Six Famous Ears
Emanuel Ax, Alfred Brendel and András Schiff
tell how they listen

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Anyone who has had personal dealings with well known performing artists is aware of the fact that many of them have a lot to say, but that often what they have to say is not especially interesting. Or, to put it differently: whatever profundity they possess is expressed through their music-making, not through words.

So when Peter Dejans, Joost Vanmaele, and Hubert Eiholzer invited me to participate in this project and suggested that I talk to three celebrated pianists about how they listen to music, I opted for a trio of artists with whom I had previously spoken on various subjects and whom I knew to be verbally as well as musically articulate. Of course, there are other well-known pianists as articulate as Emanuel Ax, Alfred Brendel and András Schiff; my choice was dictated partly by the practical consideration that all three would be spending time in New York, where I live, during the first four months of this year.

They all consented to take part in this informal study, but whereas Ax and Schiff preferred to have me interview them face-to-face, Brendel preferred to answer questions in writing. Not surprisingly, his answers are generally much briefer than those of the other two artists. But let me plunge *in medias res* without further ado.

Question 1. To what extent are you aware of listening to a piece's form, harmony, and various "lines" while you are actually performing it (as opposed to studying it)?

Alfred Brendel replied: "All these things are part of a concept that has become subconscious. It is not like an architect's layout of a house. Rather, it is a kind of living organism with room for notions and insights of the moment."

Emanuel Ax's response was similar but more detailed. "There are certain anchors that you find physically – certain bass notes," he said, "certain things that feel right and where you know you need to land right in order not to rush and so forth; you tend to listen for that. You don't really think 'Now I'm going into the development section' while you're playing. That's the kind of thing you've probably internalized by the time you're performing."

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Andràs Schiff's answer was slightly different from the answers of Brendel and Ax: "To a certain extent I'm aware of [the harmony, form, etc.]," he said, "but at the point of performing [a piece] the analysis has been done and you try to integrate what you have analyzed. I'm aware of all those elements – where is the development, how the architecture of the piece is, where there are the climaxes and the low points – also harmonically - very much so - but a performance cannot be like a lecture or something educational."

Question 2. To what extent are you aware of and bothered by extraneous noises - audience noises or mechanical noises - during a performance?

Brendel wrote: "These days, the audience sometimes needs to be told to keep quiet. I have done this when I heard the kind of nervous coughing going on that would not stop by itself. After such an intervention, the audience really stays completely quiet – which should mean that one does not <u>have</u> to cough. People who buy a ticket know what they will get – a musician performing. But they don't know that they are allowed to listen as long as they also provide something: silence. Listen / Silent: an anagram."

Schiff said that the noise problem "varies from place to place," and he added, with a laugh, that "it varies with my age. It also depends on my disposition, the state of my nerves. On a good night you can do anything to me, but on nights that are not so good it can be very bad. However, it happened to me so many times, when there was coughing, and especially persistent coughing, and I reacted to it and stopped the performance; and each time, first of all, I was so upset with myself, because this should never happen, because I should be so much on the track of the music. Secondly, after these interruptions everyone was very quiet, but it was not spontaneous, it was like they were at gunpoint – they <u>had</u> to be quiet. Somehow, it was a very aggressive way to achieve what should be natural – an obvious mutual respect. People should know automatically how to behave in a concert hall; they should still have a very good time, they should enjoy themselves, but there are things you don't do at a concert hall. Many people don't seem to know that the program notes should not be read during the music – you should do it before or after – preferably before. I try to tell myself not to be bothered, but when I hear that there is restlessness in the audience during a composition, I try to tame these noisemakers, like Tamino with the wild animals in "*The Magic Flute*."

Ax's response largely concurred with that of Schiff, but he began with a different consideration. The noise question "depends first of all on the acoustics of the hall," Ax said, "because there are some halls where the sound you get back from the audience isn't nearly as prominent as others. A place like the Concertgebouw, or the Tonhalle in Zurich, or to some degree Carnegie Hall – there, you really hear what's going on in the audience. And in most of the small halls, of course, you're very aware of it. It has to do with your mood as well. Sometimes you can be in something like a trance – you're really focused on the sounds from the piano and you're not bothered by the squeaking chair, the cougher, or the rattling in the wings. At other times, your ears take in everything. It's something that can be distracting, but also, we as performers try to work to externalize our concentration to the point where we make people focus. If <u>you</u> focus to an incredible degree, the audience goes with you, to some extent. Sometimes there's nothing you can do, but sometimes you can get people to do that."

