

## ARTS & LETTERS

### Shine or Sham?

*A Survey of Recent Articles*

Never in recent memory have classical music critics and audiences been so passionately at odds as they were last year over the concerts of David Helfgott, the mentally ill Australian pianist made famous by the 1996 Oscar-winning movie *Shine*. His rapt audiences believed they were witnessing a triumph of the human spirit, but irate critics saw instead musical incompetence and an unseemly spectacle resembling a freak show.

To Terry Teachout, music critic for *Commentary* (June 1997), who saw Helfgott's New York concert in March, it is appalling that "a mentally-incompetent man was being paraded before a paying audience for the financial gain of his managers." The pianist "grunts, mutters, sings, and talks to himself—very loudly—as he plays," and his playing "suggested a weird cross between a gifted but uninhibited child and a player piano that has been badly regulated." Not all reviewers during Helfgott's three-continent "Shine Tour" were so caustic, yet most were indignant that so inadequate a pianist, a man mentally deranged, should be appearing before sold-out audiences in some of the world's great concert halls.

Peter Feuchtwanger, a vice president of the European Piano Teachers Association, who has been giving Helfgott private lessons since 1986, claims that his pupil is "a very great musician," whose playing has impressed numerous professionals. However, he admits in a symposium on the Helfgott phenomenon in *Philosophy and Literature* (Oct. 1997), the pianist's performances are uneven as a result of constant medication.

Elizabeth Silsbury, a music critic and visiting scholar at Flinders University of South Australia, had heard Helfgott play before, but his post-*Shine* concert in Adelaide, at the beginning of his international tour, she says in the same journal, was "the most

ghastly experience" of her professional life. "Not only was his playing even more shapeless than ever, it had become arrogant, flagrantly disregarding the composer's dynamic directions as though the pianist knew better than Beethoven and Liszt how the pieces should go. Even worse, his onstage antics . . . seemed to show that he was fully aware of just how outrageous he was being."

To most members of his audiences, however, many obviously attending a classical music concert for the first time, Helfgott's performances were deeply moving. "This wasn't just a piano recital," said one woman quoted by Denis Dutton, editor of *Philosophy and Literature*, "it was a chance to touch the world of an extraordinary human being." In the film, the Australian-born prodigy is abused by a cruel father; suffers a mental breakdown at the moment of his prize-winning performance of the Rachmaninoff Third Piano Concerto in London; returns to Australia, where his father refuses to speak to him and he is institutionalized; and then, eventually, he is released, starts to perform again, and, with the help of a good woman who marries him, succeeds in giving a formal concert. Many concertgoers seem to assume that this is an accurate picture of Helfgott's world. But his family strongly disputes the portrait of his father, and key facts have been



Pianist David Helfgott performs in Toronto during his 1997 Shine tour. Many critics said that Helfgott offered a shining example of musical inadequacy.

altered or invented for dramatic effect. Helfgott did win an award for performing Rachmaninoff, for example, but his “break-down” came later, in Australia.

Helfgott is not the first eccentric or even mentally ill musician to be widely acclaimed, Jennifer Judkins, of the University of California, Los Angeles, and Canadian musicologist Kevin Bazzana independently observe in *Philosophy and Literature*. Rachmaninoff himself had symptoms of manic-depression. Glenn Gould, Bazzana points out, “wore gloves in summer and had a Linus-blanket obsession with his favorite piano chair and played with hands flailing, nose to keys, with obbligato croaks and hums.” What is new about the Helfgott phenomenon, he says, is that “never has such a successful musical

career been built on performances of such transparent and undisputed inadequacy.”

Helfgott’s playing has “moments of virtuosity and beauty,” writes Renée Cox Lorraine, who teaches at the University of Tennessee. What is often missing (besides many of the inscribed notes) is “a sense of continuity, a meaningful relation of present to past and future, any sense of the work as an integrated whole.” Descriptions of his playing, she points out in *Philosophy and Literature*, “are quite similar to descriptions of Helfgott’s psyche or consciousness—splintered, erratic, chaotic, fragmented.” His performances could be regarded as the work of “an extreme example of a postmodern consciousness”—which, given today’s “cultural zeitgeist,” may be part of their appeal.

## *The Real Meaning of Oz*

“Silver Slippers and a Golden Cap: L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and Historical Memory in American Politics” by Gretchen Ritter, in *Journal of American Studies* (Aug. 1997), Cambridge Univ. Press, Journals Dept., 40 W. 20th St., New York, N.Y. 10011-4211.

L. Frank Baum’s *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has enjoyed a century of popularity. But few of today’s fans, introduced to the story by the classic 1939 movie, even guess at the rich cultural and political satire readers found in it when it was a best seller in 1900, writes Ritter, a political scientist at the University of Texas, Austin.

The young heroine, Dorothy, part of a struggling farm family, begins her journey in Kansas, the nation’s heartland. When she arrives in Oz, Ritter writes, she finds it has a sectionalist geography that bears a striking resemblance to the late-19th-century Populists’ America: “the North and South are lands with good rulers, while, in the East and West, the people may be good, but their leaders are oppressive.” The strongest power resides in the East—until the cyclone brings Dorothy’s house down on the Wicked Witch of the East.

As Dorothy travels west toward the Emerald City (read: Washington, D.C.), she is joined first by the Scarecrow, an agrarian figure (no accident here) in quest of brains who eventually learns that real intelligence comes from experience, which he has in abundance. Then the Tin Woodman falls in with them. A worker from the East, he has been turned into a heartless machine by the Wicked Witch of the East. Next comes the

Cowardly Lion, who may represent William Jennings Bryan, the failed Populist (and Democratic) candidate in the 1896 presidential contest.

The Populists bitterly opposed the gold standard—Bryan’s famous Cross of Gold—and favored a silver standard to ease the flow of money and credit in rural America. “Oz is an abbreviation for ounces, one measure of the worth of gold and silver bullion,” Ritter points out. “In the land of Oz, gold and silver are often the arbiters of power.” In Oz, a brick road the color of gold leads to the Emerald City. Ruled by the Wizard of Oz, who turns out to be a fraud, the Emerald City, Ritter notes, “is made out to be a place of illusions where deception and aloof behavior provide the basis for authority.”

In the book, Dorothy dons silver slippers (not ruby ones, as in the movie) that had belonged to the Wicked Witch of the East. When she travels in them along the yellow brick road to the Emerald City, Ritter says, she is in effect practicing the bimetalism (a standard that mixes gold and silver) favored by some reformers.

Only at the book’s end does Glinda, the Good Witch of the South, reveal to Dorothy that the slippers “can carry you anyplace in the world in three steps.” With this knowledge, Dorothy is able to return to Kansas. On