

*Editor's Note: For many years David Dubal, the world-famous authority on music for the piano, has hosted a series of piano concerts at the Kosciuszko Foundation House. This past fall the series was dedicated to "Chopin, Sand and their Circle," and two of the evenings were co-sponsored by NYDAI's 7th International Chopin & Friends Festival. These events are recognized as uniquely important by the piano cognoscenti of New York City, and we have invited the well-known New York pianist Joseph Smith to share with us his thoughts about them.*

# Evenings with David Dubal

BY JOSEPH SMITH

MUSIC

I have often participated in David Dubal's piano evenings at the Kosciuszko Foundation on Manhattan's Upper East Side. During the recent series of concerts dedicated to Chopin, Sand and their circle, I tried to figure out why these occasions have seemed so powerful to me. What explains what I believe makes these evenings so special to both the performers and the audience?

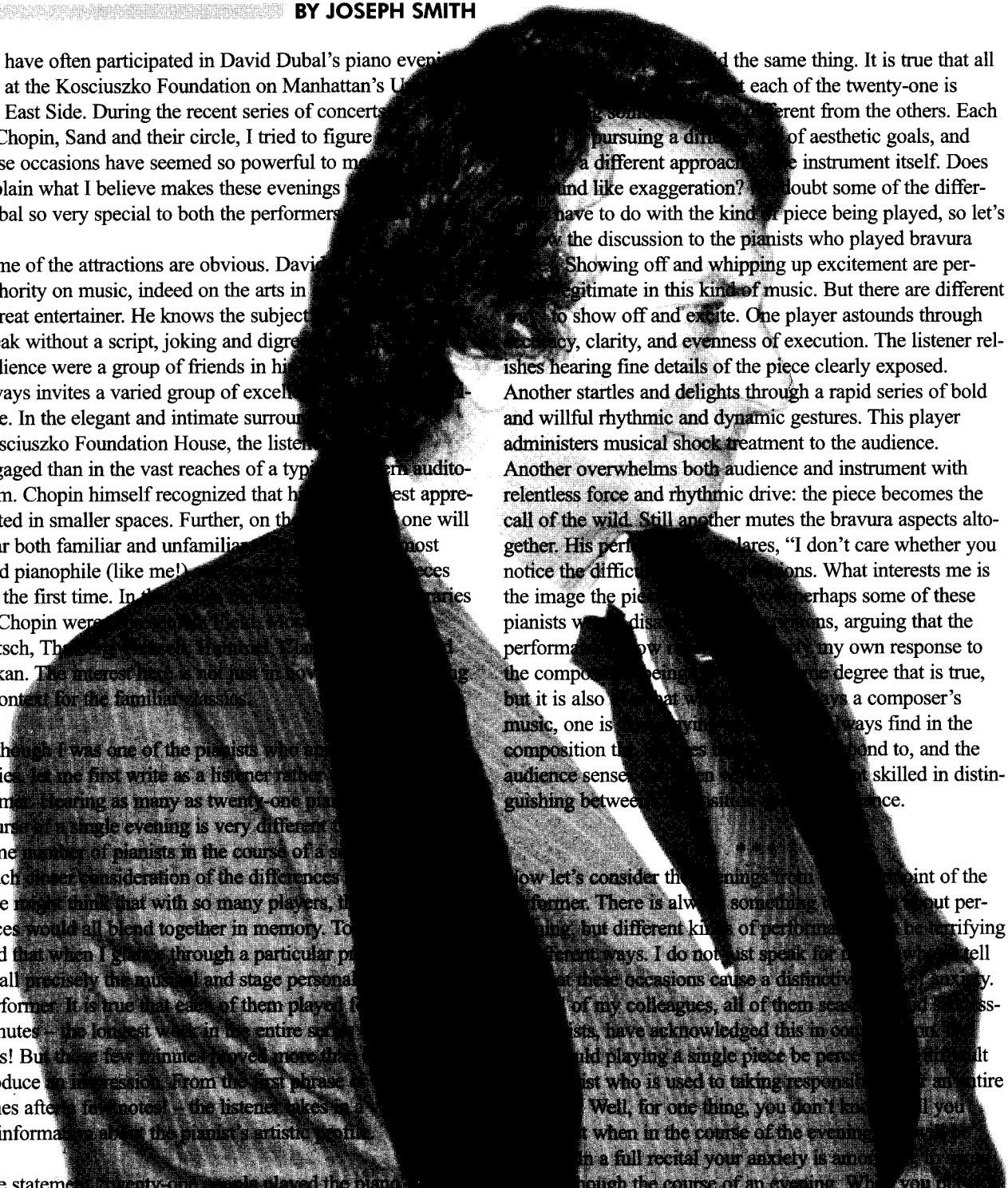
Some of the attractions are obvious. David Dubal is an authority on music, indeed on the arts in general, and a great entertainer. He knows the subject well enough to speak without a script, joking and digressing. If the audience were a group of friends in his living room, he would always invite a varied group of excellent musicians to participate. In the elegant and intimate surroundings of the Kosciuszko Foundation House, the listener is more engaged than in the vast reaches of a typical concert hall or auditorium. Chopin himself recognized that his music is best appreciated in smaller spaces. Further, on these occasions one will hear both familiar and unfamiliar pieces. I am almost an avid pianophile (like me!) and I have heard many of these pieces for the first time. In the past several years, many of the series of Chopin were played by pianists such as Andrzej Filipczak, Andrzej Filtsch, Theodor Kutzer-Duff, and Andrzej Rost. In addition, Alkan. The interest here is not just in how the music is played, but a contrast for the familiar classics.

