

## **Speaking of Pianists**

Abram Chasins

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In a re-evaluation earlier this year, I stopped writing book reviews. I don't really write book reviews, I write personal reflections on books I've read. That's what this is. This one needs to be written for reasons I'll give.

Van Cliburn won the First Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958 when I was two. When I showed any aptitude for music or piano a few years later, I was trained on and off for some years to be another one of those popular champions of high art. This culminated, after some fits and starts, in a college degree in Piano Performance. I wouldn't trade for any of this, but I have felt for years that I was glad I didn't pursue music any more seriously than that. This book confirms and explains some facets of that intuition.

Why does a book published in 1961 and clearly out of date even show up in my very selective book pile in 2012? Mother moved in with us about a year ago, and this was among her belongings. She bought it at the Cokesbury Bookstore in Dallas in 1962 for \$3.67.

Abram Chasins was himself a pianist, from my grandparent's generation, having been born in 1903. He worked for twenty years in the field, from his early 20s to early 40s, then went into other areas in music, radio producing and hosting, criticism, and so forth. This book is, in fact, a scholastic criticism of the entire field of the day that he calls "pianism." Chasins also did some composing. Having been based mostly in New York, he knows personally nearly everyone he writes about, being friends with some. His wife, Contance Keene, was also a well known pianist at the time, touring mostly in Europe due to anti-woman-pianist biases in the U.S. (my conjecture, not the author's).

He organizes the book like a work of music with the following broad sections:

- Exposition
- Countersubjects
- Development
- Theme and Variations
- Episode
- Recapitulation and Coda

and ends with a supplementary chapter bringing the material up to date from original publication in about 1957 to 1961.

This organization really didn't work for me, though it possibly did for the intended audience, the piano community of the late 1950s. Within each division, in any case, are

chapters on the great pianists of Chasins' youth beginning with Hofmann, Godowsky, Rachmaninoff, and Schnabel. This approach continues up into the then present with Horowitz (then on sabbatical) and Serkin. He then turns to a critique of society, particularly American society for not supporting the arts, particularly the art of piano. He describes the dire business situation of artists doing battle with capitalism within an under trained and under appreciative public and recommends government intervention. The book ends with several chapters of criticism for composers of piano music from Mozart through Rachmaninoff. He addresses the "Gershwin problem" of that day: "Was Gershwin a real classical composer or not?" with an even hand.

Towards the end the individual pieces get shorter, some to a paragraph or less. Later it turns into just lists of names, as if everyone working in the field seriously should be mentioned even if he doesn't know any more about them than to have perhaps been to one performance. He discusses live and recorded performance art, the hazards, pros, and cons of each. He even reviews himself, as pianist (deserved) and composer (are you kidding?) and his wife as pianist, obviously attempting to be even handed and self critical in the process as he is of all others.

I learned a few interesting things. First was my own connection to Liszt, something that all pianists in the post-Liszt era must have as pedigree. My college teacher, Jane Abbott (now Abbott-Kirk) studied with Manheim Pressler and Sidney Foster at Indiana University. These names appear in the lists of pages 161-162 (along with the likes of Abbey Simon, Leon Fleisher, Philippe Entremont, and Glenn Gould!) Somewhere else (not listed in the index) it is mentioned that one of them (Pressler or Foster) had studied with Anton Rubenstein, who was a pupil of Liszt. My first teacher, Don Wittenbach, may have had a closer or equivalent connection.

Van Cliburn is mentioned, but his victory in the first Tchaikovsky Competition was so new when the book was written that it wasn't well understood yet. Still, it was seen as a major sea change in the way competitions were perceived by the public. Before, they had been considered of little more than academic interest where no one gained much from a championship. The Tchaikovsky Cold War implications made Van Cliburn into a hero-warrior-pianist without peer, somewhat independent of his pure art, superlative though it was and is.

