
Book Reviews

Godowsky: The Pianist's Pianist. By Jeremy Nicholas. Wark, Hexham, Northumberland, Great Britain: Appian Publications and Recordings, 1989. 345 pp. ISBN: 1-870295-01-3. (P.O. Box 1, Wark, Hexham, Northumberland, NE48 3EW)

Having reviewed Godowsky's Appian Publications and Recordings CDs (7010 and 7011) not too favorably (*ARSC Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1, p. 90-1), this reviewer approached *Godowsky: The Pianist's Pianist* with some skepticism. Jeremy Nicholas has produced a biography, however, that brings this very complicated and enigmatic artist to life. Compulsive and ego-maniacal, yet generous, gracious, naive and in his final years bitterly depressed, Godowsky emerges as a strangely sympathetic figure, one deserving of respect for his determination and artistic conviction.

His formal training was negligible at best. His father died when he was young and his musical development was supervised by his Uncle Passinock, who regarded his precocious ward as a key to fame and fortune. Despite well-intentioned interventions on the part of several members of the musical cognoscenti, Godowsky's formal education was limited to three months at the Hochschule in Berlin in 1884, when he was fourteen.

Later that year, he came to America on his own and began to build a successful career as a pianist and teacher. At the age of 24, he was appointed head of the Piano Department at the Chicago Conservatory, beating out Edward McDowell for the post, an astounding feat for someone so young.

In 1900 the artist returned to Europe a great success, and the years prior to World War I were clearly the happiest of his life, both professionally and personally. Godowsky was especially noted for his extraordinary technique, though some found his playing rather pedantic. The pianist no doubt regarded his own compositions and arrangements, in which he explored unprecedented complexities in keyboard technique, as his finest accomplishment.

His career continued worldwide until he suffered a stroke at a recording session in London in 1930. In his final years, he also faced the death of his wife, the suicide of a son, and dismay over the impending cataclysm in Europe. He died in 1938, a very bitter man.

Nicholas has had access to numerous primary sources, including letters and an uncompleted autobiography, and has done an excellent job in bringing the great pianist to life. Though one occasionally tires of Godowsky's expounding on his own

greatness, one also realizes how hard he struggled and how much the resulting success validated his life.

One reservation concerns the absence of specific musical examples, with which the reader might more readily comprehend the awesome technical complexity of Godowsky's music. Most of his compositions are long out-of-print, and a few specific references, in the case of Godowsky's arrangements of Chopin's *Etudes*, for example, would have helped Nicholas further explain some of his points.

In addition to the basic text, four extensive appendices are provided: a list of Godowsky's compositions, a discography and brief discussion of his recordings, a selection of programmes, and a "Draft Plan for the World Synod of Music and Musicians." (This musical master plan was something of an impractical monstrosity, guided by the pianist's typically naive high-mindedness.) It was a relief to discover that Nicholas, in his discussion of Godowsky's recordings, shares this reviewer's largely negative assessment of them.

Once again, we are indebted to APR for making us aware of someone most of us have chosen to ignore. This project obviously was a labor of love for Jeremy Nicholas and we must be grateful for his scholarship and persistence in bringing it to fruition. *Reviewed by Walter Pate.*

The Encyclopedia of Pop, Rock and Soul. Revised Edition. By Irwin Stambler. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989; 881 pp., illus., ISBN 0-312-02573-4. Hardbound. \$35.00.

Perhaps a day will come when a multi-volume encyclopedia of popular music will be published. Ideally, it would be an all-encompassing tome with entries for artists both well-known and obscure, discographies and complete birth dates for as many entries as possible. It would cover not just artists, but record companies, important business people, and producers, etc.

Until that no doubt far-off day, this book will do rather nicely. Its virtues are many, but in general its greatest strength is taking its material seriously, providing a solid resource for both the novice and professional. It has value both in private collections and in libraries.

In particular, honors are given to its serious treatment of black popular music, which has not been given equal time in book form. A balance is struck between white rock and pop artists, and those representing soul and its related areas such as reggae and blues. Other than the excellent but now outdated *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Black Music* (Harmony Books, 1982), this area of research has been neglected.

Regardless of the type of music, the writing style is clear and unaffected, relying heavily on quotes taken from various acknowledged sources. (There are no footnotes, but there is a seven page bibliography.) The tone is informational, without being condescending.

Stambler also is not stingy. Entries vary from a few paragraphs for Mark ("Teen Angel") Dinning to four pages for Elvis Presley. The type is small, but readable, and the overall layout is inviting and tasteful. In comparison to other pop reference sources such as *The Illustrated Rock Handbook* (an offshoot of *The Illustrated Rock Encyclopedia*), Stambler's entries are much longer, but without discographies and color photos. He also gives reasonably good coverage to the late '80s, though most of today's rising stars are absent. It's even timely enough to note Roy Orbison's death (though just at the beginning and obviously after the text was written and too far along to change).