

## The Maverick type of accomplished Concert Pianist of the XX century. Considerations about the musical profile and their special high performance rank

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**Abstract:** *The extensive and so complex piano repertoire of the last two centuries, favored a diversification of the stage piano performance art, and in the same time, accordingly shaping in vary forms, the accomplished concert pianist general profile as we seek for, in the Modern and Contemporary Era. Outlining this profile, for a long time the high-class concert pianist was conditioned for validation by winning great competitions, later by strict specialization on certain stylistic segments, by recording and presenting in public some composer's integrals. However there always have been singular musicians, who in front of the general public and critics presented a particular type of musicality, which allowed the understanding of the musical text to be transmitted in a completely new, revealing way. Maverick type musicians, as the American press has been trying to identify a term for them, are not an invention of our century, they existed and imposed themselves on public musical attention as ones of the highest and most inspiring profiles in the performing arts. The non-conformity and particularity of their musicality built these artistic landmarks of pianism we are relating to. In this article we search to investigate their performance approach and to identify the common characteristics that these individuals, with outstanding musical personality, possess.*

**Key-words:** *unique musicianship; concert-pianist profile; unusual inspiring approach; mastery performance prerequisite qualities.*

### 1. Introduction

Worldwide dominated by music masterpieces of a narrow historical period and contrary to all predictions -mainly relied on saturation and natural extinction- the

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concert-symphonic classical musical genre representation on the stage, still attracts crowded mass of music lovers. For those on the other side, on stage, situation enhances in complexity, year by year. Top musicians have to face a stronger competitive world, have to achieve a higher technical level as young as possible and the pace of life regarding tour concerts around the world it's quite tough, for which someone needs to have at least iron nerves and a strong health endurance. An effective team for international promotions task it is also a mandatory acquisition to establish an individual world class artist status. Despite taking into account all these harsh aspects, most critics and elder music lovers are increasingly complaining about the musical uniformity of the performances they listen to, in most of the musical seasons that take place, always booked in good faith by great winners of strong international competitions or by musicians who reached a stratospheric notoriety of thousands of records sold, but who do not convince the audience on stage like the few interwar and after-war musicians they listened to, with rapture and veneration many decades ago. Over time, for describing these highly prized performers of those past times to whom fewer and fewer ones join today, informed public opinion seems to be found and often to use, a significant expression: "Don't miss the recital of this *maverick*<sup>2</sup>, it's a sensational musician, I left the hall, deeply moved".

## 2. Issue and Objectives

In the last fifty years the number of music schools and conservatories has increased, every year new graduates obtain licenses in concert performance. At least in certain eastern parts of this world, sold out concerts are held with soloists and large orchestras in new halls built for thousands of seats, and more youth people are intensely educated in the repertoire of classical music, obtaining a special instrumental technical mastery at younger and younger ages.

Specifically, the category of concert pianist is one of the most laborious to develop, involving the mastery of an extremely wide repertoire, facing difficulties of a high performances level to obtain, imposed by the complex interpretation derived from the particularity of the instrument. Looking at things from another perspective, pianists from early ages participate in many competitions, and the hierarchical and ruthless experience of thriving to win these events, lately develop into their performance approach, a sort of uniformity of musical expression.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the *Cambridge Dictionary* online edition *maverick* means "a person who thinks and acts in independent way often behaving differently from the expected or usual way; free spirit; autonomous;

Paradoxically, nowadays they are all educated to, afterwards are performing accordingly, *with the sole aim* of achieving fidelity to the text, to replicate the text, nothing but the text. Lately, many highly respected stage musicians have contested certain choice or withdrawn from important juries. The example of the one of most beloved by audience and critics virtuoso concert pianist *Martha Argerich* defending and proclaiming *that* [21 years old] *maverick* young competitor pianist *Ivo Pogorelich* "a genius" in the 1980 Warsaw "Fr. Chopin Piano Competition" Semifinal Stage it is a classic.<sup>3</sup> The internationally acclaimed Italian pianist *Roberto Prosseda* recognized, as a young pianist-competitor, at some point it had to renounce of competition circuit, because he found that "*too much of it can stifle one's personal style*". (Johnson 2009, 1) In most cases, any form of expressiveness that might transpire from the indirect assertion of a different personality type approach, can be 'expensively' charged, either by the competition jury, or after recital, by notorious critic guild writing for the big specialized music magazines.

