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Oscar Esplá in Belgium (1936-1949) [Book review]

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embarrassed him to the extent that he wanted to leave.

In spite of abundant self-praise, Pachmann disliked praise whenever he played badly. He suffered from memory losses throughout his career, but most of the time effectively covered them up. Pachmann married his student, Annie Louise Margaret "Maggie" Okey, in 1884, when she was nineteen. While she had a rather successful performing career, Pachmann soon became jealous and began complaining about her to audiences. Once while seated next to his wife onstage, he even hissed her playing. She eventually divorced him in 1895 and married Fernand-Gustave-Labori, famous as the defender of Alfred Dreyfus.

Pachmann's eccentricities blossomed onstage and soon filtered into his everyday life. He was a childish man and enjoyed playing tricks on people. He claimed to have socks that George Sand had knitted for Chopin and he wore an old ragged coat that he claimed had belonged to Chopin. He collected jewels and named them after composers, tossing them up in the air freely and showing them to his audiences. He was cruel to young pianists on the rise and reduced them to tears with withering diatribes. His eccentric behavior burgeoned into erratic full-scale fits of rage, and he was a hypochondriac. His outlandish behavior grew worse during long tours.

Although Pachmann's marriage produced two sons and a daughter, there were hints about his homosexuality. After his divorce, he hired Francesco Pallottelli (called "Cesco") to be his secretary and friend. This was ultimately Pachmann's undoing, as Cesco became very controlling, made bad business ventures, and with his wife, lived off of Pachmann's success for many years. He essentially drained Pachmann of his fortune to support his own life style.

During his concertizing years, from 1882 through 1929, Pachmann was regarded as one of the four or five greatest pianists in the world. His Chopin skills were unmatched, his fiery and eccentric showmanship was unparalleled, and he was an innovator, the earliest pianist to emphasize recording in addition to a concert career. It was through his recordings that he hoped to sustain his memory. Yet Pachmann was a

very troubled man who eventually lost touch with reality. In the end, his fame faded away more quickly than that of any of the pianists born between 1840 and 1860. Fortunately, his recordings, listed in the discography by Allan Evans, have helped sustain his memory. According to a note following the discography, a special project is underway by Arbiter Records to issue all of Pachmann's recordings. The first compact disc of that project, *Vladimir de Pachmann: the Mythic Pianist* (Arbiter 129), was issued in 2001.

Mark Mitchell, a pianist himself, has written a thorough study supported by meticulous research. In this first published biography of Pachmann, Mitchell carries the reader through Pachmann's early triumphs, his comic genius, his petty and childish ways, his thirst for adulation, and his undistinguished end. He focuses on the fine line between sanity and genius and shows how that delicate, fine line can be broken. The book is an interesting contribution to the study of the piano and of pianists and succeeds in helping to carry on the memory of Pachmann. Interested readers will also want to refer to another of Mitchell's books, *Virtuosi: a Defense and a (Sometimes Erotic) Celebration of Great Pianists* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), reviewed in *Notes* 58, no. 2 (December 2001): 382–83.

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Oscar Esplá in Belgium (1936–1949). By Jan de Kloe. Columbus, OH: Editions Orphée, 2001. [xiv, 264 p. ISBN 1-882612-21-3. \$44.95.] Illustrations, index.

If forced to simplify, one might say that there are two main trends in biographical writing. On the one hand, there are narrative biographies—works in which the life of an individual is related as a tale or story with a conspicuous literary panache. An interrupted teleological thread punctuated by periodical narrative climaxes characterizes this type of writing. The writer, in this case, might indulge in psychological speculation or the likelihood of "what might have happened." In these biographies, the

author often provides explanations or descriptions of the works; compositions and performances are summarized, analyzed, and critically appraised. An extreme example of this narrative writing is Simon Schama, whose hefty volumes fictionalize characters and situations by presenting events in a format that dangerously blurs the line between fact and fiction, between narrative history and historical novel.

And then there are documentary biographies. Their advocates look at narrative accounts with suspicion because they presume that the graceful narration of facts (let alone their fictionalization) leads necessarily to a misrepresentation of the historical record. Purposely eluding interpretation—whether psychological, historical, or critical—these biographies provide the dry facts only because they aim at rectifying the wrong information that is transmitted in secondary sources (reference works and textbooks). In addition, because their immediate goal is to unearth unknown information, they shun the task of shedding new interpretative light on known data, since this information could presumably be wrong. (Would it be too broad a generalization to say that narrative biographies are more common in the Anglo-American world, whereas documentary accounts are more often found in continental Europe?)

Oscar Esplá in Belgium (1936–1949) belongs to the second type of writing—that is, documentary biography. The intentions of Jan de Kloe are established at the outset of this volume: “With this book I want to document the life and work of Oscar Esplá in Belgium from 1936 to 1949” (p. ix). This task seems justified since “new versions of encyclopedias and reference works continue to copy the few known facts about those shady years, and this publication tries to put these facts in the proper perspective while adding many facts that hitherto have not been documented” (p. ix). De Kloe’s motivations for writing this book are also explained. A software engineer, musicologist, and concert guitar artist from the Netherlands, the author first encountered Esplá’s works when he was studying guitar with Nicolás Alfonso Pérez-Fernández at the Brussels conservatory. This teacher, a Spanish exile, explained to him that Esplá lived and worked in Belgium during World War II and that he wrote in French for *Le*

soir. Then and there, de Kloe decided that, one day, he “would locate the articles written by Esplá and find out about his life in this country” (p. viii).

