

One hundred years since the birth of Romanian pianist and composer Dinu Lipatti

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April 1, 2017, marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of the celebrated Romanian pianist and composer Dinu Lipatti, who died at the young age of 33 in 1950. Despite his premature death, Lipatti left a legacy of outstanding recordings of some of the major works of classical music, and is justly considered one of the greatest musicians of the twentieth century.

Lipatti was born into a musical family of upper-middle-class Greek origin in the Romanian capital of Bucharest. The wealth of his parents, and their connections with Romania's leading artists and musicians of the inter-war period, provided additional opportunities for Lipatti to realize his musical talent.

His father, a jurist and diplomat, was a talented amateur violinist acquainted with Romania's best-known composer of that time, George Enescu, who would become Dinu's godfather. Lipatti's mother studied natural sciences and literature at the university.

Dinu Lipatti made his first public musical appearance at the tender age of four. He went on to study under composer Mihail Jora (until 1928), reputedly one of the best teachers in Romania at that time. Lipatti also started composing and received early recognition for a piano sonata and violin sonata in 1932 and 1933.

In 1933, he participated in an international piano competition in Vienna. In 1934, Lipatti moved to Paris. The city was at this point one of Europe's musical centers, a status temporarily elevated due to the rise of the Nazis. Hitler's coming to power in 1933 drove many of Germany's most outstanding musical, intellectual and artistic figures into exile, with many of them initially fleeing to France.

Lipatti took up his studies at the Paris Conservatory, where he took classes in piano with Cortot. He also studied composition with Nadia Boulanger and Igor Stravinsky. His musical and personal relationship with Boulanger, who would later teach composition to a diverse list of some of the twentieth century's best-known composers, including Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter and many others, would become particularly close and formative. They maintained a correspondence for years to come, and in 1937 they recorded Johannes Brahms's waltzes for two pianos together in Paris. He also became close friends with the Romanian pianist Clara Haskil, who was more than 20 years his senior. The two often performed together and greatly admired each other's work.

Lipatti quickly earned a reputation as a sensitive and brilliant pianist. At the same time, he continued to pursue composition. He followed closely the works of contemporary composers who were performed widely in Paris, among them Stravinsky, Maurice Ravel, Jacques Ibert, Francis Poulenc, Béla Bartók, Bohuslav Martin?, Florent Schmitt and Sergei Prokofiev.

In 1939 he left Paris and returned to Romania. He would play concerts in the German-Romanian occupied territories, including in Berlin. It is not clear what Lipatti's political views were at the time. He did not seem to enjoy his visit to wartime Berlin. Haskil, one of his closest friends, was forced to flee the Axis territories because of her Jewish origins.

In 1943, already showing signs of illness, Lipatti moved to Geneva, Switzerland, a move facilitated by the help of his friends. He started teaching at the local conservatory, and toured in Switzerland and later Italy and other western European countries.

In 1946, Lipatti signed an exclusive contract with EMI's English Columbia record label, headed by the now-legendary musical producer Walter Legge. The pianist's health was already deteriorating. He was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, at that time hardly treatable.

Despite the efforts of friends and fellow musicians, among them Yehudi Menuhin and Stravinsky, who collected money to help finance Lipatti's costly cortisone treatments, his recordings and concert recitals became less and less frequent. On September 16, 1950, Lipatti, greatly weakened by illness, performed his last concert in Besançon, in eastern France, a live recording of which has since become legendary. He had plans for concerts in Zurich and London, but succumbed to complications of his illness less than three months later.

Two major influences on his playing and composing should be highlighted: first, the legacy of the Romanian national school, which, under the influence of the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, increasingly used folk elements in their works. Second, Lipatti was significantly influenced by Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni, who made the case for a new classicism. Busoni explained this term as follows: "By a 'young classicism' I understand the mastery, the view and the exploitation of all conquests of preceding experiments: their introduction into firm and beautiful forms. This art will be both old and new."

Busoni made the case for a return to polyphony (multiple voices) and a new form of objectivity in music. In a letter from 1920, he advocated "the shedding of the 'sensual' and renunciation of subjectivism (the path to objectivity—the stepping back of the author *vis à vis* his work, a purifying path, a hard path, a trial by fire and water), the reconquest of merriness (*Serenitas*): ...A new classical music is necessary. Classical: beautiful, masterly, of lasting value, simple and intense (*eindringlych*)."

These passages would also best describe Lipatti's style of interpreting the works of other composers. His playing was of extraordinary simplicity, and without any added sentimentality, yet often stunningly beautiful and intense. While not without a hint of romanticism, Lipatti by and large moved away from the very romantic interpretations of Baroque composers like Johann Sebastian Bach and the classical works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart that were common among the great pianists of the 1920s. Particularly noteworthy, in the opinion of this author, are his recordings of Robert Schumann's Piano Concerto in A Minor, as well as of Frédéric Chopin's works. Lipatti played these deeply romantic works with great emotional intensity and an amazing clarity of sound, which shines through even though the recordings were made with limited technology by present-day standards.

Legge always spoke in the highest terms of Lipatti. In a BBC interview in 1970, he described Lipatti as a "pianist unlike any other in our time," who was "highly intelligent, earnest, generous to all, the most modest

man.” When asked in another interview what, in his view, distinguished Lipatti’s playing, Legge said: “Integrity. Musicianship. ... He was a virtuoso in the highest sense of the word. He had achieved a technical perfection that was incomparable. ... He used it for purely musical purposes. ... A consciousness of playing everything as perfectly and as beautifully as humanly possible.”