The feeling there are fewer and fewer young pianists willing to take risks on their road to affirmation and to establish a distinctive artistic public position we remark also from repeated sincere states of the famous American critic Harold C. Schonberg in his articles and books, starting with the last-1960s: "*For the last few years, I have served as a juror in piano competitions around the world - the Van Cliburn in Fort Worth, the International in Sydney, and so on. It has been in one respect a stimulating experience, this chance to hear some of the best young talent. In another it has been a depressing experience. All this talent, all this preparation and dedication - and so little to say in one major segment of the repertory! [...] Most of the younger ones sounded alike and were hard to tell apart. Every age makes music its own way, and the 60's was a period in which the printed note all but strangled the artist. So intent was everybody on textual fidelity, on strict rhythms, on the ideal of "musicianship," that the concept of the artist was all but abandoned. [...] Until recent times an interpreter was supposed to bring his own mind, heart, sensitivity and knowledge to the music, refracting the composer's message through his own personality.*" (Schonberg 1968, 2)

There is also *an inherent tendency towards perfectionism* in competitive environments of artistic events that take place *live*, in real time, where the orientation towards very specific objectives dominates, such as in certain sports (as artistic gymnastics, artistic skating, for example) and of course, in the world of classical music concert performers.

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<sup>3</sup> Before The Warsaw Chopin Competition (October 1980), in the same year 21 years old Yugoslavian pianist *Ivo Pogorelich* won the first prize at the *Montreal International Music Competition* and the first prize at the *Alessandro Casagrande Competition* at Terni, Italy in 1978.

The studio recording tasks of classical music performances, for the last twenty years, *are an endless job of processing all wrong notes, bar by bar, and small sections, musical phrase by phrase to the extent of the ideal final record label product*, all of these have further increased the share of the audience expectations. If we are to evaluate a live concert only from this perspective, to play to an audience today on a concert stage, it is an act of great courage and anxiety combined.

*The difficulties that a concert musician encounters on stage are also related to the idea of success or defeat.* How will the audience will perceive, positively or negatively, this my rendition of a too well-known musical text by an equally too well-known composer who has been played in tens of thousands of situations by tens of thousands of musicians before me or at the same time as me? Am I original enough to express my rendition in a deep and a touching way or too far from the text? Am I too compliant and flat, but gaining safety instead, in my instrumental execution?

Remains to reflect on Austrian concert pianist *Alfred Brendel's* words, a very important acclaimed distinctive interpretative voice of the second half of the twentieth century, famous as a revival promotor of Schubert piano music and highly prized performer of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Liszt music, who felt his specific need for posterity to say and to be written, that as a pianist he " *find it necessary and refreshing to think about music*" [and he is] "*always conscious of the fact that feeling must remain the alpha and omega of a musician.*"<sup>4</sup>.

This conception, similar as we will see bellow in this article to many daring outstanding pianist of high musicianship profile, is continuously bringing to the fore, the role of the musician pianist performer as both:

- a giver of a solid instrumental rendition;
- a messenger able to convince the audience of the relevance and the power of the inner [free] spirit that music carries on.

### 3. Material and Methods

The creation, significance, performance, even definition of music varied over time depending on social context and geographical culture. Seen as an art of Greek muses (*mouziké*) the world of Antiquity was aware, albeit intuitively, of the valences of *musical rhetoric*. Connections between the art of linguistic rhetoric and music, theoretically began to stand out starting with the Baroque period of music.

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<sup>4</sup> Fragment of "*Form and Psychology in Beethoven's Piano Sonatas*," one pianist's lecture that was originally published in 1971 and recollected in a later book of his writings *Music, Sense and Nonsense, collected Essays and Lectures* (2016)

*Carl Ph. E. Bach's* work in *galant style* of the eighteenth century, music of a wide emotional range and extreme unpredictability, most importantly having a lot of innovation grouped even in one single work, and giving rise to an integrated tool that was characterized by means of reporting it to the literary rhetoric into the world of sounds, *Empfindsamer Style*.

Therefore, composers were generally influenced to some extent by the rhetorical doctrines governing the setting of musical texts, even after the development of independent instrumental music, rhetorical principles continued for some time.

