

THE PIANO MUSIC OF DAVID W. GUION AND THE
INTERSECTION OF MUSICAL TRADITIONS
IN AMERICA AFTER WORLD WAR I

by

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TREATISE

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS
August, 1978

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

August 1978

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Publication No. _____

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The University of Texas at Austin, 1978

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David Guion (b. 1892) grew up with the folk music of ex-slaves and cowboys in a small West Texas ranching town. When he showed an interest in music, he began a traditional musical education which culminated in his study with Leopold Godowsky in Vienna. After he returned from Europe, he accepted a series of teaching appointments in Brownwood (Texas), Dallas, and Chicago. He also began to publish his compositions. The success of his folk derived works such as "Turkey in the Straw" caused him to give up teaching and to move to New York to devote his time to composition. He staged a successful Broadway show, starred in weekly radio programs, and gave many performances of his music. His works were also performed by prominent pianists and singers as well as leading orchestras and bands.

In this paper, the success of his music is studied in relation to the convergence of several musical traditions in America in the 1920's and 30's.

The folk music movement which began in America with Dvorak's tenure at the National Conservatory reached the point of public popularity just as Guion's first folk derived pieces were published. It is likely that Guion both influenced and benefited from this development.

The nineteenth century piano virtuosos created a particular repertoire of display pieces and pieces of a certain popular flavor. Guion became acquainted with this tradition during his Vienna years. He composed a few works in this vein, and its influence appears in his transcriptions and in many original piano pieces.

Following World War I, the popular and serious musical spheres in America influenced each other and in some cases actually merged together. Guion's piano music and its success among a cross section of American performers and audiences are an illustration of the blurring of the boundary between the cultivated and vernacular traditions at that time.

Following the text are appendices: A. Manuscript Sources, B. Published Sources of the Piano Music, and C. Discography.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Since schools in the Southwest were still somewhat provincial or at least lacking in prestige before World War I, many Texas families who could afford it sent their children either "back East" or to Europe for their education. So, it was perhaps predictable that David Guion decided to go to Europe to study piano when he was nineteen years old. Leopold Godowsky was at the height of his fame as a pianist and was teaching at the Royal Academy in Vienna. Guion had heard Godowsky play in this country and decided to go to Vienna to study with the famous artist. After arriving in Vienna in the summer of 1912 along with another student from Texas, Marian Douglass, Guion made arrangements to audition for Godowsky. He recalls that he played rather poorly for the great virtuoso, and

After I had finished playing for him, he asked me what made me think he would accept me as a student--and why had I come so far to study piano with him. I was a bit taken back at this but was determined to stay in Vienna and study piano whether he took me or not. So I summoned up all the courage I could and answered that my Father had told me any teacher would accept me if I paid enough for my lessons. I shall never forget how Mr. Godowsky laughed at this. He then asked me if my father owned a big cattle ranch in Texas. I said, yes, he does and he is also a lawyer. "So," he said, "I am to be bought, like your father buys a fine bull." I replied, "Well, my father always got what he wanted, and what he wanted was to send me over here to study with you." We both had a good laugh . . .¹

¹David Guion, My Memoirs (unpublished), p. 17

Godowsky accepted the boy as a student. Guion had planned to remain in Europe four years, but the beginning of World War I forced him to return to Texas in 1914.

Guion's study in Europe was a significant influence upon the development of his musical style, but his early years in Texas were equally important. David was born December 15, 1892 in the West Texas town of Ballinger. His family can trace its heritage from ancient French nobility, and his ancestors in this country have included two governors of Mississippi. His father, John Isaac Guion, was a lawyer in Mississippi who moved to Ballinger only a few years before David was born. The Guions became prominent and prosperous members of West Texas society. It was from his mother, a musician, that David and his sisters received their first piano instruction.

During his childhood he came into contact with the rich folk music traditions of the region. As a baby he was cared for by a Negro servant named Neppie, who had been a slave in the Guion family in Mississippi. Neppie sang old Negro melodies to young David and carried the boy with her to the Negro church in Ballinger on Sundays. Guion was so fascinated with the music he heard that he frequently attended the church even after he became older, much to the embarrassment of his family.² After Mammy Neppie died, David was attended by Andrew, a Negro boy who sang and played the guitar.