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Question 3. Do you ever think of the sounds you produce on your instrument in terms of color, shape, density, light/dark, or as if you were playing another instrument or singing? If so, does this happen frequently or infrequently?

"All these things, at least in a figurative sense, are to me essential," wrote Brendel. "To me the sound of a piano piece is not something abstract and self-sufficient. All great piano composers, with the exception of Chopin, have also been composers of many kinds of ensemble music. Many of these sounds have entered their piano works. They are full of latent musical ideas that transcend 'sheer piano sounds.' To make such sounds as manifest as possible is the art of the pianist."

Schiff said: "You have a system of associations which is very individual and subjective. When I play the 48 [Preludes and Fugues] of Bach, I have my own system of saying that C Major is white and B minor is pitch black, and between them you have all the shades. But this is very individual: maybe for someone else C Major is purple. The thing is that music is not just black and white. And then, I never think of the piano – anything but the piano! I always associate: this must sound like a cello, this is like a horn, this is like a string quartet. The voice all the time: all instruments want to imitate the voice. The piano has one great advantage over other instruments, and that's the polyphony, but otherwise it has almost only disadvantages: it cannot sustain, it cannot make a crescendo on a held note – it always makes a diminuendo – so when you play the piano you are dealing with a series of illusions. Therefore you have to have a very lively imagination. It's possible to <u>suggest</u> that you are sustaining or that you do make a perfect legato, even though it is not the perfect legato that a singer makes. But in the right hands, these illusions, these suggestions, can work."

Ax said that he often thinks of other instruments, "not necessarily as I'm performing, but in preparing a piece. I think that's partly because I worked a lot with Erich Leinsdorf when I was young, and he thought it was good, if you were having problems with a particular piece or a particular section, to look at something analogous in a string quartet or a symphony and see how the composer handles it. It's quite obvious, in certain pieces, that Beethoven or Mozart is thinking of pizzicatos in the cello, or a bassoon playing something, or a wind choir, or a string sound, or maybe something vocal. It doesn't have to be so specific, but it helps you a lot on the piano, because where we have control is with balance and volume. Balance is what makes the difference between the piano sound you want and the kind you don't want. If you heard one note from any pianist, you really couldn't tell who it was, but a chord, or three notes – you would at least hear a difference, even if you didn't know who was playing. But color? I'm visually impaired – I have no sense of that – shades of brightness, or darkness. When I say 'dark' about something, I'm thinking in terms of sound rather than in terms of vision. The color of certain keys obviously meant a lot more in the nineteenth century than it does to us, because instruments sounded different – the natural horns, and so on – but also because the tuning systems were different. Peter Serkin has been experimenting a lot with old tunings, and that does give you a different color sense."

Question 4. Do you ever think of non-musical imagery (pictures, stories, etc.), as the Romantics often did, when you work on your sound? If so, does this happen frequently or infrequently?

Alfred Brendel wrote: "It doesn't seem that Chopin ever thought of non-musical imagery. I don't either. But I am aware that certain pieces have to be 'told' and unfold like a narrative – on purely musical grounds."

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Emanuel Ax seemed to agree with Brendel's point of view. "I certainly think of stories very often," he said, "but very often they're non-specific – I don't have fully developed characters or anything like that! Generally, the feeling that you are telling some kind of story is for me very much a part of the music I play, but it's non-verbal. When you play the 'Appassionata', whatever is happening at the beginning of the piece, when there's that knocking, da-da-da-DA, it represents some kind of story-telling, whether you want to say it's death knocking at the door or a guy pounding from upstairs to stop the noise. Von Bülow was very specific: in the 'Les Adieux' Sonata, he's got this whole scenario – in the last movement he even tells you where the handkerchief is being waved from the coach. It sounds stupid, but I know what he means – it's the idea that yes, there is this rush, I see this person, it's exciting, it's wonderful; I understand that. Von Bülow wrote a whole program for Chopin's Barcarolle, and so did Liszt: you come to the trill, and 'obviously' that's the place where they kiss. That I find meaningless, but the point is that there is a process of story-telling."