*The rules of phrasing combining and developing vary parameters* that define music until nowadays, have taken root and developed. *W. A. Mozart, both as a composer and as a performer*, had always voracious tendencies to improvise his melodic lines in all kinds of combinations, playing the harpsichord with various tempo fluctuations. What remains to be fully understood is how these vital relationships often control the craft of composition. *Ludwig van Beethoven* even more, *in composition but also as performer* is famous for his spontaneous variations and improvisation sessions where exploited the instrument to the maximum, in search of new harmonic, timbre, dynamic and tempo variations. Consequently, everything that followed had such a basic conception.

Strangely enough, was not until the early twentieth century that we rediscovered the significance of rhetoric as the basis of the theoretical and aesthetic concepts of music as phenomenon, both in its form of expression: compositional structure and performance. Now we are able to understand that a discipline from another field of art, assimilated from every educated man from many centuries ago, had to be revealed and rebuilt in the decades that followed. Only now we can fully understand how much classical music of the last centuries, especially from the Western side of Europe, relied on rhetorical concepts. These inner rules of music as mechanisms of another type of language proves in another way the existence and the function of a larger boundaries and free spirit of the significances there are laying encapsulated in the hermetic graphic code of the music score, transpiring through recreation of the work through the performing act.

From a historical point of view, until the second half of the twentieth century, *a larger perception of the score reading* allowed a slightly different relationship between composer and performer. When the performer was in the category of professionals, both in vocal and instrumental music, he had a complex role. Perhaps, when it comes to the piano repertoire, in many cases due to the fact the composers themselves performed, in a first phase, their own works. In the Romanticism period and the first decades of the next century *Frederic Chopin, Franz Liszt, Charles Alkan, Johann Brahms, George Enescu, Claude Debussy, Bela*

*Bartok, S. Prokofiev, S. Rachmaninoff* and many others not prominent today, summed up the two roles, allowing small interference between composition and interpretation in an extremely natural way.

*With the fascination of Franz Liszt's total pianism, launched not only in piano composition but also in performance* the objectives of musical rendition are even closer to the highlight of personality and individual sensitivity of the performer 'caught' in his way to decode the music from the score for the audience, with the quality of highlighting it, exploiting valences, work that attracted from the audience emotional response to extremes (perfectly captured, impressed to tears, devastated, or manifesting other strong visceral reactions) as well as to promote themselves as a creative personality. We can't know for sure what Liszt's personal imprint was, *his ineffable touché*, because we didn't got the technical ability to record it. What followed towards the end of the 19th century through *Liszt's disciples* (let's name some of his pupils most famous acclaimed concert pianists, *Saul Liebling, Alexander Siloti, Arthur Friedheim, Emil von Sauer, Alfred Reisenauer, Alexander Gottschaig*) was clearly enough to get a clue and *to be perpetuated by recreating the image of the great Liszt beyond time*, at an exponential level, that image quite reaching a mythological value in the consciousness of the general audience.

*"Of course, there is the problem of separating fact from myth."* (Schonberg 1963,15). In the last decades of the nineteenth century, little known fact even among today's musicians, there are available recordings on piano rolls and other specific devices of the time of some prominent concert- pianists and composer-pianists, willing to trust in the captivating power of labeled and transmitted music through the ether.<sup>5</sup> Starting with *J. Brahms (born 1833)* and *C. Saint-Saens (born 1835)* also a valiant pianist of his time, most of the great epigones concert-masters (former students) of *Liszt, Chopin* and *Leschetizsky*, to which they joined *Debussy, Skriabin, Prokofiev, Stravinsky* and *Enescu* even, recorded on welte –mignon devices in rudimentary conditions (pre-electrical times) and better ones after, but quite faithful. Mastering, cleaning, digitizing them today allows us to evaluate more consciously what historians have called *the flourishing era \ golden generation of pianism*.

These recordings do not provide us with exhaustive information, but at least we can consider them reliable testimonies, a kind of living *"compendium of romantic performance."* (Schonberg 1963, 16).

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<sup>5</sup> Many of them are mastered and digitized and already available to be listened to and to be downloaded for free on you-tube platform.

If we look again at the term recently used by overseas critics –*maverick musician*- to identify that kind of musicians with a free spirit, autonomous, with the freedom and courage to *filter differentially the coded text in their own performance*, we find that, at least for long centuries, within certain limits, the development of the Western European musical idiom, it is not at all foreign to relate to the concept. *“Some of these pianists took liberties that spilled over into eccentricity or even anarchy. Others, however, proved more discreet and controlled. But above all, these pianists conveyed a sense of individuality largely frowned upon by the literalist interpretative zeitgeist that subsequently prevailed in the second half of the 20th century”* (Distler 2019, 1).

