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I cannot write other than personally about Serkin. He has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I knew him, though not well (awestruck, and 40 years his junior, I was ever tongue-tied in his presence) throughout my childhood, adolescence and early manhood. His dominant influence in my life, however, was musical, not personal. It was through Serkin's performances that I first heard not only the works presented here but many other Mozart concertos, all the Beethovens, the Schumann, the Mendelssohns, the Strauss *Burleske*, the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto of Bach, the Brahms concertos, countless chamber works, and solo works including many Beethoven sonatas, the Brahms 'Handel' Variations, Schumann's *Carnaval* and so on. In every one of them, what impressed me most, apart from the overpowering effect of the music itself, was the absolute identity of music and man. Never had I witnessed or experienced such intense dedication, passion and rigour in any sphere, nor such an electrifying combination of intellect and emotion. It is entirely possible that without Serkin's influence and example I might never have become a musician myself. I thus owe much of my sentient, conscious life to him, for it was he who first and most decisively convinced me that for the duration of its sounding, and of its conscious pursuit, music and life are one and the same.

Serkin was one of those rare figures (rare even amongst the great) whose very presence, on or off the platform, proclaimed a man of truly exceptional character and substance. He radiated an aura of incorruptible integrity, a profound sense of morality, a tirelessly questing spirit and an almost dangerous combination of intensity and energy, at once inspiring and intimidating. That he also radiated warmth, generosity and ebullient humour has long since been a matter of historical record. The latter qualities, however, are less consistently evident in his playing than the former. The incorruptible integrity was always there, as was the totality of dedication. Serkin was a musician, first last and always, for whom the piano was no more than a medium for the expression of the highest art. Musically speaking, he might aptly be described as a passionate puritan, who had little interest in the lighter side of the repertoire, and whose uncompromising search for artistic truth made no concessions whatever to his listeners.

He was and remains a highly controversial figure, many in his lifetime regarding him as the greatest pianist in the world, others regarding him with something more like abhorrence. Part of the problem is that he was so erratic. To say, as many have done, 'I do not like the way he plays' is to betray an inadequate familiarity with the totality of Serkin's performances. 'The way he played' all depended on when you caught him, and where. For instance, he was seldom heard at his greatest in London, and only sporadically in New York. At his most relaxed, he could play with an unmannered tranquillity and a loveliness and variety of tone matched by very few. On other occasions, once his shy walk to the piano was completed, punctuated by nervous smiles (part sweet, part hopeful, part apologetic) he often seemed to be locked into a life-or-death struggle with music and instrument alike, in which harsh sounds and rigid, angular lines emerged to the accompaniment of strained, heavy breathing, an often distracting vocalising and a feverish stamping on the pedals ('Stomp and Serkinstamps', as Richard Goode once wittily described it). Arms flailing, sweat pouring from his brow, his body sprung with all the tension and power of a

tiger set to pounce, Serkin could demand from his audiences, not by choice but by virtue of his temperament, a considerable act of will. In the symbolic language of tones, he was always a wrestler with the great issues, and a large part of his extraordinary power as a performer lay in his ability to make listeners grapple with them too. A Serkin recital was never anything so simple as merely enjoyable. It might be uplifting, exciting, even awe-inspiring, or it might be acutely distressing.

Despite his formidable virtuosity, Serkin never regarded himself as a natural pianist, and the element of struggle was seldom altogether absent from his playing. It's no accident that the composer with whom he spent most of his many thousands of hours at the piano was Beethoven - or that the work which most obsessed him throughout his life was that most epic of all musical struggles, the 'Hammerklavier' Sonata. Of the composers with whom he was most closely associated, only one, Schubert, is missing from the present collection (though we should not overlook Schumann). He was not, however, despite his image, a musician who played only that music which, in Schnabel's much-quoted phrase, "is better than it can be played". For all his dedication to the great Germanic repertoire, he also played in the course of his long career such outwardly un-Serkin-esque composers as Chopin, Bartók, Debussy, Ravel, Prokofiev, Grieg, Liszt and even MacDowell. But all of this befitted his background and development. Though he himself was born in Bohemia, his parents were Russian. His father was a largely unsuccessful Jewish cantor whose poverty was such that the entire family (parents and eight children) were forced for a time to live in a single room. It was in these circumstances that the young Rudi developed his intense powers of concentration and his rigorous single-mindedness - features of his playing to the end of his days. At the age of 6 he was playing Schubert Impromptus and at 12, now resident in Vienna as the student of Richard Robert, he made his orchestral debut in Mendelssohn's G minor Concerto, which he kept in his repertoire for most of his career. Despite his youth, he soon became part of a circle including the composers Webern, Berg and Schoenberg (his composition teacher), the painters Kokoschka and Klee, the writer Herman Hesse and the architect Adolf Loos.

