 on the platform to play Chopin, and his own specially commissioned Steinway/Fabbrini for Bach, Scarlatti, and Mozart, Schiff made us think. Some individualistic interpreters may not wish the focus of attention to be distracted from themselves and shared with unfamiliar instruments. However, they may be reassured by, for

example, the very different playing of Schubert on fortepianos by Staier, Badura-Skoda, Bilson, and Tverskaya.

If a comparable trio of biographies of more recent and contemporary pianists comes to be written, the contentious issues of historical awareness will be inescapable, and a knowledge of the sounds earlier composers knew will be axiomatic. Today's giants of the keyboard and those of the coming generation need to address the interplay between performer and instrument, the acoustic situations of live and recorded performance, and the rapidly changing cultural contexts; all those considerations are becoming increasingly important, and to a greater degree than they interested Pachmann, Siloti, and Serkin.

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Portrait of Percy Grainger. Ed. by Malcolm Gillies and David Pear. pp. xxxv + 220. Eastman Studies in Music, 18. (University of Rochester Press, Rochester, NY, 2002, £40. ISBN 1-58046-087-9.)

A glance at the select bibliography in this book reminds us that the last twenty-five years have witnessed a considerable revival of literary interest in the life of Percy Grainger even though, judging by the curt dismissal of one London publisher, after seeing Colin Brumby's first documentary study of the composer, it was believed that Grainger's contribution was 'rather slight' and that his appeal was one restricted to the Australian market; indeed, the expectation after Grainger's death in 1961 was that, save for a few pot-boilers such as *Handel in the Strand*, *Country Gardens*, and *Molly on the Shore*, his music would quickly fall into obscurity. These predictions were wildly premature, as the extraordinary proliferation of recordings from Nimbus, Hyperion, and especially Chandos have shown in recent years. There have also been a number of musical studies, among them *Music by Percy Aldridge Grainger* (University of Melbourne, 1978) and *Percy Grainger's Kipling Settings* (University of Western Australia, 1980) by Kay Dreyfus (one-time curator of the Grainger Museum in Melbourne); Lewis Foreman's edited collection of essays, *The Percy Grainger Companion* (London, 1981); Frank Callaway's Grainger centennial volume, published as *Studies in Music*, 16 (1982); and Wilfrid Mellers's *Percy Grainger* (Oxford, 1992). But perhaps the most significant book to raise the profile of Grainger's colourful and unconventional *Weltanschauung* was John Bird's *Percy Grainger*

CORRECTIONS. The Editors and the reviewer regret three errors in the review of Mark Mitchell's book *Vladimir de Pachmann: A Piano Virtuoso's Life and Art* (*Music & Letters*, 85 (2004)). All are on page 482: in column 1, the words attributed to the late Edward Said are in fact the author's own, and Pachmann was born in 1848, not 1852; in column 2, he was in the USA in 1890, not 1888.

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