Esplá lived in Belgium for almost fourteen years. He fled Spain at the outset of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and accepted an invitation to be a member of the jury of the first Concours Eugène Ysaÿe (1937). Once in Belgium, he decided to stay. The composer did not suspect, though, that soon another war would begin and that his adoptive country would be occupied by Germany; ironically, he had fled one tyranny to fall into another. In Belgium, life was not easy, even for a respected composer like Esplá. He therefore attempted to make a living as a composer, lecturer, and especially as music critic for the German-controlled *Le soir*. The catch was that he had to sign an allegedly pro forma oath of allegiance to the Nazi *Propaganda-Abteilung*. He did not refuse the job and, when Belgium was liberated, he was incarcerated twice, but he was never accused of collaboration. After his sojourn in Belgium and a short stint in France, he finally settled in Madrid in 1950.

De Kloe’s main objective, as he declares in the foreword, is to rectify the misinformation that exists about Esplá in Belgium. His program is as simple in conception as it is difficult in realization. To attain his declared goal, he consulted all the secondary sources available (dictionaries, encyclopedias, music histories, etc.) and carefully compared their discrepancies and chronological gaps. Then he sifted through all the accessible primary sources, especially the Fondo Documental Oscar Esplá, *Le soir*’s archive, and the subject’s family and other individuals who knew the composer, among many other sources. De Kloe’s meticulous work with primary sources paid off, for his findings are many and very important. Some of these discoveries include the following: Esplá was not born in 1886 but 1889; he was not the director of the Madrid conservatory for the period from 1936 to 1939 but only for a few months in 1936; the composer inflated his role as a director of the Laboratoire Musical Scientifique in Brussels; no document establishes clearly that Camille Saint-Saëns was his teacher.

Despite its documentary approach, this book will also be useful to cultural historians

concerned with larger issues—and the question of “collaborationist” artists is one of them. Esplá’s case, for example, is controversial and eludes easy explanations. He was neither a Nazi nor a Nazi sympathizer, but he certainly worked for what the Belgians considered the “stolen *Le soir*.” After the liberation, all writers for the “stolen” paper were banned from publishing and, although his boss at *Le soir* was sentenced to death, Esplá was never charged with any wrongdoing. As was the case with many artists confronted with the moral dilemma of cooperating (though never collaborating) with the Nazis, Esplá put his financial survival and the needs of his family first. It is certainly a great irony for a man who had fled Franco’s regime.

This study also allows a glimpse into another issue of interest to cultural historians of Spanish music, namely the Spanish exile in Brussels. Thus, one learns a great deal about major and minor figures of the Spanish circles in Brussels at the time, including Eduardo del Pueyo, Néstor Rey de la Torre, La Argentina, Joaquín Nin, Luis Galve, and Pérez-Fernández, the author’s guitar teacher mentioned earlier. Belgian intellectuals, including the controversial Paul de Man, also make brief cameos in the book.

In sum, one feels grateful that someone has taken up the task of debunking, one brick at a time, the vast amount of misinformation that exists about Esplá. De Kloe is a thorough, meticulous scholar whose work shows a masterly command of Spanish music history and its sources. It is a great pity that neither *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (New York: Grove, 2001) nor the *Diccionario de la música española e hispanoamericana* (Madrid: Sociedad General de Autores y Editores, 1999–), have yet incorporated his findings. The *New Grove* has promised to consider the new information, but the editors of the *Diccionario* have not yet responded.

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Henry Cowell, Bohemian. By Michael Hicks. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002. [ix, 204 p. ISBN 0252027515. \$29.95.] Illustrations, bibliography, index.

Henry Cowell (1897–1965) remains both one of the most renowned and enigmatic of American composers. His reputation as an avant-garde performer, inventor of extended techniques, theoretician, and multiculturalist suggests several personalities from which it is hard even now to discern an obvious unity. Add to this an extraordinary prolificity (to the point that archivists are still trying to determine a definitive works list), and it becomes clear why Cowell remains something of a historical chimera. Michael Hicks, who teaches at Brigham Young University, presents what is billed as the “first full-length study” of the composer, although his book is far more controversial, problematic, and incomplete than that description might suggest. Before dealing with my reservations, however, let me examine what Hicks does accomplish, at times brilliantly.

Hicks’s thesis is that Cowell, who presented himself as a homegrown prodigy, a sort of “wild first fruit” of native American genius, was in fact the product of a cultural environment that almost guaranteed his emergence. According to Hicks, Cowell’s career and aesthetic stance was the natural result of growing up in early-twentieth-century California, and in particular the Bohemian community of the Bay Area. He benefitted from a series of devoted supporters and patrons, ranging from his literarily ambitious mother Clarissa, to Ellen Veblen (the wife of Thorstein), the Stanford English professor Samuel Seward, the Anglo-American poet and mystic John Varian, and the progressive Berkeley music theorist and composer Charles Seeger. This world has a very familiar feel to the contemporary reader. It is full of artists, poets, professors, mystics, and the communes and cults thereof. Indeed, Hicks drives the point home by describing Cowell’s music for a play by John Varian in an open-air performance for his Temple of the People,

The pageant was produced in a field near the beach, the makeshift stage lit by automobile headlamps, covered with cellophane. An anonymous writer described the spectacle [as] “. . . rather queer music, a piano out of doors, played boldly and freely, the high cry of a man’s dramatic tenor, then a crash of chorus . . . we came upon the extensive grounds of an old-fashioned California mansion,