



Shura Cherkassky with the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra in Tel Aviv in 1954.

Cherkassky, Shura (1909-1995)

by Slawomir P. Dobrzanski

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2008 glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

With the death of Shura Cherkassky in 1995, the music world lost its last link with the Great Romantic Piano Era. At the age of eighty-six, after more than seventy-five years of performing, the longest career in the history of classical pianism, Shura Cherkassky still sounded like a young man.

Cherkassky was born in Odessa, Ukraine on October 7, 1909 (but frequently given as 1911), the son of a Jewish family. Cherkassky's father was a dentist, and his mother a professional pianist, with whom he began piano studies at the age of four.

Cherkassky's debut in his native city in 1920 was sensational. In December 1922, the family moved to the United States, settling first in Baltimore, Maryland. At this time the family gave Cherkassky's birth date as 1911, believing that a prodigy of 12 would be regarded as more remarkable than an adolescent of 14.

After consulting famous pianists of the day (Vladimir de Pachman, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Ignace Jan Paderewski, and Josef Hofmann), Cherkassky's parents enrolled him in the newly opened Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia in the fall of 1925. He began formal studies with Hofmann, with whom he would study until 1935, becoming his most successful student. He also studied briefly with David Saperton, another member of the Curtis faculty.

Cherkassky's American debut took place in March of 1923 in Baltimore. His playing was described as supernatural, and at the age of fourteen he was invited to play for President Harding at the White House.

His subsequent appearances took him to New York City (formal debut in November 1924), Boston, Philadelphia, and abroad. As a young man he performed in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, England, Germany, Russia, Japan, and China.

Cherkassky early earned a reputation for spontaneity, creativity, and technical perfection in his playing. His sound was unique and became almost instantly recognizable. He was famous for never playing the same piece the same way.

In addition to the standard virtuoso repertoire, especially Chopin, Liszt, and Rachmaninoff, Cherkassky also performed works by Hofmann, Paul Hindemith, Morton Gould, Benjamin Britten, Luciano Berio, Alban Berg, and other twentieth-century composers.

He recorded for Nimbus, Decca, HMV, Orfeo, Biddulph, RCA Victor, and other major companies.

Following negative reviews of his recitals in New York in 1940, Cherkassky's career slowed down.

During World War II, Cherkassky lived with his mother in Los Angeles. He described the war years as the worst time of his life. Although he did some film work during these years, concert engagements were rare. His career did not recover until a very successful tour of Scandinavia in 1946.

In March 1946, Cherkassky married Eugenie Blanc, a concert manager, but divorced her in 1948. According to Elizabeth Carr, his biographer, Cherkassky decided to marry because, as he said, "everybody was doing it."

From 1949 to 1961, Cherkassky lived with his mother in the south of France. He toured widely during these years, performing frequently on all continents.

In 1961, following the death of his mother, he moved permanently to the White House Apartment Hotel in London.

A modest and shy man, Cherkassky avoided publicity. His lifelong passion was travel. He loved vacationing in exotic locations such as Thailand, Madagascar, Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, or Australia. In 1987, the seventy-eight-year-old pianist undertook a day trip to the North Pole.

Cherkassky was noted for his eccentricities and his undeviating routines. For example, he insisted that his hotel rooms had to be equipped with a piano; he practiced exactly four hours a day throughout his entire life.

Cherkassky's homosexuality was widely known, especially among fellow pianists, but discreetly practiced. Elizabeth Carr, a personal friend as well as his biographer, quotes him as saying, "I want a woman inside a man's body." She also states that Cherkassky was sexually active well into his eighties.

However, Cherkassky's attempts at establishing long term-relationships failed, and he often complained of loneliness. His most intimate and long-lasting friendships were with women.

Cherkassky blamed his inability to develop meaningful and intimate relationships with other men on his demanding travel schedule, his inflexible personal habits, and his practicing routine. While it appears from Carr's biography that Cherkassky chose a solitary existence (even while enjoying an active sexual life), it is nevertheless hard to believe that he was not influenced by the social stigma against homosexuality in making such a decision.

According to Carr, Cherkassky suggested that his homosexuality was a result of his life-long fascination with the personality and artistry of Vladimir Horowitz.

She intimates that Cherkassky was not happy about his sexual orientation, but acknowledges that he was never embarrassed by it. He regarded his homosexuality as simply part of his personality. He did not hide it, nor did he ever publicize it. He evinced no interest in joining the gay social scene.

During the last decades of his life, Cherkassky was recognized as one of the world's greatest pianists.

In 1991, he performed his so-called "eightieth anniversary" concert at Carnegie Hall in New York City. In October 1992, he was selected by Wanda Toscanini-Horowitz to perform a memorial concert in honor of Vladimir Horowitz at the Steinway Hall in New York City.

Cherkassky's last appearance took place on November 9, 1995 in Prague. He performed Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto with the Czech Philharmonic.

He died on December 27, 1995 in London.

Bibliography

Bündler, David. "Interview with Shura Cherkassky." (November 14, 1987). Davidsbundler Homepage: De-Mythologizing Music: <http://www.angelfire.com/music2/davidbundler/cherkassky.html>

Carr, Elizabeth. *Shura Cherkassky. The Piano's Last Czar*. Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, 2006.

"Cherkassky, Shura." Naxos.com (2008): http://www.naxos.com/artistinfo/Shura_Cherkassky/12269.htm

Schonberg, Harold C. *The Great Pianists from Mozart to the Present*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.

About the Author

Slawomir P. Dobrzanski is Assistant Professor of Music at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. As a pianist, he has performed in Europe and in North and South America. He is author of a biographical study of the nineteenth-century pianist Maria Szymanowska, published in 2006.