Although it was one of the pianists who participated in the series, let me first write as a listener rather than as a performer. Hearing as many as twenty-one pianists play the same piece in the course of a single evening is very different from hearing the same number of pianists in the course of a season. It allows for a much closer consideration of the differences between the performances. One might think that with so many players, the differences would all blend together in memory. To my surprise, I find that when I glance through a particular piece, I can recall precisely the musical and stage personality of a particular performer. It is true that each of them played for only a few minutes—the longest work in the entire series was only a few minutes! But these few minutes proved more than enough to produce an impression. From the first phrase to the last, ten times after the notes—the listener takes in a great deal of information about the pianist's artistic profile.

The statement that twenty-one people played the piano

is not the same thing. It is true that all of the performances of each of the twenty-one is different from the others. Each pianist is pursuing a different set of aesthetic goals, and each is using a different approach to the instrument itself. Does this mean that some are like exaggeration? No doubt some of the differences have to do with the kind of piece being played, so let's turn the discussion to the pianists who played bravura pieces. Showing off and whipping up excitement are perfectly legitimate in this kind of music. But there are different ways to show off and excite. One player astounds through sheer force, clarity, and evenness of execution. The listener relishes hearing fine details of the piece clearly exposed. Another startles and delights through a rapid series of bold and willful rhythmic and dynamic gestures. This player administers musical shock treatment to the audience. Another overwhelms both audience and instrument with relentless force and rhythmic drive: the piece becomes the call of the wild. Still another mutes the bravura aspects altogether. His performance declares, "I don't care whether you notice the difficulties or not." What interests me is the image the piece creates. Perhaps some of these pianists would disagree with me, arguing that the performance is only a reflection of their own response to the composition. It is true to some degree that is true, but it is also true that a pianist always finds a composer's music, one is always finding ways in the composition that are not intended to, and the audience senses the difference. It is not skilled in distinguishing between the two.

Now let's consider the evenings from the point of the performer. There is always something about performing that is different, but different kinds of performances can be terrifying in different ways. I do not just speak for myself, I can tell you that these occasions cause a distinctly different kind of anxiety. Many of my colleagues, all of them seasoned and successful pianists, have acknowledged this in one way or another. It would playing a single piece be perceived as a challenge. It is a pianist who is used to taking responsibility for an entire concert. Well, for one thing, you don't know what you are going to play when in the course of the evening you are asked to play a full recital your anxiety is almost unbearable. It is not through the course of an evening. When you play



only a single piece all of your nervousness is poured into a few minutes. You will not be able to retreat into silent meditation for a few minutes before you start playing. If you have been able to try out the piano at all, it may have been hours earlier. You cannot even adjust the height of the piano bench in advance; the previous player has just been using it.

