

Romantic virtuoso pianists

Jeremy Nicholas surveys the greatest recordings of an elite group of daredevil pianists who managed to combine phenomenal technique with the pure joy of making music



Earl Wild: played with a consummate technique and tonal beauty

It's not quite right to call this a Specialist's Guide to 'The Top 10 Pianists on Record', nor to 'The Top 10 Virtuoso Pianists', though some of the names would undoubtedly inhabit both categories. But it is a guide to a particular kind of pianist. How to describe the rare attributes of these elite artists?

To some listeners – even committed pianophiles – some of the repertoire in which they excel(led) is dismayingly frivolous. On the other side of the fence, as it were, are those who revel in the

pianistic equivalent of the high-wire act, and the thrill of hearing the near-impossible tossed off with aplomb. Pianophiles, secretly or not, tend to have a preference for one or the other while readily appreciating that, of course, neither 'side' has it all.

In an interview, the late Earl Wild said: 'The difference between playing a piece like d'Albert's *Scherzo* and, say, Beethoven's Op 111 is that in the d'Albert you are a decorator; in the Beethoven you are an architect. A pianist should be able to be both.' So what are we

looking for? A transcendent technique is the *sine qua non*; an omnivorous appetite for the literature of the piano; a certain generosity of spirit; the ability to convey the joy – and not the agony – of making music in public; a communicative ease; daredevilry, risk-taking, nothing played twice the same way.

All these attributes are part of the alchemy: playing of music with intelligence but which, ultimately, comes from the heart and not the head, and leaves a warm afterglow. ☺

Earl Wild (1915–2010)

Earl Wild plays Scharwenka's Piano Concerto No 1 Ivory Classics (M) @ 77003 (A/O7)

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Few pianists have rivalled the breadth and adventurousness of Wild's repertoire (Buxtehude to Barber and beyond, with not many gaps in between), his consummate technique and tonal beauty. Wild had it all. He played with a light hand and a light heart, never better than in the brilliant array of transcriptions heard on discs like 'The Art of the Transcription' (Audifon CD72008-2). 'The Virtuoso Piano' (Vanguard, 8/92, with works by Herz, Godowsky, d'Albert and Thalberg), and in his own life-enhancing *Seven Virtuoso Etudes* on Gershwin songs (10/90). Among the more than 30 concertos he recorded, arguably the finest is of Scharwenka's Piano Concerto No 1 from 1969.