²Ibid., p. 6.

Another ex-slave and servant in the Guion home, Elijah Cox, was a fiddle player. Thus, a variety of sacred and secular folk music was an important part of Guion's childhood.

After his first piano lessons from his mother, David's early traditional musical training started with a weekly trip to study with Charles J. Finger in San Angelo. When Finger moved to Arkansas, Guion's father decided it was time to send David away to school. In 1907 he was sent to the Whipple Academy in Jacksonville, Illinois.³ He did not make friends among the other students his age, however, and became so lonely that he returned to Texas after a year. Then he was sent to Fort Worth, Texas, where he stayed with a sister and became a student at Polytechnic College. Guion remained at Polytechnic four years, during which time he studied piano with Wilbur McDonald until McDonald's death in 1912. It was at this point that Guion's father offered to send him to Europe to continue his piano study, an offer that David eagerly accepted.

His life as a student in Vienna was a happy experience, and he was disappointed to have to give it up. After he returned from Europe, Guion stayed in Ballinger for a year. Then he began a third phase of his life, a career in teaching which occupied the next thirteen years of his life. His first position was Director of Music at Daniel Baker College in Brownwood, Texas--a little

³Shirley McCullough, David Guion and the Guion Collection, p. 20.

town about forty miles from his father's home in Ballinger. He taught there for two years; but after the excitement of Vienna, Guion found the cultural life of West Texas frustrating. During his tenure at Brownwood, he gave his Dallas debut recital. The program was a conventional one, and he used two of his own compositions for encores. The reviews of this recital were quite complimentary both to his playing and to his pieces.⁴ In 1921 Guion was married to Marion Ayres, but the union was a brief and unhappy one, ending in divorce two years later. Guion's next teaching job was at the Fairmont Conservatory in Dallas, and from there he went to the faculty of Southern Methodist University. In 1926 he was offered a position at Chicago Musical College--at that time one of the most respected American conservatories. After two years in Chicago, Guion returned to Dallas to head the Music Department of the Southwest School of Fine Arts.⁵ For four summers in the mid-1920's he taught at a music camp in Estes Park, Colorado. Throughout his years as a teacher, Guion continued to be active as a pianist, collecting many excellent reviews from his recitals in Chicago and in numerous Texas cities.

He was also building a reputation as a composer. Beginning in 1917, Guion made many trips to New York City to contact publishers and to promote performances of his music. On his first

⁴Ibid., p. 23.

⁵Ibid., p. 25.

visit he met Nora Bayes, a popular blues singer at the time. She asked him to write a song for her, and he responded with "Old Maid Blues." Bayes used the song in the 1918 George M. Cohan Review and subsequently had it published.⁶ In the same year, Guion took a collection of his arrangements of Negro spirituals to M. Witmark and Sons, who published the entire set. His setting of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" became popular at once, and his career as a composer and arranger was launched.

Probably the most significant step in becoming established as a composer was Guion's contact with Schirmer's publishing house. In 1918 he took a piano transcription of "Turkey in the Straw," and a collection of songs--"De ol' Ark's A-moverin," "Greatest Miracle of All," and "Lil Pickaninny Kid"--to Schirmer. Both Rudolph Schirmer, then president of the company, and O. G. Sonneck, head of the Publication Department, became interested in his music and in his career.

They sent Guion's music to performers such as pianists Percy Grainger and John Powell and singers Mabel Garrison and Sophie Braslau who began to include his pieces on their concert programs. "Turkey in the Straw" was a particular success. In a matter of weeks after it was published it was heard in an arrangement for John Philip Sousa's band and in an orchestral version conducted by

⁶Guion, op. cit., p. 26.

Toscanini. By the mid-1920's this piece was widely regarded as the epitome of the folk music movement in America.

