



"PART OF THE MUSIC ITSELF"

An Interview with Lili Kraus

"Impossible! Now 20 minutes of a Schubert movement such as this—she illustrated from "The Wanderer" Fantasy—could be called tiring; but this Bartok is part of me. I was singing it as a child of three, four, five, six; I know it as well as I know my eyes or my hands. How wonderful, how *vital* it is! But then Schubert is even more vital." Her use of the word *vital* gave me my key-word.

I asked if she had been practising all day and the family of three laughed.

"My wife has been delivering a lecture," Dr. Mandl said.

"A wonderful, a perfect lecture," said Ruth.

"Yes, quite extempore. A lecture to my daughter."

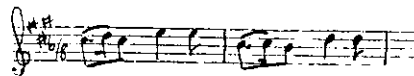
They all looked so happy about this lecture I wished I had heard it, and said so. Lili Kraus leaned back over the chair, looked at the ceiling, said slowly "Um—the theme was—let me see—that where the technical difficulties are to be seen, perceived, easily recognised by the hearer, the music is not the greatest; the greatest music has the fewest *obvious* difficulties. So with Mozart; they hear this and they will say 'so simple, like a child's play.'" She was silent and still and then she played a few bars from a Mozart sonata. "So simple, like a child's play," she had said. And so it was, and yet it was not. "And to come to that," she said, "has taken me twenty years, twenty full years. And this, full of dynamics—a Chopin etude—twenty hours if as *much*, certainly not more; but how difficult, how clever it appears to those who do not know." She turned round from the piano and leaned forwards, hands clasped, elbows on her knees, something specially important to say.

"And if the performance is good it can never be said 'Gosh! how well she plays!'" How electrifying I found that word *Gosh!* "The artist must have achieved technical excellence, must have studied until material things no longer intrude, until he has gone beyond mechanics and is able to become himself part of the feeling, the vision, the message, whatever you may call it, of the music itself."

From this we came to a discussion of the artist's duty towards the composer, with Beethoven's "You must be as faithful to the text as possible; you must add nothing and you must omit nothing. Yet, if you play the notes only as they are written, you have done nothing for the rebirth of music" for text.

"There are so many commentated, that is annotated, editions of great works, and naturally many prefer to play from them because the added comments and instructions seemingly help them in interpretation. But hardly ever these com-

ments and instructions are the original ones, very often indeed contradictory to the original intention. For instance, in the opening bars of Mozart's A Major Sonata, the original is thus:



and most commentated editions thus:



But what a difference! You will perhaps spend sleepless nights wondering why, why Mozart indicated one incredibly difficult phrasing or another strange grouping. But at last you *will* understand and you will know that it must be that particular way, no other."

"So you were not misquoted in Australia when you were reported saying the voice of God could talk much more undisturbedly through Mozart and Schubert than through Beethoven."

"No. I was not misquoted, though that is perhaps not so simple. Let me say that I think Mozart never, Beethoven sometimes, is forced to rely on technical routine; Mozart is never deserted by his genius, the highest in music, the voice of God or whatever you may choose to call it."

"And Beethoven is sometimes so deserted?"

"Yes."

"Would you say that this is possibly something governed by the individual's reaction to the composer? Is it possible that another may honestly find that Beethoven never, Mozart sometimes, is so deserted?"

With the greatest care she made her reply.

"I would be a fool, an utter fool to say I could not be mistaken, I could not be wrong. It is true I may be wrong. But I think Mozart did hear clearly, perfectly, this highest in music without exception from the time he was mature." She then began to illustrate, here in Beethoven, but not here; here in Mozart, here again. And if she did not enchant and win my unwilling logic, she did wholly enchant and win my willing ear.

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SOMETHING that had happened in 1929 was mentioned, something that had happened in London.

"Yes," she said, "London in 1929, my first concert there. How very sweet it was. I was young and there I went and played simply and naturally and everyone was so kind. The critics were so kind everyone was astonished. I did not know London was so difficult then. Later I learned to tremble, I assure you I learned to tremble."

"But you had no cause to tremble later, surely?"

"Perhaps not. But I did tremble. The critics were not unkind, but I always expected. . ."

"When fame comes the intrigues begin," said Dr. Mandl.

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THAT first visit to London was before Ruth was born. We talked about the

problem of the family and a music career.

"That is *always* a problem," Lili Kraus said, "an insoluble difficulty." The repeated griefs of many separations shadowed her face. After a pause she began to speak about her son Michael, left behind in an agricultural school in Sydney.

"I am *not* happy about him," she said. "I should so much rather have him here with us, perhaps at school here. His accent! He is already talking about *plying a gime!* But it will go. We were so long in Australia when we had expected to be there perhaps two days on our way to New Zealand."

"But why New Zealand?" I asked.

"Well, it has been New Zealand ever since 1938, we've been on the way here eight years," Dr. Mandl said. I still asked why New Zealand?

"Oh, because we had a dear friend, Dr. Condliffe, we knew him in Geneva and in London," Dr. Mandl said. "And now at last when we come here he is in America. Yes, it goes a long way back. Even before 1938 we had planned to visit New Zealand. But in 1938, the day Hitler marched into Vienna, we were in Paris and that night we did not sleep. The next morning we began to try to get our papers for New Zealand and soon we succeeded. But Lili had concerts in London and in Belgium, Holland, Scandinavia, etc., and the war had begun six months before we were ready to leave for the Dutch East Indies. There Lili's 40 concerts grew to 150, and with 12 months in Bali, we stayed much longer in Indonesia than we had planned."

"And suddenly the Japanese were there," said Lili Kraus.

"Do you feel you wish to talk about that period?" I asked.

"No. It is not worth it," she said. "Except this, this is important. For one whole year I had no piano. For the last 18 months we were together and we had a piano; but for the first year, the whole year, I did not touch a piano. Now for the whole of my life before I was not without a piano for more than a week, ten days."



The hands of Lili Kraus. The two photographs on this page were taken in the studio at 1YA last week

LILI KRAUS was working in a studio at 1YA on Sunday afternoon and I stood outside listening to notes coming faintly through two thick doors. I opened the first door, notes less faint, then with great care I opened the second door and heard fully with astonishment and delight: she was playing, with what energy and vitality, Bela Bartok. I stood and stared and listened, till Dr. Otto Mandl, her husband, came from behind the door and greeted me.

"Let us go into the next room and I shall show you photographs and materials and then you shall speak with Lili Kraus," he said, gently showing me the way. "But," I said, "if I could stay and listen. . . ." So he led me across the room and introduced me to Lili Kraus and to their beautiful 16-year-old daughter, Ruth.

"Now shall I continue? What shall I play? Ah this. Very lovely music; cannot be heard too often—Bartok."

The energy, the extraordinary impression I had of energy going into that piano: here she sat, often still, with straight back, slim shoulders, a black high turban on her head, black long-sleeved jersey, black slacks and high-heeled shoes, one gleaming ring on a right finger, a dull gold clasp in the turban; and out from that black glowed her bent and moving face, her flying hands. I watched those hands, then and later, and I marvelled at their smallness, their slimness, and the volume of sound that they were producing. Later we talked about them. "Feel these muscles," she said. I felt them and they were hard-firm and rounded, almost knotted, along the edges of the palms, between thumb and forefinger. Their strength, she explained, came from a loose wrist-play, a constant vibration of the wrists (acting like the "vibrato" of a string player), she had long ago invented for herself.

"In the very moment of stress you could say that my wrist is already loose again; thus I am always able to produce great volume without pressure."

I asked if she found this energetic Bartok exhausting to play.

"Bartok exhausting!" she exclaimed.