

Kirkus Reviews (starred review), July 1, 2007

Bazzana, Kevin

LOST GENIUS: The Curious and Tragic Story of an Extraordinary Musical Prodigy

The swift rise to international celebrity and decades-long decline into profound obscurity of eccentric Hungarian pianist Ervin Nyiregyházi.

Bazzana (*Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould*, 2004, etc.) spent ten years investigating the bizarre life (1903-1987) of this quintessential flawed genius, who emigrated in 1920 to the United States, where he dazzled audiences and confounded critics for a few brilliant years before self-destructing at the end of the decade. The biographer's diligent, patient research paid off in abundant documentary evidence, and Bazzana gained the cooperation of Nyiregyházi's *tenth* wife. Yes, the pianist also had a busy sex life. Likely a virgin until he was 20, Nyiregyházi compensated in his final six decades with multiple marriages, multiple extramarital partners and a lifelong fondness for oral ministrations. His biographer is hard on Nyiregyházi's mother, blaming her spoiling for retarding his social and psychological development. This seems harsh, but Bazzana's attitude is generally fair and balanced. He aptly describes Nyiregyházi's mind-boggling abilities: Virtually all his life, the pianist could read a score, then play it flawlessly; he taught himself English in a week; he could play from memory a piece he'd not rehearsed for decades. Bazzana also has a very strong chapter on the architectonics of Nyiregyházi's artistry and expertly analyzes his Romantic approach to the piano; he believed a score was a set of suggestions, a road map for artists to follow howsoever they chose. A prolific though undistinguished composer, Nyiregyházi emerged briefly from near-invisibility and poverty in the late 1970s to make some highly hyped recordings. Unfortunately, the author notes, his technique had abandoned him by then. He was error-prone and even more erratic in temperament, and the critics, initially animated, finally saw ruin rather than splendor.

Both compassionate and critical.