Guion continued to divide his time among teaching, performing, composing, and traveling to New York to promote his music. In 1929 he finally decided to give up teaching, move to New York permanently and concentrate on composing. He wrote to S. L. Rothafel, the director of the Roxy Theater, about plans for a musical production using some of his cowboy songs, and Rothafel invited him to come for an audition.⁷ When Guion arrived in New York in 1930, he went to see Rothafel, who liked Guion's music and agreed to produce the show. After a few weeks of rehearsal Prairie Echoes opened at the Roxy on July 25. It was one of eight short stage productions preceding a movie, and it was the featured attraction for the week. Most of the music in the show was already known to New York audiences: "Turkey in the Straw," "The Harmonica Player," "The Bold Vaquero," and "Cowboy's Meditation." One song was new to them, however--"Home on the Range." Prairie Echoes ran for ten days and the show was a success. An article appeared in the New York Times under the headline, "Texas Musician 'Makes' Old Broadway on Very First Try."⁸ Another reviewer announced, "Guion has proved there is a wealth of racy and

⁷McCullough, op. cit., p. 26.

⁸"Texas Musician 'Makes' Old Broadway on Very First Try," New York Times, Aug. 9, 1930.

native music in America aside from jazz and its various forms."⁹ The show attracted the attention of the national radio networks. While Guion's production was still playing at the Roxy, NBC engaged him as guest artist on the weekly coast-to-coast broadcast "The General Motors Hour." Later that month he also appeared on NBC's "Eveready Hour," and in September he was a guest on "Metropolitan Echoes."¹⁰ These were only the beginning of Guion's radio appearances. In the following year, the New York station WOR began a weekly program of Guion's music called "Hearing America with Guion." The series ran for thirty-two weeks. Later in 1931, NBC began a national series following the same format but under the name "David Guion and his Orchestra." For this show Guion's music was performed by an NBC studio orchestra, Paul Ravell, and the composer at the piano. This program continued for thirty-eight weeks. When it was over, Guion and Ravell were engaged for many recitals of cowboy songs throughout the Northeast.

Others were performing his music as well. Metropolitan singer John Charles Thomas gave a Town Hall recital in November, 1930. The Times reported, ". . . the surprise of the day came with the inclusion among English texts of several American negro spirituals and cowboy tunes rescued from oblivion by living

⁹"Prairie Echoes at Roxy," New York Times, July 27, 1930.

¹⁰McCullough, op. cit., p. 26.

composers, one of whom was in the hall."¹¹ The cowboy tunes were Guion's "All Day on the Prairie," and "Home on the Range." The composer was called to the stage and introduced to the audience. After that, Guion's cowboy songs became popular with several members of the Metropolitan Opera Company. Artists such as Lawrence Tibbett, Sophie Braslau, Mable Garrison, James Melton and John Charles Thomas included them in their concerts and recorded them. By 1934, one radio official announced that Guion's "Home on the Range" held first place among all lists of favorites on radio circuits throughout the United States. At that time a suit was brought against Guion for infringement of copyright. The suit was filed by William and Mary Goodwin of Arizona, who claimed on the basis of a 1905 copyright that they were the composers of "Home on the Range."¹² Although the court found that the Goodwins had no grounds for their complaint, the controversy continued for many years and eventually involved several folk song collectors and folklorists, a television station, and even the state of Kansas. The controversy was gradually forgotten rather than settled, and Guion still collects royalties on his arrangement of the melody.¹³

¹¹"John Charles Thomas Sings Cowboy Songs," New York Times, Dec. 1, 1930.

¹²McCullough, op. cit., p. 44.

¹³Ibid., Chapter IV.

Guion's cowboy songs and piano transcriptions of fiddlers' tunes had given him a reputation as a Southwestern or Cowboy composer. Reporters were fond of pointing out that Guion was an expert horseman as well as a pianist-composer. A frequently published photograph showed Guion on horseback in full cowboy regalia and the Wyoming Rocky Mountains in the distance.

His music encompassed other styles as well. Before moving to New York, he had written what he called a "Primitive African Ballet." The manuscript sketch is dated 1929, and the piece was first performed in a two-piano version in the Little Theater in Dallas on January 12, 1930. It was originally written at the suggestion of Theodore Kosloff, who had intended it as film music for Cecil B. DeMille's Madam Satan; but the advent of the "talkies" caused DeMille to change his plans.¹⁴ When Guion moved to New York in 1930, he met Paul Whiteman who became interested in the piece. Whiteman sent the two piano score to the famous composer-arranger Ferde Grofé, who began working on an orchestration for Whiteman's band. This version--renamed "Shingandi"--was performed in a concert at the Studebaker Theater in Chicago on November 22, 1931. There were four large works on the program, and two were featured as premiers: Guion's Shingandi and Grofé's Grand Canyon Suite. Guion's music was enthusiastically received by the Chicago

