

The Grandest Piano



The artists, left to right: Michael May, Fernando Valenti, Jesus Maria Sanroma, Bruce Hungerford, Guiomar Novaes, Raymond Lewenthal, Julius Rudel, Beverly Sills, Gunnar Johansen, Rosalyn Tureck, Alicia DeLarrocha, Ivan Davis, Earl Wild, Jorge Bolet.

Article by Frank Cooper

**Photographs by Paul J. Hoeffler
and John Graas**

It was a dark and stormy night. But nearly 2000 people braved the blowing rain to attend a concert at which eight concert grand pianos were used in conjunction with some of the world's most eminent musicians (and a few others) — together and singly. Nothing like it had taken place in more than 40 years, and word had gotten around that there would be surprises at every turn. The purpose for this extravaganza: to raise funds for the International Piano Library, which recently had suffered a disastrous fire. The place: Hunter College Auditorium in New York City. The personalities (in order of appearance): Fernando Valenti, Jesús María Sanromá, Earl Wild, Bruce Hungerford, Ivan Davis, Jorge Bolet, Rosalyn Tureck, Beverly Sills, Raymond Lewenthal, Alicia de Larrocha, Gunnar Johansen and Guiomar Novaës.

concert of Modern Times



Chopin's A-Flat Polonaise

Maestro Rudel warns his eight octo-pianists: "You've **got** to watch me on the scales."

Below, "... the clattering, clangorous, joyful performance."



Indeed! And the audience got far more than its money's worth of fabulous pianistics — it went home with some truly glorious memories. First of all, the sight of eight concert grands on one stage — you don't run into *that* every day! — four of the new Baldwin SD-10s and four Steinways; then, Fernando Valenti acting as Master of Ceremonies (doing a witty, urbane job of it, too) and even playing the piano, something he confessed he had not done in 25 years. He introduced eight of the pianists one by one and New York City Center Opera conductor Julius Rudel, all of whom filed onstage for what proved to be a clattering, clangorous, joyful performance of Chopin's *A-flat Polonaise*. Even if the big scales never quite came out together, it had great dash and élan. I loved it. So did everyone else. We forgot the rain, the traffic — and leaned forward to hear what would happen next.

It proved to be Valenti, playing "a Scarlatti Sonata by Paderewski" neat as a pin (actually, the piece was Paderewski's *Caprice*, Op. 14 — written in Scarlatti style — which the famous harpsichordist learned for this one occasion). Mr. Sanroma followed with a loving performance of Pablo Casals' *Preludio en do mayor* and a blazing rendition of Héctor Campos-Parsi's wild *Plena de Concierto*. Earl Wild stirred up a whirlwind of sorts with Dohnányi's *Capriccio in B Minor*, then startled everybody by executing a perfect *Entrechat-quatre* before leaving the platform! Bruce Hungerford provided contrast with his group of soft-spoken Schubert *Ländler* (very warmly received by the audience). Ivan Davis and Jorge Bolet played Liszt: Davis, the *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12* — glitteringly; Bolet, paraphrases on themes from *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Rigoletto* — with wonderful control, gorgeous tone and complete musicianship (her eyes wide in admiration, Mme Novaës whispered, "*C'est extraordinaire!*"). Then, Bach's own Rosalyn Tureck strode onstage.

People were twisting their necks and their programs in every direction trying to figure out what Miss Tureck was going to do. The printed program read:

Two Part Invention No. 1, C Major

— which is exactly how she played it! The piece sounded quite delightful upside-down, to everyone's utter amazement. But she topped it with a "two-manual" performance of the *Gigue* from Bach's *B-flat Partita*, one hand playing on the keyboard and the other on the music rack! The place broke up when she ended with one finger all alone on the wood . . .

Soprano Beverly Sills brought the concert's first half to an unbelievable conclusion with something she billed as "An Aria, to be announced." She certainly did announce it, and it turned out to be a phenomenal concoction of approximately eight great arias (plus two Chopin piano pieces!) dreamed up by Roland Gagnon, her accompanist ("He's been embellishing me for ten years," she said.). I never heard anything like it and, from the sound of things, neither had the audience (which, to put it mildly, went crazy, delirious with applause and bravos).

After intermission, down went the lights and out came Raymond Lewenthal, The Romantic Era's most dedicated denizen. He lent his very special abilities to



Raymond Lewenthal, Gunnar Johansen, and Alicia De Larrocha rehearsing Czerny's "Scotch Fantasy."

an *Etude* by Bortkiewicz, Saint-Saëns' *The Swan* (in Godowsky's luxuriant setting) and the *Russian Sailors' Dance* from Gliere's ballet *The Red Poppy* (a fire-and-brimstone transcription of Lewenthal's own — in the tradition of utmost sonority and virtuosity). Lewenthal's giant figure disappeared backstage and was replaced immediately by the diminutive Mme de Larrocha (in a breathtaking robe of gold and silver brocade). As "host" for the evening (Mme de Larrocha is President of the I.P.L.), she very hospitably played only a group of tiny pieces — by Albeniz, Granados, Frank Marshall (who had been her teacher), Juan Torra (her husband) and herself (an ingenuous little *Danza* she had composed as a child) — planned not to compete with the more spectacular contributions of her guests.