András Schiff expressed similar ideas and added, "That's why it's very important to live a full life. Piano playing is not just sitting at the piano and practicing; I want to listen to people make music who have something to tell me. In Bach's music the imagery is very often architectural. When you play Schubert's sonatas, if you don't know his lieder you are lost; there is always a story, but you can't specify it. Even Beethoven's 'Les Adieux': it's the only one of his sonatas with a sort of program, but it's obvious, as he wrote in the 'Pastoral' Symphony, that it's not tone-painting but descriptive of emotions. With the Chopin ballades, we know that they were inspired by Mickiewicz's poems, but we don't know which ones. Beethoven said about Op. 31, No. 2, 'read Shakespeare's *Tempest*' – we read Shakespeare's *Tempest*, but we will never know which character is speaking at which point. It indicates something, and that is what's important. Music is an integral part of general culture and life – you can't separate them."

Question 5. If you make a mistake during a performance, does it have a negative effect on how you listen to yourself immediately afterward?

Brendel said, simply, "I try to regain my composure as quickly as possible and play the next phrases with particular affection." Ax said firmly, "The answer is yes. One of the big things that I've worked on all my life and am still working on is to get away from being conscious of and a slave to wrong notes. It's one of the worst things about the recording culture – it's the biggest single problem both for performers and for listeners, including critics. When they hear the Chopin E minor Concerto, they hear nothing but perfect [recordings]. Then they come to a performance by someone like Garrick Olsen; every pianist in the audience has his jaw hanging down with the perfection of the playing, but if Olsen misses three notes the critic writes, 'Mr. Olsen had some technical issues.' The effect of that sort of thing is to take away from spontaneity, from daring. I've spent many years fighting that tendency. On a good day I think, 'I'm too old to think about this' – and then it goes better, it's both cleaner and freer. But it's a problem for most of us today."

Schiff hopes that making a mistake would not have a negative influence on what followed. "We don't like our own mistakes," he said. "We must register them, but it is not good to make a mistake and then show it to the audience. It isn't necessary, and it is a terrible pity to spoil the whole evening because of that. It's not a big deal to fall; the big deal is to stand up and move on." Like Ax, Schiff, too, lays a great deal of blame on recordings. "As much as I enjoy recordings, they have spoiled the way many people listen to music," he told me. "When we go to a live performance we expect a reproduction of the document.

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But a lot of [musicians] now make live recordings, and people are realizing that [studio recordings] are a false track, in a way. You don't love your favorite performances because of the perfection; you love them because of their magical capturing of the moment. They are unrepeatable. There are exceptions, and I'm sure that if you had asked Glenn Gould this question you would have had a different answer. I would hate to give up concerts. Even though there are hazards and things that disturb you, when it works it's so much greater than anything a recording can give."

Question 6. Do you more often have an idea of how you want a passage to sound and then work to realize it, or develop that idea as you work on it?

Brendel's answer came in three parts: "a) I imagine clearly what it should sound like, and try to realize it. b) I am not satisfied with how I play a passage or theme, and look for ways to improve it. c) A (better) solution comes by chance, which I try to retain."

Schiff's response was similar but more elaborate. "It's always a work in progress," he said. "There's a difference between studying a work you have heard before, played by others, or something you have never heard. It's easier to develop an independent unity if you have never heard it; it's very difficult to play the 'Waldstein' Sonata for the first time – you have heard it hundreds of times, and you still have to work something out. One has a concept of it, yes, but certainly things happen along the way – while learning it but also while doing many performances of the Beethoven sonatas, for instance. It doesn't become routine, but that means taking a lot of time. You have to make the journey which you have already made often, to rediscover it. And along those journeys you get new ideas, also about the sound and how you want to develop it."

Ax said, "What's not good for me, sometimes, is having an idea before. Sometimes I have to try to play the piece totally differently – twice as fast, twice as slow, without pedal, with a lot of pedal – just to get away from one possibility. Sometimes we get locked in. It's really important to keep an open mind and to keep re-thinking." He added that he finds it hard to listen to himself from the outside while he is performing, but that he thinks it is a good thing to do. "If you hear the way a certain note is coming out, you know what to do with the next note," he said. "It's good to have recordings of [one's own] performances, because they tell you what you did instead of what you thought you did. If you can stand hearing how badly you're playing, [recordings of yourself] are probably the best education."

