

Review by George Fetherling

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Lost Genius: The Story of a Forgotten Musical Maverick by Kevin Bazzana, who won various literary awards for the biography of Glenn Gould he published in 2003, isn't the first book written about Ervin Nyiregyházi, a concert pianist and composer who was once famous and is now famously forgotten. *Lost Genius* was preceded by *Erwin Nyiregyházi: psychologische Analyse eines musikalisch hervorragenden Kindes*, the work of Dr. Geza Revesz, a prominent psychologist who made a study of child prodigies. Revesz's book was published in 1916 when its subject was only thirteen years old, but already had been writing music for a decade. Given that Nyiregyházi lived until 1987, there is obviously much more of his story to tell, much of it almost unbearably tragic.

Everyone knew that the young Nyiregyházi was special. When he was four, he impressed the faculty of the National Hungarian Royal Academy in Budapest (where he was born into a lower-middle-class Jewish family). At five, he corrected a dentist who told him to say La: "That's not La you said, that was Fa." His talent, while obviously concentrated in music—he's known to have composed 900 pieces—sprawled in many directions. At six, the year he gave his first public concert, he was playing chess blindfolded. "He recalled," Bazzana writes, "that his forte was defence rather than attack—a neat metaphor for his personality."

Nyiregyházi was fortunate to have grown up in Budapest when it was the fastest-growing, most religiously tolerant, and possibly the most cultured city in Europe. He was not so lucky in his parentage. He was only eleven when his father, a sensitive man with whom he had a decent relationship, died. That left him all alone to deal with the mother of all stage mothers. She saw that there was good money to be made in the child prodigy biz and exploited it for all it was worth, mindless of her boy's emotional health.

In Bazzana's account, Maria Nyiregyházi insisted "that he be an adult (a professional virtuoso) while he was still a child, yet demanding also that he remain a child (a marketable prodigy) even though he was approaching adulthood." What's more, she was loud, boorish and crass. For example, in 1917—just before the golden age of Hungarian culture, which Bazzana captures so well, was destroyed by the Great War—"he joined several artists in playing for a member of the Austro-Hungarian imperial family, in a benefit concert for the Hungarian Red Cross, and was humiliated when his mother insisted that he be paid." She put pressure on him to play Chopin's "Minute Waltz" in less than a minute, to show how good he was. As he recalled years later, "If I received one favourable review

and one unfavourable one after a concert, my mother would say that the man who wrote the unfavourable review knew more about music.” She could be physically abusive as well.

Not surprisingly perhaps, his personality developed along unusual lines. “In him,” Bazzana writes, “the grandiosity and narcissism typical of adolescence were greatly magnified; they were a kind of armour against anxiety but did not protect him from a crippling fear of criticism and a dread of the expectations of others, as though he had internalized his mother’s carping, and he was terrified at the prospect of abandonment by those he loved. The powerful price that made him insist on his artistic and intellectual superiority wrestled with his profound insecurity . . . The normal turbulence of adolescence was magnified by his intelligence and sensitivity, and by his mother’s infantilization and control. She still refused to let him wear long pants, which boys usually started wearing at 14 or 15. She was apparently terrified that her son might grow up and was steadfastly puritanical where his sexuality was concerned.”

Mother and son often quarrelled and he often ran away. “But, unable to look after himself, he always returned.” Of course, he continued to rebel, mainly by becoming deeply involved in the music of the great Franz Liszt, his fellow Hungarian who had died a generation earlier, but, strangely, was still known more as a performer than a composer. Spurred by Liszt’s example, Nyiregyházi became a kind of musical arch-expressionist, a pianist for whom emotion was everything.

Eventually, in 1920, when he was seventeen, he ran off to the United States (and never saw his mother again after 1924). A New York reporter described the young genius this way: “He does not know how to tie his shoes. He cannot put on his collar. Knotting his necktie needs a whole corps of assistants. He cannot carve his food. Soup is a dreadful affair with him. And he owns a collection of crochets, whims and eccentricities that are arresting even among musicians-to whom crochets, whims and eccentricities are conventional.” A slight exaggeration perhaps, but he was certainly unworldly in practical matters, including business. He fell prey to an unscrupulous manager and found the kind of career he had enjoyed in Europe impossible to replicate on the other side of the Atlantic. His gigs included helping Rudolph Valentino judge a beauty contest and performing for prisoners at Sing Sing. The latter paid \$25. That’s five more than he received for entertaining at Harry Houdini’s house party. Houdini was astonished at the performance. “How can you play the piano as you do?” he asked. Nyiregyházi replied, “You don’t tell me your secrets and I won’t tell you my secrets.”

From the late 1920s to the late 1940s, many exiled European artists found good careers in Hollywood. Nyiregyházi wasn’t one of them. He scored some films and even played piano on screen a few times, but

he was not a success. The low point must have been when he accepted six dollars to provide accompaniment for a wannabe's screen test. He lived in a succession of skid row hotels.

Nor was his romantic life happy. Actually that's putting it mildly. He was married ten times, once to a native Vancouverite who "was variously described by L.A. newspapers as a dramatist, actress, and aviatrix." He was in fact a sexual compulsive. As the author puts it, "His attitude toward sex was a recipe for a lifetime's muddle and torment, and his juggling of relationships was complicated by all sorts of predictable problems, from venereal disease to blackmail." Bazzana elaborates: "His love for one woman did not replace his love for another; both resided in independent compartments within his mind, more or less permanently. No wonder his love life became more complicated with him: past loves accumulated, and haunted him." He couldn't understand, for example, why the novelist Theodore Dreiser would object to his having a torrid affair with the woman who had been Dreiser's mistress for many years.

This is a fine biography of someone who "really was a lost genius [whose] talent was as great as his life and personality were strange." Bazzana has been researching the subject for many years, and it shows. Personally I would have worked much of the footnote information into the narrative, but that is a pro forma quibble. Bazzana brings his own high level of musical education to bear on his subject while displaying considerable psychological understanding as well, not to mention the fine prose style already obvious from the Gould biography. *Lost Genius* shows no signs of hastiness or hedging. Few works of Canadian nonfiction are as well written as this one.