

PRODIGY TO PAUPER

Jeremy Nicholas tells the extraordinary story of pianist Ervin Nyiregyházi, a Hungarian child prodigy who wrote more than 700 works, married ten times, and whose performing career imploded as his personal life turned ever more disastrous



A butterfly without wings: Ervin Nyiregyházi around the time of his New York debut in the early 1920s

In the mid-1970s rumours were flying concerning the rediscovery of a long-forgotten pianist whom someone had recently taped giving a recital in a church hall in San Francisco. It was, apparently, like listening to a pianistic throw-back from the early years of the century. The pianist was living in a dosshouse. He didn't own a piano. He didn't practise. He went straight to the concert hall and played from memory. 'There's an LP coming out,' people said. 'Have you heard of him? He's called Ervin Nyiregyházi. That's Near-e-gätz-e. Shall I spell it for you?'

By chance, I had heard of him. On a 1960s LP of recordings of Ampico piano rolls, there was Liszt's 'Mazeppa' (from the *Transcendental Etudes*) made in January 1924 and played by Nyiregyházi. I consulted the 1925 Ampico catalogue. There was his photograph with the following encomium beneath: 'This amazing genius of the piano, hardly more than a boy in years, has high gifts, such as are vouchsafed to few. Such brilliancy, such poetry, such a wonderful touch, and so complete a grasp of the classic masterpieces are rare. Nyiregyházi is justly celebrated and acclaimed.' I assumed that, along with the other artists on the disc, he had long since departed to the great concert hall in the sky. Apparently not. But what had happened to him? How had he become completely forgotten?

THE ELUSIVE ARTIST

The new LP was acquired and listened to with some astonishment (for reasons that