Question 7. Were there any listening events – live or recorded – in your early years that had a strong influence on your musical development?

"With all my admiration for certain pianists," Brendel wrote, "the strongest impressions were those of great conductors (Furtwängler, Bruno Walter, Klemperer) and great singers."

Schiff was influenced by many performances. "Unfortunately, I'm too young to have heard some of the people I would have loved to hear," he said. "But in my early childhood, my mother took me to concerts in Budapest – first with Richter, and then some wonderful recitals by Annie Fischer, whose playing I adored and which influenced me very much. Then recordings – for instance, Pablo Casals influenced me, particularly his relationship to music, like a force of nature. Also the piano playing of Bartók, which I still consider the greatest art – the closest we come to how a great composer plays his own music."

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Simply going to concerts had a great influence on Ax. "I think my earliest learning experiences were from hearing other pianists," he said. "I was lucky: I lived in New York, Carnegie Hall was very close, and all the great pianists played there regularly. The value of hearing concerts is sometimes underestimated; recordings, too, but actually seeing and hearing the pianists – that makes a tremendous impact. Today I find that most kids don't go to that many concerts, but in my time my close friends and I went to hear everybody. We'd regularly hear Horowitz, Rubinstein, Gilels, Richter, Serkin, whenever they came – all the time. And of course the next morning you get up and you try to sound like that guy. You can't because you're you, and even if you could play that well – which you can't – you'll never sound like him. But it was an incredible experience, more than recordings. I don't think you listen the same way: you listen analytically to recordings, you're comfortable in your room, you're not up for the event – it's not the same experience. Seeing someone like Gilels or Richter walk onstage and play whatever piece it was - that was just overwhelming. They all had the ability to convince you with the way they were presenting whatever piece it was."

Question 8. Do you seek outside influences (e.g., performances or recordings by colleagues, or recordings of artists from the past) when you are adding a new piece to your repertoire or restudying a piece that you haven't played in a relatively long time?

Brendel replied: "There are some recorded performances that have remained benchmarks. One or two have even prevented me from playing certain works (Cortot's Chopin Preludes of 1932-'33, Edwin Fischer's *Well-Tempered Clavier*). Going back to works I have played before, I sometimes listen to older performances of myself, to see what I should improve, or retain."

Ax said, "I would say that I don't really seek [outside influences], except sometimes if I'm working on, say, the Schumann *Carnaval*, I would certainly listen to the Rachmaninoff performance because it's so legendary – everybody says this is the way to play the piece, so I'd like to hear it. But I probably wouldn't go and find fifteen versions of it. I like very much to listen to pianists who are no longer with us, partly because I like the sound, partly because I like the individual styles, and partly because the fact that they're not around let's you listen with a kind of romantic haze. You can listen to Schnabel, and despite all the little things that don't go right you get the whole picture. But if you heard a contemporary pianist play the same piece you'd probably think, 'I didn't like bars twenty-two to twenty-four.' I go to hear my contemporaries, and I admire a lot of them, but that probably has nothing to do with how I study a piece or think of the sound. I do better just thinking on my own. The danger for young people is to hear only one version [of a piece]; if they hear eight different performances, that's fine. Or none at all."

Schiff's response was similar. "I always listen to my favorite old pianists – Schnabel, Fischer, Cortot, Rudolf Serkin, Wilhelm Kempff – but not when I'm working on a piece," he said. "And I look for other influences, like great singers or string quartets, and non-musical influences – reading a lot, theatrical experiences, or experiences from the visual arts. When I play a Beethoven sonata, I'm certainly not going to listen to twenty recordings of it – it would totally confuse me and be counterproductive."

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Question 9. Do you think that listening to artists from the past is a) essential, b) potentially important, c) unimportant, or d) detrimental?

All three pianists agreed, in essence, on this point. "Why should it be detrimental?" Brendel asked. "One ought to be able to learn, positively or negatively, from listening to others. I think it is essential to get an impression of the very high standards of the past – providing that one listens to the best of these performances. Caruso, Cortot, Casals, Callas, the Busch and Kolisch Quartets, to mention only a few – my life would be much impoverished without them."

Ax's answer was brief: "I'm somewhere between essential and potentially important, but I think it's a good thing – certainly not detrimental!"