And "spectacular" is the word to describe Mr. Johansen's sweeping performance of Godowsky's *Symphonic Metamorphosis of Strauss' Artist's Life Waltz*, a dizzying work of complex polyphony and monumental resonance. The impossible became audible as Johansen played the work *a tempo*, a feat no other pianist has managed since the days of Hofmann and Godowsky. He then joined Lewenthal and de Larrocha for Czerny's six-hands-at-one-keyboard *Scotch Fantasy*, Op. 741, an hilarious bit of 19th century musical fun.

The evening's final soloist was Guiomar Novaës. Her entrance brought a hush over the entire house. Clad to the floor in ice-blue sequins, she walked slowly to the piano, bowed slightly, established herself at the keyboard — and ripped into Gottschalk's setting of the *Brazilian National Anthem* (One of his most demanding transcriptions). She held herself poised and in total command throughout waves of translucent decoration. At 71, Novaës clearly reminded us all that she belongs to the uppermost ranks of the great pianists of all time.

Four hours (!) after it had begun, the I.P.L. Bene-

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"Ah, that's the signature of Marshall. How did you get it?"

"No, it's the trademark signature of Federico Mompou."

"But it's Frank Marshall too," she said, laughing gaily. "It's exactly the signature of Frank Marshall."

"It's on most of Mompou's works published by the Union Musical Espanola," I added. "I like the *Songs and Dances* Nos. 5, 6, and 7 very much."

"Yes, they're very beautiful. Number 7 is of popular origin; only Number 5 is original, the themes that is. I'm going to record Numbers 5 and 6 on a disk of contemporary Spanish composers — Mompou, Montsalvatge, Nin-Culmell, Sqrinach, and Ernesto Halffter."

"The *Variations on a Theme of Chopin* could be played in concert," I said.

"*Oui, oui, oui, oui.* That is the most brilliant work pianistically he has composed. I was with him when he composed the eleventh variation. Mompou doesn't like to play very loud or fast; he detests when you play more than mezzo forte or Allegretto. He's worked on a concerto for years, but since it isn't finished, he used the theme in a ballet. Recently he composed an oratory, *Los improperios*, which is perhaps the most important work he has written and which has been recorded. But in general he doesn't like large forms; it is the miniature that he likes. I'll tell him you're writing an article on his music; he'll be pleased."

"I'll tell him . . . he'll be pleased." It was the kind of sweet, sunny, spontaneous remark that seems to characterize Alicia de Larrocha. ★



THE NONCONFORMIST

The Grandest Concert, continued

fit Concert came to a rousing end when Raymond Lewenthal returned to conduct a "celebrity" performance of Carl Reinecke's *Children's Symphony*. A "production number" replete with a host of "stars", it featured authors Joseph Machlis and Phillip Miller, Broadway lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green, critic Alan Rich (where was Harold Schonberg?), composer Ned Rorem, Jack Roman (Baldwin's artist representative) and I.P.L.'s own Gregor Benko (playing a tea tray loaned by Sunny Carballeira, former pianist with Phil Spitalney's All-Girl Orchestra!). I tell you, it was quite a night.

Of course, no one out front had any idea of what went on backstage or ahead of curtain time: Novaës



Guests at the reception: harpsichord builder John Challis, I.P.L. president Gregor Benko, Mrs. Arthur Loesser, author Frank Cooper, and Mme. Novaës' daughter Annamaria Pinto.

having to be replaced at the last minute for the Chopin *Polonaise* by young pianist Michael May (her ancient Busoni edition would not fit with the *urtext* used by all the others); I.P.L.'s multi-talented William Santaella wrestling like a hero with the eight grand pianos, moving them in *every* direction to accommodate each artist's wishes; John Challis responding to an emergency call from Benko just prior to the big event by making a wooden base to hold the crystal bowl (in B) which kept threatening to fall over each time Mr. Miller whacked it in the *Children's Symphony*; Earl Wild's backstage equipment which included a bee-keeper's hat replete with veils (he planned to wear it when he played the *Flight of the Bumble-bee* for an encore — before he found out that encores were "out"); the distances covered by so many of the artists in getting to the concert — Johansen came from Wisconsin, Davis from Florida, Bolet from Indiana, Sanroma from Puerto Rico, Novaës from Brazil (flown courtesy of Varig, the Brazilian Airlines, because she was playing Brazil's national anthem); the cooperation of various record company officials and concert managers who helped make it possible for every one of the participating artists generously to contribute his services. *Etcetera!*

Most important, the concert raised enough funds to help the I.P.L. recover some of its losses and to operate in the black for a while. It won a number of new friends for the Library and proved beyond doubt that memorable evenings of music are still possible in our time — and that concerts (even under inclement conditions) are far from dead, if they are planned with ears and eyes for the extraordinary. *Fine*