Perhaps the most important factor is that you are facing an audience that includes not only piano enthusiasts and teachers, but the other pianists who are performing that very night. They will range from avidly ambitious students at the height of their dexterity to elder statespersons who have spent a lifetime considering and reconsidering the literature of the piano. This is peculiarly scary, but it can also be peculiarly satisfying. You know that the people listening to your performance will have well-considered criteria – your colleagues can hear things that the public cannot. These criteria allow them to criticize, but they also allow them to appreciate. They are better able to distinguish what belongs to the piece itself from the effect of its performance; they can *hear past* trivial blemishes. This is both a tough and a supportive audience.

On the last day of the series, David reminded us of the multifarious connections between the pianist-composers of the Romantic age. No, they were not one big happy family – they were a big, troubled, dysfunctional family! There were friendships, alliances, quarrels, jealousies, factions. Yet there was some overall sense of community as well. These men knew that their peers were the people best able to appreciate their work. Chopin may have scorned Schumann's music, but when Schumann said that his favorite Chopin composition was the startlingly idiosyncratic first Ballade, Chopin knew that he had been genuinely understood. Liszt transcribed songs by Chopin, Schumann, and Mendelssohn while those composers were alive. The works which composers of this circle dedicated to one another were frequently among their most important – for example, both Schumann's *Fantasy* and Chopin's *Op. 10 Etudes* are dedicated to Liszt, and Liszt's *Sonata* and Chopin's *Second Ballade* are dedicated to Schumann.

Anyone who is serious about playing the piano necessarily spends many hours alone in a room depressing keys – and often himself! Some pianists regard this time alone as a grim duty; others welcome it as a daily vacation from mundane existence. In either case, this way of life inevitably entails some degree of isolation and loneliness. Practicing is an activity that is impossible even to discuss with anyone who does not play seriously. For example, a layperson will not understand that repetition is not primarily a means of imprinting the correct notes; it is a constant search for greater beauty. (“Why do you keep repeating that one phrase? It sounds fine to me.”) In short, there are areas of one's life that only another pianist can really understand. But one's relationships with other pianists may be complicated. The green-eyed monster constantly lurks in the background. Discussion of one's work may lead to philosophical or technical disagreements that can threaten fragile egos. Under

these circumstances it is hard to have a sense of community.

Granted, the closed society of a music school or conservatory has its own way of producing community and comradeship. The person in the next practice room may be a rival, but when you go out for a bag of potato chips or a cigarette, friendly remarks emerge. (“Oh, I hear you working on that etude – is it as hard as it sounds?” “You had your lesson this morning; what mood is our teacher in?”) The most significant limitation to community in the music school, however, is the hierarchy of age. Older people, the teachers and administrators, have great power over young people. They sit on panels to choose students, and on juries to judge them. Exactly here is the most special aspect of David's evenings – the meeting of the generations as fellow performers. It often happens that one will hear a teacher and his student on the same program. You never know who may turn out to be playing: someone you heard, or heard about, long ago; a student of someone you know; someone who has been either kind or discouraging to you or to someone you know. But tonight you are all colleagues. (I couldn't help smiling when an older, very gifted pianist strolled over to me afterwards and remarked, “You know – this is really hard!” This pianist had been on the faculty of a school I had attended, and in my mind he had become a particular object of terror.)

When you are young, you tend to think of “us” and “them” – “us” being young and vulnerable, “them” holding power over “us.” David's evenings affirm that it is all “us” – us in different places on the same path. We are all trying to play the piano more beautifully and meaningfully, and are all hungry for respect and appreciation. In the very special forum that David provides, we are reminded as nowhere else that we pianists *are* a community.

# Music

Suzanne K. Walther  
and David Dubal



Photo: NYDAI