



Horowitz, Vladimir (1903-1989)

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Vladimir Horowitz.
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The career of Vladimir Horowitz finds no comparison with that of any other twentieth-century pianist. For many, he embodied the last link to the nineteenth-century Grand Piano Era. His legendary artistry, preserved on recordings, remains a source of inspiration for generations of pianists, a delight for listeners, and a constant subject of academic inquiry.

Born on October 1, 1903 in the Ukraine, a son of an affluent Jewish family, Horowitz began piano lessons at the age of six, studying with his mother. Later, he attended the Kiev Conservatory, where he was a student of Sergei Tarnovsky, Vladimir Puchalsky, and Felix Blumenfeld.

Horowitz's solo career began in the Soviet Union, where he quickly gained fame as a bravura performer with extraordinary technique. He was allowed to leave Russia in 1925 as part of a mission to propagate Soviet culture abroad. However, he soon decided not to return to the Soviet Union. In 1929, in order to facilitate his travels across borders, he accepted the honorary citizenship of Haiti. In 1945, he became a citizen of the United States.

Following successful 1926 debuts in Berlin, Hamburg, Paris, Rome, and London, Horowitz settled in Paris, sharing an apartment with his manager Alexander Merovitch, the cellist Gregor Piatigorsky, and the violinist Nathan Milstein. The Horowitz-Milstein-Piatigorsky trio performed together only once. Even though the careers of its members took independent paths, all three musicians soon moved to the United States.

During his early performing years in Russia and Western Europe, Horowitz developed a reputation as an eccentric. He was also widely rumored to be a homosexual. Gossip circulated in Russia about his visits to sailors' bars in port cities and his fascination for extravagant clothing (his favorite colors were pink and red). He was also supposedly seen wearing make-up.

Horowitz's same-sex interests at this time seem to have been well known to his friends. In Berlin, he hired a young German personal assistant, who would accompany him in all his travels, including vacation trips. It is often assumed that the relationship was not simply professional. The companionship lasted six years.

In 1928, Horowitz traveled for the first time to the United States. His American debut took place in January 1928 at New York's Carnegie Hall, where he played Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto under the direction of Sir Thomas Beecham. The concert was so successful, and Horowitz generated such excitement, that a solo recital in New York was quickly arranged. During the last decade before World War II, he frequently performed in both Europe and the United States.

In 1933, Horowitz performed for the first time with the legendary conductor Arturo Toscanini. This artistic relationship led to his marriage to Toscanini's daughter, Wanda, in December of the same year.

The motives for Horowitz's decision to marry remain unclear. His friends expected the marriage to last no more than a month. His future father-in-law was also skeptical, and one of the reasons for such skepticism

was knowledge of Horowitz's strong sexual interest in men.

However, the marriage initially seemed happy. Wanda, with unmatched devotion, took care of her husband's affairs. In October 1934, Sonia Toscanini-Horowitz, their daughter, was born.

Horowitz's last concert in pre-World War II Europe took place in Lucerne, Switzerland in August 1939. Soon afterwards, the Horowitz-Toscanini family settled in New York City. Their family life centered on the powerful personality of Arturo Toscanini.

Until Toscanini's death in 1957, Horowitz was able to exert little influence within his family. In addition, he also found himself temperamentally unsuited for the role of father. He never developed a close relationship with his daughter.

In 1940, Horowitz began psychoanalytic treatment with Dr. Lawrence Kubie, a psychiatrist who specialized in "curing" homosexuals, especially celebrities. (Among his other patients were Moss Hart and, later, Tennessee Williams.)

Even though his wife was very supportive in all his endeavors, including the (failed) attempt to change his sexual orientation, Horowitz separated from her in 1949 for a period of four years. During this time he lived with Carl Erpf, a personal assistant assigned to him by Dr. Kubie. In the 1960s, Horowitz underwent supposedly successful electroshock therapy to cure depression.

Later in his life Horowitz was occasionally seen in New York City's gay bars and discotheques. He also seemed to display a somewhat more relaxed attitude toward his homosexuality, even though his personal life was apparently unfulfilled in that respect.

Throughout his life in the United States, Horowitz always had a personal valet. Some of these personal assistants lived at his home with Horowitz and his wife. Over time, albeit not without reservations, Wanda learned to tolerate and accept her husband's eccentricities, including his attraction toward men.

Horowitz is often credited with the famous "blasphemous" statement: "there are three kinds of pianists: gay pianists, Jewish pianists, and bad pianists".

The emotional stress connected with performing and the rigors of travel profoundly affected Horowitz. Nearly always suffering from health crises (either emotional or physical), Horowitz frequently withdrew from performing. He did not perform public concerts during the periods from 1936 to 1938, 1953 to 1965, 1969 to 1974, and 1983 to 1985.

Each of his comebacks from these self-imposed sabbaticals created euphoria among classical music lovers. His performances, characterized by matchless technique and extraordinary artistry, had the power to hypnotize audiences into a state of unprecedented enthusiasm.

Horowitz's legacy is preserved through his outstanding recording. He made several award-winning recordings for RCA Victor, Columbia Records, Deutsche Gramophon, and Sony Classical. He was a major exponent of music by composers relatively unknown in the United States at the time: Sergei Prokofiev, Karol Szymanowski, Alexander Scriabin, Dmitri Kabalevski, Domenico Scarlatti, Muzio Clementi, and the American Samuel Barber.

Horowitz also enjoyed teaching, though he would tell his students that he was merely giving them tips. The list of his piano students includes names of some of today's foremost pianists: Byron Janis, Gary Graffman, Ivan Davis, and Murray Perahia.

Perhaps Horowitz's most impressive return to the stage took place during the last years of his life. In 1986, at the age of 83, he played in the Soviet Union for the first time since 1925; the following year he performed in Japan, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, and Germany. His last public concert took place in June 1987 in Hamburg.

In 1986, Horowitz was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor bestowed by the United States.

Horowitz died from a heart attack on November 5, 1989. His devoted wife Wanda died in 1998.

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