Describing his own aesthetic views, Lipatti made a passionate plea for contemporaneous interpretations of musical works in the late 1930s, and an adjustment to contemporary technological standards:

“Let us never forget, true and great music transcends its time and, even more, never corresponded to the framework, forms, and rules in place at the time of its creation: Bach in his work for organ calls for the electric organ and its unlimited means, Mozart asks for the pianoforte and distances himself decisively from the harpsichord, Beethoven demands our modern piano, which Chopin—having it—first gives its colors, while Debussy goes further in presenting through his *Prelude des* glimpses of Martenot’s Waves [early electronic musical instrument]. Therefore, wanting to restore to music its historical framework is like dressing an adult in an adolescent’s clothes. This might have a certain charm in the context of a historical reconstruction, yet is of no interest to those other than lovers of dead leaves or the collectors of old pipes. ... How right Stravinsky is in affirming that ‘Music is the present!’ Music has to live under our fingers, under our eyes, in our hearts and in our brains with all that we, the living, can offer it.”

He also considered the consequences of the still-nascent recording technology, and the general conservatism among musicians in creating their concert programs that will sound familiar to contemporary concertgoers:

“At times, radio and records confront the practicing artist with demands which lead him away from the actual idea of his art. There is a tendency toward absolute technical perfection, but one that is bare of all genuine capacity to enthusiasm and without empathy. Added to this is the pressure to constantly make compromises in order to please the audience. Hence the lack of imagination, when it comes to the concert programs. Why does no one have the courage to play music which is worth being played? Instead, we musicians are content with works about whom we know that they will surely fill the concert hall. We have created an audience which has no interest for new works or for older, unknown compositions.”

Lipatti did not say everything there is to say to explain what are genuine and serious problems in classical music, perhaps today even more than when he wrote these passages. Amid the constant cost pressures and the demands of the record companies, in a musical world dominated increasingly by financial interests and starved of public funds, the ability of artists to choose what and when they are playing is extremely limited. Moreover, the education and growth of an audience for classical music that goes beyond the well-known pieces of the most famous composers of the past is a task that falls not only upon interpreters, but also shows the need to raise the cultural level of broader layers of society. Nevertheless, Lipatti’s opinions should be considered, especially by young musicians who are starting their careers under circumstances that are, despite advances in technology, in many respects more difficult than they were

for Lipatti.

Lipatti’s career as a concert pianist was dramatically cut short, and even in the time he had he was not able to travel widely. While famous among and admired by fellow musicians, he did not reach a very large audience during his lifetime. His main legacy is, therefore, his recordings. His career was, as Legge put it, largely posthumous.

Lipatti made his name as a pianist of international fame with his recording of the A Minor piano concertos by Edvard Grieg (1947) and Schumann (1948). He also recorded Chopin’s 3rd Piano Sonata in B Minor and his First Piano Concerto in E Minor. In July 1950, in an almost heroic effort, he recorded all the waltzes of Chopin, a project he had prepared for some two years and that was made possible only by his cortisone treatment. Several more recordings exist, dating back to as early as 1936, from various radio recording sessions. Some of these have been rediscovered only recently.

All in all, his recordings are relatively few in number, and many, despite digital remastering, are available only with relatively poor sound quality. The fact that they still remain extremely influential and popular speaks to the extraordinary quality of Lipatti’s playing. Its intensity and depth have often been explained by the fact that he felt death hovering over him for most of his active life as a pianist. Others, like Karajan, have resorted to mystical explanations. However, neither explains the immediacy with which Lipatti still speaks to audiences.

Whatever the particulars of his upbringing, Lipatti formed part of an entire generation of outstanding musicians whose playing was to influence how classical music was composed, understood and developed in the twentieth century. This generation included, to name but a few, the French violinist Ginette Neveu (born in 1919) and, above all, the great Soviet musicians Sviatoslav Richter (born in 1915), David Oistrakh (born in 1908) and Emil Gilels (born in 1916).

They were the product of an inter-war climate that was shaped by the Russian Revolution and intense social struggles in all of Europe, which, despite the rise of fascism and increasing economic crisis, produced a complex and rich cultural environment. They played before war-torn audiences, before people who had lost their loved ones in war and revolution and sought consolation in music. This heightened sense of the relevance and significance of music for both their audiences and themselves, in what were extraordinarily difficult times, could not but inform their playing. While emphasizing fidelity to the compositions they played, they thus all developed an extremely distinctive sound and style of playing, which made their interpretations highly characteristic.

Young musicians who, through no fault of their own, are often all too soon thrown into the highly competitive and financially dominated classical music business, would do well to draw inspiration from Lipatti’s playing and that of his contemporaries, and study their approach to both composition and interpretation. Meanwhile, it is hoped that many more people will continue to listen to Lipatti’s recordings, all of which are available on YouTube and Spotify.

Selected recordings by Dinu Lipatti:

His last recital in Besançon

Grieg’s Piano Concerto

Chopin’s 3rd Piano Sonata

Schumann’s Piano Concerto under Herbert von Karajan

Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 21 under Herbert von Karajan



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