¹⁴Works Premiered at Little Theater, "Dallas Morning News, Jan. 13, 1930.

audience. A week later NBC arranged a national broadcast of Shingandi and Grand Canyon. Guion was the pianist for these performances, and Variety reported, "Guion interpreted 'Shingandi' on the piano, proving himself as able at execution as at creation."¹⁵ An orchestral version of the work was later performed at an American Music Festival in Richmond, Virginia with the Washington Symphony and John Powell as pianist. It was also heard in Fair Park Bowl in an all-Guion program played by the Dallas Symphony.¹⁶

Since Guion had written a libretto for his "Primitive Ballet" describing the tribal rituals of African warriors, he still wanted the piece to be staged as a ballet. In 1932 he signed a contract with the Roxy Theater to produce the ballet, but unfortunately, the Roxy went into bankruptcy before rehearsals could begin.¹⁷ The following year, Theodore Kosloff became interested in the project, and staged the work in November 1933 at Fair Park Auditorium in Dallas with the Dallas Symphony and David Guion and Harlan Petit as pianists. Several years later the Kosloff Ballet Company took its production of Shingandi on a tour that included performances in San Diego, the Hollywood Bowl, at Grauman's Chinese Theater, and several performances in Mexico City.¹⁸

¹⁵McCullough, op. cit., p. 31.

¹⁶"Plans for 'Shingandi' After Performance at Bowl Here Sunday," Dallas Morning News, Aug. 17, 1931.

¹⁷Ibid. ¹⁸McCullough, op. cit., p. 33.

In 1937 Guion gave up his Greenwich Village apartment and bought fifty acres in the Pocono Mountains in eastern Pennsylvania. For several years he made frequent trips to New York to promote his music. He began to devote more of his time to other interests, however. He redecorated his old Dutch house and accumulated an impressive collection of Early American antiques: furniture, cut and pressed glass, china, rugs, and silver. He spent time gardening and entertaining his friends, who included musicians, writers, poets, and composers.¹⁹ He still found time to compose and perform his music.

In 1950 the Houston Symphony Society commissioned Guion to compose a work for the following concert season. He reworked some of his earlier music and added it to new material to produce a suite. The work, titled "Texas", consists of fourteen descriptive movements. The orchestration was contributed by Foster Case. The Texas Suite was premiered in 1952 by the Houston Symphony with Efrem Kurtz conducting. The audience response was so enthusiastic that the piece was repeated on the orchestra's next concert. Although Guion had expected Schirmer to publish his suite, they published only the two-piano versions, and it was thirteen years later when Carsan, Inc. bought the publishing and recording rights. In 1965 the Houston Summer Symphony recorded several movements of the suite.

¹⁹Guion, op. cit., p. 36.

Guion continued to live on his Pennsylvania estate, which he named "Home on the Range," until 1965 when the Army Corps of Engineers designated the entire valley as the site of a water and recreation project. Guion and his neighbors tried to save their property, hired lawyers and wrote letters to many government officials. He recalls, "I fought--we all fought, but it did no good."²⁰ He was bitter about losing the estate and believed that he and his neighbors were the victims of a political corruption in which the property owners were paid only a fraction of the value of their land. Guion decided to move back to Dallas. He bought the old home he and his mother had built when he was teaching in Dallas and has been living there to the time of this writing.

After World War II the cultural atmosphere in America changed in many ways, and the popularity of Guion's music diminished. Today much of it is considered "dated" and has gone out of print. The original popularity of his style arose partly from the fact that it appeared at a critical time when several musical traditions intersected in the musical culture of America in the 1920's. Guion, who was a talented man acquainted with these different musical currents largely as an accident of birth and training, synthesized the various elements into a single style. The piano works, in particular, illustrate that synthesis which included elements both from his traditional musical training under one of the

²⁰Ibid., p. 37.

last great Romantic virtuosos and from his acquaintance with the folk and popular styles he recalled from his childhood in West Texas.

