Rafael Joseffy

1852-1915

Rafael Joseffy was an immigrant pianist who toured the country, shining on many stages. After his distinguished career as a performer, he moved to Tarrytown where he composed classical variants and taught the next generation of musicians. He also played at the Music Hall and was an active member in our community.

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Rafael Joseffy: A Piano With Many Keys

Upon scanning the Hall of Fame list of names, I came across someone who caught my eye immediately. Rafael Joseffy’s description construed him as a “pianist, teacher, and composer”. I sat there thinking, how could a person’s whole life be tapered to three, bare words? Soon I was on a quest, hunting down the humanity behind the ink and paper. I walked to the Historical Society where I found the holy grail of research. There I dug through newspaper clippings, correspondences, portraits, and autographed books by Joseffy. His life, and what can be gained by his story, deserve to be remembered.

Rafael Joseffy was born on July 3, 1852, in Hunfal, Hungary. At eight years old, he began exploring his passion: the piano. He started on a local level and then continued to study in Budapest. In 1866, he left his home of Hungary to travel to Leipzig, Germany, where he studied the piano from age fourteen to sixteen. Following his stay in Leipzig, he moved to Berlin where he was educated by Carl Tausig and Franz Liszt, who were both commemorated and distinguished musicians. These two mentors greatly influenced his pianistic style and artistic ideals. At his 1870 debut in Berlin, his transcendent technique and colorful tone gained Joseffy acclamations of a master pianist. In 1879, Joseffy immigrated to New York and made his American debut in an orchestra. Soon after his original performance, he played with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and was a soloist for the inaugural concerts of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1891. Joseffy played the piano with brilliance and was keen on adapting classics, such as Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, and Brahms, and all were interpreted with equal mastery and enthusiasm. He also created books in order to teach others how to
play the piano poetically.

I find his musical achievements incredibly impressive, however, what makes Rafael Joseffy truly compelling was the quirks in his life and the man behind the glare of the footlights. As a performer who had toured all over Europe and amazed many on the greatest stages of our country, Joseffy settled down in Tarrytown, New York, where his personality came to light. Professor Joseffy lived near Bedford Road and Webber Avenue and was a kind neighbor and village favorite who bustled about in a surrey with a fringed top. He opened his doors to struggling artists at all hours, helping them find their love for music. It was his firm belief that the study of music should never be forced upon the young, and love for the craft and willingness to work were necessary for success. Joseffy was amusingly in the New York Times as the defendant in a Supreme Court suit for damages done to his rented home in Tarrytown. He had converted the parlor to a dog kennel and, in consequence, the carpet was ruined. He loved animals, and in instances like those, one can see his true, lighthearted personality. Also, he went from playing at the Metropolitan Opera to the beloved Tarrytown Music Hall where, in 1894, he performed as part of a charitable function for the Hospital Association. The people of Tarrytown were thrilled by his performance, and the Tarrytown Argus proclaimed his concert as a “treat.” Many times he was offered great sums to tour the country after settling down in Tarrytown, however, he preferred the joy of teaching in his beloved home to any fame or applause. Rafael Joseffy was a truly inspiring artist who was the epitome of success. He was an immigrant who, through practice and education, made a name for himself in a new country. He became a genius in his field and, instead of pursuing profit, he chose to spread his love for music through teaching. As a violin player, I understand the value of having a passionate and loving teacher, as well as the profound impact a teacher has on students. And although I do not understand what
it is like to play at Joseffy’s level of expertise, I can imagine how much of a
sacrifice it was to leave behind those prominent stages, but that choice was
influenced by his love of teaching. Hence, one could say that Rafael Joseffy was a
pianist, teacher, and composer, however, he embodied much more than that. He
was a dog-lover, a muse, a philanthropist, and most of all, he was a kind neighbor
and contributor to our town.

Sources

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