The great turning-point of his career came with his introduction to the incomparable violinist, quartet-leader and conductor Adolf Busch, who invited him to become his sonata partner. Serkin accepted, and the result was a professional liaison which lasted for some 30 years - augmented in 1935 by his marriage to Busch's daughter Irene (a union whose musical fruits persist to this day in the person of their son Peter, now regarded by many as his father's equal). Perhaps uniquely in his generation, Serkin managed to establish concurrently a major reputation as both chamber musician and soloist. Indeed his instincts and insights as a chamber player informed everything he did.

He made his American debut in New York, playing Beethoven's Fourth and Mozart's last concerto with Toscanini, who had already become one of the great inspirations of his life. The decisive moment had been a performance of the Brahms D major Symphony. "An incredible revelation! It was architecture with *passion*," he later recalled - thereby articulating one of the abiding hallmarks of his own music-making.

As a soloist, Serkin was rarely comfortable in the recording studio, and many of his recordings, particularly in later life, leave a misleading impression. Generally speaking, his concerto and chamber recordings form the most truthful legacy, but the series of Mozart concertos recorded in his old age with Claudio Abbado seldom approach the level, naturalness and fizz of his earlier collaborations with Busch, Szell, Ormandy, Alexander Schneider and his long-time friend and chamber partner Pablo Casals. The best of him, indeed, remained, on the whole, a stranger to the microphone, whose presence seems to have precluded a measure of spontaneity which rendered his greatest performances both incandescent in their spirituality and incomparably powerful in their dramatic intensity.

Like many great artists, Serkin was a curious bundle of contradictions. The gentle, shy, professorial figure who walked onto the platform ('that wise old angel of the platform', as one

newspaper characterised him in his later years), could also be puritanically severe, even to the point of brutality - as performer and teacher alike. 'What does it matter how deeply you feel the Beethoven Fourth Concerto if your scales are uneven and you have no trill?', he would ask. But who could argue with the realism? One former pupil, now well-established among the greatest living pianists, recalls 'No matter what one did, it was never good enough. You just couldn't get it right.' Another struggles to remember a single compliment in three years of study. But Serkin the teacher was no less severe with Serkin the performer. His strenuous, uncompromising search for musical truth was with him to the end.

From the beginning, Serkin was an avid practiser, but it was only after hearing Horowitz that he became downright obsessive. Although already himself an outstanding virtuoso, he heard in Horowitz's playing a level and precision of technique beyond his own attainment, and it galvanised him. Indeed for many years he kept in his repertoire one piece of glitz with which no-one would readily associate him: Liszt's *Tarantella di Bravura* from Auber's *La muette de Portici*. He freely admitted that he liked to play it now and again simply in order to shock. But there we see the streak of mischief, the sometimes even naïve sense of fun that rarely surfaced in the great musical centres of the world. Where it did surface, indeed often erupted, with an almost childlike exuberance, was his cherished school-cum-festival at Marlboro, which he directed for nearly 40 years. Here, in the luxuriant foothills of Vermont, nestled comfortably in the northeast corner of the United States, he also owned, and had a hand in running, a beautiful, sprawling farm on which he raised a prize-winning herd of cattle. In Vermont, away from the strains of the international big time, Serkin often played in a manner seldom duplicated in the concert hall. There he was able to temper his relentless search for perfection with a delight and abandon which gave free rein to his infectious but unselfconscious sense of humour. At Marlboro, as nowhere else, Serkin displayed not only the stern and saintly qualities associated with his concerts and recordings but a quality of joy, of sheer, contagious rapture, indeed, that has never been surpassed. There one heard the whole man. And for many, myself among them, it was a transfiguring experience.