A brief survey of Guion's music reveals how important vocal literature was: it accounts for at least sixty-five songs including arrangements of Negro spirituals, sea chanties, cowboy ballads, popular, and art and sacred songs. There are four orchestral works, and many of the piano pieces and some of the songs have been orchestrated for ensembles of various sizes. The piano music includes twenty published works, one unpublished etude, several pieces now lost, and the original two-piano version of the ballet Shingandi.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY VIRTUOSO
TRADITION IN GUION'S MUSIC

Liszt's retirement from the concert stage in 1847 marked a change in the social role of the virtuoso pianist. The change involved several factors among which were the decline of aristocratic patronage, the rise of the public concert, and Romantic ideals of the mission of the artist. All of these affected the repertoire of pianists which in turn had its effect on the output of composers. Since this tradition of Romantic virtuosos was at its height when Guion finished his education and began his career as a composer, and since his only formal musical training was his piano study, the aesthetic of the virtuoso tradition was significant in the development of his style.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century the secular arts had been supported almost exclusively by the aristocracy. The instrumental virtuoso played primarily in the salons of royalty and the wealthy. The solo recital was a rare event before 1840. The usual program included several performers on different instruments perhaps including a small ensemble to assist in concertos. The famous pianists received a rather small part of their income from playing recitals. Hummel, for example, was primarily a conductor and teacher, Clementi a piano manufacturer and music publisher, and Field

mainly a teacher of the daughters of the Russian aristocracy. All virtuosos were also composers. There was no standard repertoire and performers largely played their own music. Even Chopin and Liszt made their reputations as pianists in this environment. The next generation of performers, however, faced a different situation. With the decline of aristocratic patronage and the increasing popularity of public concerts, it became possible to make a living exclusively as a pianist--and the professional touring virtuoso appeared. The repertoire of these late nineteenth century pianists was shaped by several conflicting influences. On the one hand, the new professional had to know his market and provide repertoire that the public demanded--and the public taste was by no means as discriminating as that of the Paris salon. The public could be relied upon to react favorably to virtuoso display pieces, transcriptions, and variations on popular themes, especially if they were composed by the performer. On the other hand, the Romantic ideal of the artist as one who edified and educated the masses, as well as the artistic standards which were the natural result of professionalism, motivated pianists to present the best music of the older masters.

Anton Rubinstein was one of the first of the new professionals to make established masterpieces by Beethoven, Weber, Schumann and Chopin staples of the repertoire.²¹ He had tremendous influence as one of the greatest pianists of his generation.

²¹Arthur Loesser, Men, Women, and Pianos, p. 516.

Nevertheless, the pianist as composer still remained. Although the works of recognized masters dominated piano recitals, the performer was still expected to provide a few numbers of his own composition. Professionals are by nature a conservative group, and as composers the Romantic pianists were no exceptions. They selected from a small number of audience-tested styles and forms--usually those handed down from the previous generation. Thus the music of Anton Rubinstein and Moritz Moszkowsky is the virtuoso continuation of the style of Mendelssohn, and pieces by Paderewski or Moritz Rosenthal are clearly descended from Liszt. Pieces of this type were generally transcriptions, concert etudes, capriccios, minuets, variations on well known themes, or waltzes. The more successful examples became absorbed into a growing repertoire of such music.

The virtuoso tradition came to America rather early via tours by the great European pianists beginning in the mid-1840's. Rubinstein's visit in 1872-3, sponsored by Steinway, had a considerable impact on America and was remembered by music writers and critics for years--even becoming something of a popular legend.²² Rosenthal first came to this country in 1888, Paderewski in 1891 and 1896, followed by many others. America had every opportunity to become acquainted with the best Romantic pianists.

²²Harold C. Schonberg, The Great Pianists, p. 261.

Louis Moreau Gottschalk became the first native pianist-composer to achieve an international name. He studied and began his career in Europe where his playing and his compositions were popular and admired by such personalities as Chopin and Liszt.²³ In 1853 he began his American tours. His diary, published as Notes of a Pianist, colorfully describes the difficulties of the touring virtuoso in nineteenth-century America and suggests that his own fantasias as well as improvisations provided most of the repertoire for his American concerts.

