

CHARLES ROSEN

David C F Wright DMus

Here was a king among pianists, probably the most intelligent and intellectual pianist of our time, a pianist who was neither histrionic nor a show off and a pianist who did not imbue his performances with slush.

He also wrote excellent books on music including style in piano playing whether it was playing Mozart, Chopin or Beethoven.

He was not typecast. He played the classics ; his Bach was of crystal clarity ; his tempi was never extreme ; he was not a speed merchant; his late Beethoven sonatas were truly superb and, although he was not enamoured with Chopin, he played this composer with a strength and not in the usual effeminate style. His performances were intellectual which did not please everybody particularly those who like excessive romanticism.

He was born in New York on 5 May 1927. His father, Irwin, was an architect and his mother, Anita, was a semi-professional actress and amateur pianist.

Charles enrolled in the Julliard School at the age of six. When he was eleven he studied with Moriz Rosenthal who had been a pupil of Liszt.

The financial crash of 1929 created problems for this once wealthy family. At the age of fourteen, Rosen played a welcome concert for Martinu when he moved to the USA in 1941.

In 1944, Charles entered Princeton University studying French, Mathematics and Philosophy. In 1951, he achieved a degree in French literature. He recorded music by Haydn and Martinu.

On a Fulbright Scholarship he went to Paris to study the relationship between French music and poetry of the 16th century. In 1953, he was teaching French at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

An offer from the Columbia Artists Management reinstated his piano career and with great success.

Rosen was a pianist of exceptional gifts and free from prejudice and guile. His playing of Debussy is matter of fact and all the better for that. His love of all things French was shown in that he always had an apartment in Paris

It is grievous that so-called musicians and music lovers ridicule and debase the music of Schoenberg, Webern, Elliott Carter, Stravinsky and Boulez. If they do not like it they dismiss it as rubbish. In this ultra-demanding repertoire Rosen was the tops. The Boulez sonatas, which are maligned, can only be played by the greatest of pianists.

Virgil Thomson said that Rosen was the greatest piano technician of all time.

Hearing some effeminate performances of Chopin with excessive lingering and pretty gestures this lead Rosen to write some books on the history of music and style in piano playing. The books are:

The Classical Style 1971

Sonata Forms 1980

The Romantic Generation 1995

Beethoven's Piano Sonatas 2001

Classical Entertainments: Music Old and New 2001

Piano Notes The World of the Pianist 2002

All young pianists should watch him on You Tube and emulate his attitude and approach. Perhaps some older pianists should as well. As for the pianists who show off with absurd bodily gyrations and facial expressions they should also watch. A pianist is neither an actor nor a ballerina!

He had long association with the State of New York University and the University of Chicago. President Obama presented him with a National Humanities Award.

Charles Rosen died of cancer at the Mount Sinai Hospital New York on 5 December 2012. He was 85.

(565)

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