

SOME EARLY LETTERS

FRAGMENT FROM A LETTER TO HIS MOTHER (1902)

To-day I was at a musical party at Professor Thoman's. There was a big crowd consisting of his relatives and other people. I was asked to play two movements of my symphony. Thoman liked them both, but especially the Scherzo. He embraced me twice (1) because the compositions are so beautiful, (2) because I played them so well. He, as a pianist, is interested in the manner of playing.

To-day I took the slow movement to Kœssler. He said: "An adagio must be about love; there is no trace of love in this movement. That is a serious fault. It is a general shortcoming of modern composers, they cannot write adagios, and whenever possible modern composers should avoid writing them." What others cannot do he will not ask from me. If I cannot think of anything better I may leave the slow movement as it is but it cannot be considered good.

It is well known that Kœssler is frightfully strict in judging adagios. He will say: "In order to write adagios you must have gone through certain experiences." (What sort of experiences? Very likely of love and all that is involved: disappointments, raptures, pains, etc.) Well, I do not believe experiences have all that influence on the quality of a composition.

I have lived through a great many things and am gifted too (at least so they say), so according to the above rule I ought to be able to write good adagios. By the way, Kœssler does not think Dohnányi's adagios beyond reproach either. (Neither do I!)

FRAGMENT FROM A LETTER TO HIS MOTHER (Paris, 1905)

If Elsa* were more like me she would not mind her "loneliness" and it would not worry you either.

In spite of my having my meals with 20 people from Cuba and all parts of South and North America, with Dutch, Spanish and English people, in spite of going for excursions with Germans and Turks, I am still lonely. May be there are Diel and Mandl in Vienna who care for me, and I have my friends (Thoman, Mrs. Gruber) in Budapest, still I am all alone. And I can see in advance, this loneliness of my soul will be my fate. I am looking and searching for an ideal companion, but I feel it is all in vain. Should I find one disappointment would not be far away.

Quiet resignation may sound contrary to my searching for a companion, but I have almost become used to the thought that it cannot be otherwise, I must always be lonely. And I can say this to bring comfort to others: We must attain to a height from where we can view things with sober calmness, with complete indifference. It is difficult to acquire this ability. But to reach this height is the greatest triumph we can have over ourselves, over others, over all that is. Sometimes for a while I feel I have reached the height. Then comes a terrible fall, then the struggle, the move upwards starts again. And so it goes on incessantly. Still, there will be a time when I shall succeed in remaining on the top.

*Bartók's sister.

FRAGMENT FROM A LETTER TO HIS MOTHER (*Paris, August, 1905*)

I have to inform you with regret that I was not successful in the competition. It is not extraordinary and does not hurt me that I did not win the prize for piano playing, but the way the prize for composing was handled is just revolting.

Well, here is some detailed inside information which I had from Dietl, who was one of the adjudicators.

The piano prize went to Backhaus. Next to him Eisner had the best chance. For the composers' prize there were only 5 competitors.

The following questions were put before the adjudicators:—

- (1) Should the 1st prize be awarded? (Yes 2, No 13)
- (2) Should the 2nd prize be awarded? (2000 frs.) (Yes 5, No 10)
- (3) If prizes are not given, should diplomas of honour be given? (Yes 10, No 5)
- (4) Who should receive such diplomas? (Brugnoli 10, Bartók 9, Flament 2, Weinberg 1)

So Brugnoli was mentioned in the first place. The last 2 do not even receive diplomas. And I shall return my (un)-honorary diploma to Auer (St. Petersburg) as soon as I receive it. I do not want to accept such stupid "honours."

I should like to remark that Brugnoli's works are just compilations of no value at all. That the adjudicators could not see how much better my works were, is perfectly scandalous.

The works were well performed; that even so the adjudicators could not see what was in them makes the whole business so scandalous. And how much trouble they gave me! I almost decided to resign. They said that the parts in the score of my concerto were not written out correctly, that the whole was too difficult and with little time for rehearsals it could not be played. I corrected the parts (there were hardly 10 to 15 mistakes in them) and after much fuss it was played reasonably well.

Of the quintet they said straight away that it could not be learned in such little time. Luckily there was still my sonata for violin, (Why do I say 'luckily'? It made no difference to the result) and that was played.

It took me some time to find a player; at last a young Russian violinist, a pupil of Auer's, rehearsed and played it with me.

So it was for nothing I had written out the second copy of the quintet. And, owing to extraordinary circumstances they did not ask for a second copy of the violin sonata. Nobody had even so much as a glance at the piano version of the orchestra part of the concerto, which took me 6 hours to write. Why on earth these pigheads of adjudicators insisted on having it I really could not say.

The works of the 4 other composers were of no value whatever. Brugnoli's works, at least, had some formal qualities. But it was hard for the public not to burst into laughter when Ságody's works were performed, so incredibly stupid were they.

(These extracts have been translated by Eva Hajnal-Konyi)