A view of the concert repertoire after the turn of the century is provided in a scrapbook Guion kept during his years in Vienna.²⁴ Besides pictures of buildings and scenes in and around Vienna, letters he received there, and some newspaper clippings, the book preserves the programs of concerts he attended while he was in Europe along with pictures of many pianists and occasional notes that Guion added. One page, for example, has a picture of Moritz Rosenthal accompanied by Guion's note: "Moritz Rosenthal, born in 1862 at Lemburg, pupil of Mikuli, Chopin, Joseffy and Liszt. His technic is phenomenal and he is a virtuoso of the highest rank." On the same page are two programs and two ticket stubs from Rosenthal's concerts.

²³Ibid., p. 206

²⁴Scrapbook in the Guion Collection.

Recitals resembling those common today--filled exclusively with serious large-scale works or groups of pieces by clearly recognized masters--were not completely absent, although they were rare. The scrapbook contains an all-Beethoven sonata program played by Bufo Peters and an all Chopin program by Ignaz Friedman. Guion also heard Busoni play Beethoven's "Hammerklavier," all the Chopin Preludes, and the Liszt B minor Sonata in a single recital. These were exceptional, however. Several features emerge from the programs as a group: there are rarely more than two large works on a concert and rarely more than one sonata; these large pieces are usually near the beginning of the recital. Most of the programs end with a group of virtuoso display pieces of the sort described above, and over half end with one of Liszt's famous brilliant works--Hungarian Rhapsodies, Don Juan Fantasy, Norma Fantasy and the like. Even Artur Schnabel, who was later considered one of the most classically oriented, scholarly, and restrained of pianists, ended a program in 1913 with four short Liszt pieces and the Strauss-Tausig False Caprice "Nachtfalter." Approximately half of the programs include the pianists' own pieces. Guion heard Rosenthal play his Papillons, Busoni and Eugene d'Albert play their transcriptions of Bach and Emil Sauer several groups of his own etudes and capriccios.

There appears to be a style of programming which attempts to balance cultivated taste with popular appeal. The programs listed

below are representative of the repertoire and programming practice reflected in Guion's Vienna Scrapbook.

MORITZ ROSENTHAL, December 13, 1912

Chopin: Concerto, op. 11

Goldmark: Traumgestalten
Bedrangnis

Leschetizky: Gavotte Antique e Musette Modere

Poldini: Etude in A-flat major

Rosenthal: Papillons

Liszt: Concerto in E-flat

EMIL SAUER, February 1, 1913

Beethoven: Sonata, op. 31, no. 1

Brahms: Handel Variations, op. 24

Schumann: Romanze in F-sharp
Traumeswirren

Chopin: Ballade, op. 47

Berceuse, op. 57

Etude, op. 25, No. 11

Sauer: "Le Retour: (Capriccio)

"Propos de Bal"

"Meeresleuchten" (Konzertetude no. 7)

Liszt: Rhapsodie no. 12

WILHELM BACKHAUS, October 28, 1913

Beethoven: Sonata, op. 110

Jules Wertheim: Variations in E-flat Minor, op. 4

F. Chopin: Ballade in G minor

Nocturne in C minor

Nocturne in G major

Rachmaninoff: Five Preludes

St. Heller: Two Freischützstudien
 A. Rubenstein: Etude in C major

A survey of the reviews of piano recitals in the New York Times for the season of 1920-21 reveals a similar state of affairs in this country when Guion's music began to be popular. One critic, for example, reported that Grainger opened a program with the Bach D minor Tocatta and Fugue in which he combined the Busoni and Tausig versions.²⁵ A tendency toward too serious a program seemed worthy of note by a reporter who observed that Rudolf Ganz "played to a full house at Aeolian Hall . . . , a musical assembly that found no terrors in the fact of two sonatas in one recital. The works were Beethoven's Op. 26 in A flat, and Chopin's in B minor."²⁶ (emphasis added) Perhaps to compensate for such heavy fare, Ganz ended the program with four of his own compositions and a couple of Liszt pieces. One imagines that in the early years of the twentieth century modern programming practice would be considered a lapse of taste.

This distinctive virtuoso literature was not considered mere empty display at the time. In a recital on October 11, 1920 in New York, Godowsky premiered his set of pieces Triakontameron subtitled "Thirty Scenes and Moods in Triple Time." The New York Times reported, ". . . in all these pieces there is of course a fine

²⁵"Grainger Plays," New York Times, Dec. 8, 1920.

²⁶"Rudolph Ganz," New York Times, Jan. 22, 1921