The story of Horowitz's big break, the fill-in performance in which he goes from being a not-even-break-even traveling pianist to a world superstar is well told.

The laugh out loud moment is an anecdote about Fritz Kreisler being accompanied by Rachmaninoff in performance and getting lost. He leans back to the pianist and asks "where are we?" to which Serge, without missing a beat, replies, "Carnegie Hall!"

So why do I need to write this review? To consolidate some thoughts I have had on the art of piano for fifty years that are brought into focus by the very existence of a book that is more or less a joint biography of pianists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> through first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the times they worked in. Reading this book, while familiar, nostalgic, and

informative, confirms that I made the right choice to pursue a different life most of the times the choice was before me, particularly in 1978 when I graduated from Baylor University with a Bachelor's of Music in Piano Performance, allegedly ready to enter the field and conquer the world. Some world that doesn't really exist, in reality, and for which I was far from prepared or targeted by handlers to even enter, much less to conquer.

My story begins at a church piano in Frisco, Texas about 1961, when this book was being printed. Mother spent about half an hour, a long time for a five-year-old, trying to teach me to read a simple hymn in F. This didn't work but when piano lessons were offered in Henrietta a couple of years later by Don Wittenbach, an organ major from nearby Southwestern in Wichita Falls, I was signed up. On the Liszt method (scales, exercises, and pieces, 30 minutes each, 6 days a week) I was given the fundamentals of discipline, musculature, and the beginnings of theory and form, at an appropriate age. People at the time said I had an unusual "touch." Whether they knew what they were talking about or not is debatable, but I was attributed with natural musicianship, "the knack", as it were. My paternal grandmother, wanting to foster another Van Cliburn, had a Story and Clark piano installed in our house, adding a degree of stress to the family's in-law situation. There were two annual recitals at Henrietta, one in which I played "A, vous dirai-je, maman", and the other a Rondo, both of Mozart. I was working on Mozart Concerto number 20 (D minor) which might have been a competition entry for a nine or ten year old prodigy in a year or two, but in summer 1966 we moved to Dallas and training stopped.

You wouldn't think that a move to Dallas would stop all training, you would think that the Big City would be a Big Break for a prodigy, but my parents were not well connected in the music community and didn't know they needed to be. Opportunities for my continued training (like Don Wittenbach) did not fall into their laps in the suburbs where we found ourselves and anything like that would have costed money anyway, money we didn't have and didn't think we needed. There was nothing for two years therefore, grades five and six, except flute in elementary school band. During some of the following three years at Taylor (after another move), grades 7-9, I worked with Mrs. Voiers, a housewife piano teacher for whom I was an average to advanced student. But we moved again, this time to tiny Hubbard, for my sophomore, junior, and senior years of high school. Again there was no piano training (except church accompanying) until I joined Jane Keyes' moonlight studio at nearby Baylor. This led to acceptance into the school of music (after being rebuffed by an old crank in the Math Department, my other potential interest) where I abandoned all other interests and worked solely towards the piano performance goal. That goal was more or less achieved in four years with modest distinction. My recitals and performances are detailed, to the extent that they can be reconstructed, on the music page of my website <http://cbduncan.duncanheights.com/Music/Music.html> . These included junior and senior recitals and a concerto movement with the Baylor Symphony. I was in the advanced category among the majors but not outstanding in the department taken over all time.

I did not attend my own Baylor graduation ceremony, feeling that my piano performances had been the culmination of my Baylor experience. I was being groomed to go to graduate school in piano, possibly continuing at Baylor or possibly going to Stony Brook where I might have studied with Gilbert Kalish or some other east coast conservatory-like environment (Peabody was also considered), but I put a stop to it. After graduation I got married, got a minimum wage job (first dispatching police officers at Balch Springs and then as a low level engineer at KXTX channel 39 in Dallas) and moved off in other directions. The rest of my biography is out of scope here save to say that I've always had music in my life to some degree, but never again to the degree of totally committed performance major.

