

Leonard Pennario: 'Sensational' classical pianist

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Leonard Pennario's pianism drew superlatives from the critics wherever he took to the stage; one recalled him as "a sensation with orchestra, playing any glittering concerto [. . .] with the clarity, the speed and the accuracy of a machine gun". Excited encomia of this sort would accompany Pennario's appearances for the 60 years of his professional life.

But there was more to his playing than pyrotechnics. The conductor Dmitri Mitropoulos once stated that "collaboration with this young musician has been one of the happiest experiences of my life. I say musician because, although he possesses the technique necessary, he possesses what is more important, a soul." One of the most perceptive assessments of Pennario's musicianship came from Richard Freed, a senior figure among the American critical fraternity:

Perhaps because he cut more of a "gentlemanly" figure than a "colourful" one, Pennario tended to be rather under-appreciated by the public and never quite achieved super-celebrity status, but as a performer he was as unfailingly communicative as he was tasteful. He managed to balance fastidiousness and subtlety with a sense of spontaneity and vitality that earned him the respect of his fellow musicians, and the pleasure he found in productive give-and-take with them made him as effective in chamber music as in the big virtuoso concertos.

Pennario was born in Buffalo, in upstate New York, in 1924. He can hardly have known when, aged seven, he was taken to hear Rachmaninov in concert that he would be the first pianist after the composer himself to record all four Rachmaninov concertos and the Paganini Variations. He was seven, too, when he gave his first public performance in a Buffalo department store. Three years later, his father's shoe-store business collapsed in the Depression and the family moved to Los Angeles, which was to be Pennario's base for the rest of his active life (he retired to La Jolla in 2005).

Word of his playing soon began to spread. When he was 12, a cancellation left the Dallas Symphony Orchestra without a soloist for the Grieg Piano Concerto, and Pennario was recommended. Asked if he knew the work, he said yes. He didn't, of course, but learned it within six days, and the 2,000-strong audience at the Texas Exposition witnessed the beginning of an extraordinary career. He was particularly proud that he hadn't had to miss school in the process.

Pennario was a natural musician with a capacious memory, and made his mark without attending a music college or entering a competition. But he did have piano lessons from the legendary Isabelle Vengerova, whose other students included Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein, Gary Graffman and Abbey Simon. And at the University of Southern California he studied composition with Ernst Toch, one of the many refugees from Nazism whose arrival was beginning to animate musical life in California. The 17-year-old Pennario took his Variations on Kerry Dancers to Toch, who commented: "Very impressive, but you are the only one who could play these."

He had a similar reaction in New York in 1942, when he played a piece of his own, *Midnight on the Cliffs*, to Vladimir Horowitz, then at the height of his fame as the virtuoso's virtuoso. "That's a beautiful piece," Horowitz responded, "but hard, isn't it?" In the event, as with Horowitz himself, composition was not to distract Pennario from life as a performer.

Pennario was one of countless musicians called up when the United States entered the Second World War, and it was as Private Pennario, in the uniform of the US Air Force, that he gave his New York début – in the Liszt First Concerto, with the New York Philharmonic under Artur Rodzinski in Carnegie Hall – on 17 November 1943. Active service took him to the Far East, to China, Burma and India, where his musicianship was put to good use in concerts in military bases and hospitals, among them a Christmas concert in Calcutta in 1944 – although the state of the pianos he found sometimes required him to circumnavigate missing keys.

At the end of the war, by now a staff sergeant with three Bronze Stars to his name, he returned to the United States and resumed his career where it had left off. He was soon eliciting the kind of press notices for which agents give their eye-teeth: in 1946 one critic felt he had "the electric style of a young Horowitz" and, six years later, reviewing his Wigmore Hall début for *The New Statesman*, Andrew Porter found that his "transcendental pianism [. . .] surpassed all expectations" and that his "playing knows no limits: the technique is magnificent and unshakeable [. . .] Busoni must have played very like this".

Pennario's California base was an important facet in his music-making. He made his début with the Los Angeles Philharmonic (under Otto Klemperer, again in the Grieg Concerto) when he was 14 – the first of over 70 appearances with the orchestra. He was friends with the Hungarian-born, LA-based Miklós Rózsa, composer of the film-score to *Ben Hur*, who wrote a sonata for him in 1948 and a concerto in 1966.

The élitists found his proximity to Hollywood unsettling, as when he recorded the album *Concerto under the Stars* or adapted his *Midnight on the Cliffs* as the title for Doris Day's 1956 film *Julie*. Tall and handsome, Pennario drew other advantages from his home turf: he dated Elizabeth Taylor briefly, and went to parties with July Garland. But he never married, explaining to an interviewer late in life that he had been "wed to the piano".

His first recordings were made in 1950 for Capitol Records, based in Hollywood. He ended up making more than 40 LPs for them, until Capitol's classical division was closed in the early 1980s, whereupon he recorded 20 more for other labels. One of the most popular of all classical LPs was Pennario's account of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, made with the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra under the baton of Felix Slatkin.

Success in the recording lists (in 1959 he was declared the best-selling American pianist) did not dent his enthusiasm for the concert platform. Performing in public was important to him: "You have to play for the people; you have to play for an audience. You can't just go into the studio and make records, you know."

In 1961 the violinist Jascha Heifetz and cellist Gregor Piatigorsky invited Pennario to replace Arthur Rubinstein in a series of concerts in New York and on the West Coast and for the next three years, Pennario recalled, "Recording with them, getting ready with them, was the biggest thrill of my life." They won a Grammy in 1963.

Although Pennario's career was focused principally on the United States (he was the first pianist to perform in all 50), where he appeared with every orchestra and conductor of note, he was also heard widely abroad. In 1989 he was one of the first American pianists to play in Communist China, and he returned two years later to play not the piano but bridge, winning an "Open Pairs" event in Beijing.

Bridge had been Pennario's main hobby since 1965, and he became a Life Master in 1980. When in the late 1990s the onset of Parkinson's disease forced him to give up the piano, it became the solace of his old age. His mentor had been Alfred Sheinwold, America's leading bridge columnist. On Sheinwold's death in 1997 Pennario remembered his friend in a letter to the bridge press: "He had a fine tenor voice, and at our get-togethers he often sang lieder by Schubert and Brahms. I would accompany him and he in turn would partner me in tournaments. Each of us felt he had the better deal!"

Martin Anderson

Leonard Pennario, pianist: born Buffalo, New York 9 July 1924; died La Jolla, California 28 June 2008.