

## notes & asides

### ■ Notes on the Passing Scene

I have said about myself, and repeat it here, that living in New York, or having easy access to it, can reproachfully grate on you. There are those so inattentive to the resources of the city that we live as if at the Grand Canyon with the shutters always closed.

I haven't counted, but there must be 100 musical events every day in NYC, and if you add dance and visual exhibits, make that 500. I write of a minor affair on March 2nd, the kind of thing that *can* just *happen* in Manhattan, in this case under unusual auspices because the impresario was celebrating his own 30th birthday. The modest, affable, gifted man had come to town eight or ten years ago from Minnesota, attracted to a career as a performing pianist. But he yielded (perforce?) to the usual stresses, and is now about to enter business school.

Tonight's was a special celebration: Lawrence Perelman sitting at a resplendent Steinway grand piano in one of the most alluring rooms in New York. Behind the hall, where musicians and their friends can gather in modest numbers, are the rooms that display the precious (a Steinway grand costs \$90,000) artifacts of ivory, wood, and metal that give forth music. The invitations for tonight, sent out only a week or so earlier, were addressed to a few dozen friends, invited to hear him play.

Five minutes after 7 P.M. he hadn't come on stage, and we felt suspense building. Overhead at Steinway Hall is a

great crystal chandelier. Behind the piano are slabs of gray-black marble, framing the large arched window with the plush, relaxing drapery at either side. Above the recess is a balcony with copper-colored railing. Right, at floor level, is the desk of the hall's manager, in finely burnished wood, behind it two yellow sofas, matching two others on the left end. Two grand oil paintings hang on either side. On the left is Franz Liszt, playing to feminine admirers—though maybe it is Anton Rubinstein who is seated at the piano, performing in a salon somewhere in Europe a century and a half ago. On the other side it's Wagner, depicted writing something on manuscript paper, with flying Valkyries overhead.

The suspense was for two reasons, the first, what sometimes sets in at the theater just before the curtains actually part. Tonight there was also suspense brought on by the sheer audacity: Larry Perelman had elected to celebrate his birthday by playing three of the most demanding pieces of piano music extant, the last three sonatas of Ludwig van Beethoven. Those who have pursued aural pleasure will have heard Sonatas 30, 31, and 32, but only those who are ambitious, and preternaturally skilled, will undertake to perform one of them, let alone all three at one sitting.

Five minutes later, the dark-haired celebrant walked into the room, dressed in a black suit and sweater, tieless, accompanied by a friend who would

turn the pages. He smiled at his guests, made a brief comment on what lay ahead, and sat down to the Vivace of Opus 109.

Twenty minutes later he paused, accepted the applause, and then brought his hands down on the Moderato cantabile of Opus 110. His head was all but immobile even in the stormiest passages. He played through the sublimity of Beethoven's last piano works with precision and devotion. One quickly knew the artist's mastery of his material, noted the nimbleness of fingers that had Olympian challenges to perform, and wondered at his faculty for absencing his own personality so that we had only the music to hear in the gilt of the chamber.

Seventy minutes later, he reached the quiet ending chords of 111, leaving the audience rapt by the music, and by the undertaking. Think, furtively, of the young matador confronting six bulls in one afternoon, the actor undertaking serially all of Shakespeare's tragedies on successive days—the painter, on Day One, starting in on the whole of the blank ceiling of a church.

It would be neat to finish here by saying that this kind of thing happens all the time in New York. But not quite. New York is a great, endless stage for star players in music and dance and drama, but the kind of thing Larry Perelman did cannot be regularly scheduled because dazzling acts of artistic adventure happen only in very special moments—like tonight's. A young man, at 30, decides to take on a music mountain, to dazzle others and himself by laying down one more wreath for the master, before settling down to learn accounting.

—WFB