This, in retrospect, was the right thing to have done. I remember upper class music majors scrambling to take extra courses, even adding majors and minors in their final college years that might lead to gainful employability upon graduation. I didn't do that; I just followed skills I had learned from hobbies, particularly amateur radio.

From the beginning, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for the people Chasins knew, the *entry point* for pianists was *homo pianisticus*, the Olympic Class athlete of pianism. Most of even those don't make it much farther. After all, there are few Olympian contenders in the *athletic* Olympics who even place. These specimens of *homo pianisticus* attempt to enter into a realm at the edge of human capacity at which there is no objective measure of performance. Rhythm has to be strict, but not mechanically exact. Technique has to be perfect, but not wooden. The intersecting lines have to be understood and communicated but neither over played nor ignored. The mood has to be set and communicated. Somehow, Chasins, at least in this book, never brings any responsibility for any of this to an audience where much of it, in reality, must lie.

Of course, all these judgment calls, line, rhythm, mood, and the rest, vary from one reviewer to the next. All is subjective and no one is perfect. Of course, most pianists are better at some repertoire than others. Of course, some repertoire is more popular than others. Some pianists end up being judged acceptable in every way except that they don't seem to have any scholarship to go with their art, that is, understanding of the composer, his times, and what he wanted. This sort of thing is, of course, unforgiveable in the highly elevated stratosphere of serious music criticism.

Due to limited market for the services of pianists, the whole field is extremely competitive. A handful of the most popular work as performers, at least part time. The best of the remainder mostly teach. The vast majority do something else with their lives. The routes to popularity are not well understood, and if they were would be judged disgusting.

This is not a situation I would want to be in in *any* profession but it is ubiquitous in "pianism."

(By the way, I dislike the word "pianism" and use it here in that vein.)

The world of piano, from compositions to performance, to pedagogy, is very complicated, very inbred, very personality based, and very past-looking. Nearly all of the important repertoire is between one and four hundred years old. Arguably, world culture today does not support much in the way of additions to the existing tradition. There is a lot going on *in music*, but piano as an art in itself, though it still has young dilantants, is on the decline. Beethoven himself moved from piano to composing because there was a lot more to music than the keyboard. Piano was popular for centuries in part because it could *simulate* an orchestra, but even that has declined greatly in an era of electronic reproduction and synthesis. Ice Skating competitions are not performed to live music today, much less to piano. “Classical” concerts today are very high-brow, far from any center of any culture. People use their capacity for mental and emotional complexity elsewhere in our day rather than in perfecting a personal art.

So piano is not work I would want to do full time and in any case there is not much demand for such workers.

To stay really good at piano I would have to spend all of my leisure working it. To do that I would have to be obsessed. I’ve occasionally been obsessed with something in music, but less so with the grind of piano preparation, and certainly not for more than some hours at a time. Perhaps the biggest thing I learned in music school was how to finish a huge (four year) project *without* needing to be continuously obsessed about it. I understand obsession and I read about it in this book. Rubenstein, for example, hosted a party that went until after 2a.m. after a big Brahms Concerto performance. He was energized and could do nothing else. Hoffman would have parties at his house for musicians, then drift off to the piano and compose something and wonder, when he came out of his trance, where everyone had gone, in the wee hours. Gershwin always found his way to the piano at parties (are you picking up on the party theme here? I don’t much like parties either) and rarely did anything else. This happens to me in other fields, but not pianism.

That’s the third and final thing. Pianism is a community of the Olympians, that is, those naturally equipped who can even contemplate participating, who *also* have the taste, style, form, intelligence, training, support, connections, opportunities, and, yes, the obsession. This is demonstrably not my community. I would be uncomfortable and out of place playing for, being played for, or even socializing within it.

**Speaking of Pianists** hit a nerve indeed. This “review” is more about my reaction to “pianism” than commentary on Chasins and his book.