Schiff was more categorical: "I would say essential. I'm sure that a lot of people play Bartók's music who are not familiar with his playing, because they bang the hell out of it – and he never does. He was a child of the nineteenth century – his playing is beautiful. I don't even know why people call Bartók's piano music percussive. And I don't think that many people who play Rachmaninoff know Rachmaninoff's playing – it's so fantastic! When some other people play his music, I don't like it. I wish I could hear Liszt play, because it must have been fantastic, and I really don't like the music - maybe because of the way people play it. Of course, nobody can do everything equally well. When I hear Cortot play Mozart or Beethoven, I don't like it, but when I hear him play the Chopin preludes or César Franck or even Debussy, that's something else."

Question 10. How long does it take you to adapt your sound to a new performing venue, or to the same venue when it's full after you have practiced there when it's empty?

Brendel answered this final question by saying: "There are halls that are good for the player, and halls that are good for the audience, and halls (not too many) that are good for both. Usually, the sound improves in the full hall. Some acousticians tend to neglect the quality and amount of sound onstage. I always spend some two hours in the hall to adjust, and then hope for the best in the evening."

Ax said that he usually becomes accustomed to a hall "pretty fast. You have to be prepared for the fact that in a hall that's fairly large and fairly resonant, when you come in and start and there are a lot of people, it's going to sound very different than it did at the rehearsal. But I adapt fairly quickly. It can be a danger, but it's a matter of experience."

Schiff's statement was virtually the same as Ax's. "This is something that comes with experience," he said. "You can learn so many things at school, but still you come out as a 'freshman' on the stage. It is very difficult to develop a 'third ear' that listens to you from a distance. The better your 'third ear,' the better musician you are, although it can never be perfect. To me it's very important to spend at least three hours in the morning in the hall where I'm going to perform, playing through parts of the program and listening to it, even if it's a hall I know well. When you come out in the evening and it's full, it sounds somewhat different, and you have to adjust. You even have to watch your tempi – not that you can do completely different tempi, but I do believe that the venue is important, and all that really matters is what the listener hears. An impossibly fast metronome mark by a composer may work on paper, but if in a certain hall half of [the music] is lost because the speed makes it inaudible, then one has to do something, or else not play this music in that venue. The dynamics have to be watched, the balances have to be watched, the pauses have to be observed, and whether you play with more pedal or less pedal – and all

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this you have to decide very quickly. This is difficult even for a solo recital, but when you are doing chamber music it's even more difficult – there is a great balance problem. Even in a wonderful hall like the Musikvereinssaal or the Concertgebouw, you have to know them and 'live' in them. Plus, it's a great pleasure to spend two or three hours there and rehearse and absorb the atmosphere."

These, then, were the responses of three outstanding pianists to the ten questions that I posed to each of them. They differed on numerous details, but the consensus on nearly every major point was significantly broad. Were there any shocks in their answers? No. All three artists are aware of a piece's form and harmony as they perform it, but they are not consciously re-analyzing it. They may all be disturbed by extraneous noises at performances but try not to let the disturbance affect their playing. All of them think of colors and/or other instrumental or vocal sounds when they study, and all are aware that a piece of music tells a story as it unfolds, although the story should not be verbalized. Each of them tries to limit the effect that a mistake has on what comes afterward.

On the question of whether to work toward an ideal sound as one begins to study a piece or developing that sound as work proceeds, Brendel takes the first path, Ax the second, and Schiff says that the answer depends on whether or not he is already familiar with the piece before he begins to study it. All three have been influenced by live and recorded performances by other musicians - although Brendel claims that the influence of conductors and singers has been greater than that of pianists - and all of them severely limit their exposure to others' performances of pieces that they are actually working on. They agree that listening to recordings of performers of the past is very important, even essential, and that learning to adjust quickly to a hall's acoustics is above all a matter of experience.

All that remains for me to add to the intelligent remarks of Emanuel Ax, Alfred Brendel, and András Schiff is my gratitude to the Orpheus Instituut for giving me the opportunity to carry out this study and to gather, collate, and analyze the responses of these three wonderful musicians. I hope that my listeners today have found those observations to be as fascinating as I did.

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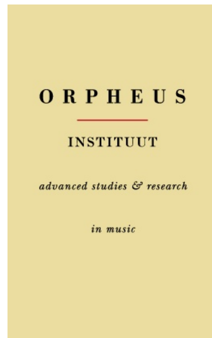

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