**Sergei Vassilievich Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)** was born to be the most beloved and played, by the pianists, composer of the twentieth century, and considered by the audience, the most charismatic performer of the XX century despite his aloof physical appearance and reserved way of being. His *maverick qualities* as a composer and concert pianist melted in the transcendental knowledge of music and of the piano as instrument and were very special. With *“a comprehensive technique”* and *“musical to his bone's marrow”*, he had the advantage over his fellows contemporary pianists, of being, for his time, (he died in 1943, the last 25 years were spent on stage as an active concert pianist) among the few surviving great composers capable of high interpretive and technical skills and for this reason was able *“to approach a work as none of his pianist contemporaries can approach one: from the inside, as an organic and felt creative process.”* (Cardus 1966, 90).

We cannot review all the great pianists of a maverick type profile from the most flourishing and prolific this instrument playing's period. But a few profiles to strengthen the argument are worth investigating.

**Moritz Rosenthal (1862-1946)** was eleven years older than Rachmaninoff but, from certain points of view, evaluating his piano education origins- thinking on the genealogical line of European piano pedagogy- was better positioned. If we read his biography as well, we will find that his education was the result of a quite rare combination; the student of *Carol Mikuli* (direct disciple of *Frederic Chopin*) and direct student and disciple of *Franz Liszt*. Rival of *Anton Rubinstein*, his career as a concert pianist was unquestionably, a very successful one, both in Classical and Romantic repertoire (from Bach to Brahms, especially Chopin and Liszt). A friend of all the great composers and performers of his time, he was convinced that a good intellectual education is absolutely necessary for him, to develop further, from an interpretive point of view. No wonder he studied philosophy at the University of Vienna under the guidance of *Brentano* and *Hanslick*. He was also passionate of all art form related, self-cultivating for a larger artistic and intellectual approach of music. That's why his playing was absolutely outstanding and colourful, his career

was indisputably one of great relevance, touring for decades all over Europe including the Eastern and South –Eastern parts (Russia and Romania) an extensive repertoire. He taught piano at Curtis Institute in Philadelphia USA and his best disciple were *Charles Rosen* and the outstanding Cuban pianist *Jorge Bolet*.

Excerpt of his repertoire is recorded at a mature age (after 65 years) and it is about three hours of music (made in the electrical period between 1928 and 1942), for *Ultrapphon, Columbia, EMI, Edison* and *RCA Victor*. Some of them are often high prized and considered as among the finest piano recordings from his era. Towards the end of his life he wrote several memoirs pages about the experience of meeting and working in his youth and during his maturity with Fr. Liszt, from whom we learned which path had to be taken, his *maverick qualities* to develop: [writing about working with Liszt, as his piano teacher] he was guided to always look for "*clarification of musical structures, emphases on hidden subtleties, explanation of the historical relation of each work to the evolution of art, [...] for he looked at everything with the eye of a creator!*" (Brown Barnett, 30)

***Josef Casimir Hofmann (1876-1957)*** was a Polish-American concert pianist, known also for his teaching, composing career and inventions, too (over 70 patents!). A young prodigy at five years old toured Northern Europe and was an *Anton Rubinstein's* and *Moritz Moszkowski's* pupil. His concert- pianist career was a famous one, especially by its longevity, almost fifty years of concerts in the best halls around the world. Composing one hundred music works under pseudonym and teaching (famous pupils *Shura Cherkassky* and *Nadia Reisenberg*) and managing The Curtis Institute of Philadelphia for many years, he was a real outstanding figure of the piano exclusivist guild of his time. His imaginative and musical intelligence power while performing a piece were his top *maverick* assets often being consider equal to *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, and prized later by *Rudolf Serkin* and *Glenn Gould*. His unique and fresh performances full of orchestral sonority and embellished with the most rapid and elegant staccato and cantabile technique, qualified him for the ideal live sensational recitals in front of crowded audiences, numbering more than 150 requested appearances at Carnegie Hall, for example. His recordings are only a late testimony of his authentic and original art in performance because were made in the late period of his life when his career was almost fading.

***Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860-1941)*** was even older than Rosenthal and Rachmaninoff, an accomplished Polish concert –pianist, composer and man of State (Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Poland, at the end of the First World War). He graduated the Conservatory in Warsaw (1878) and studied further with *Th. Leschetizky* in Vienna. He extensively toured USA (around 30 times!) gaining fame for his *maverick qualities*: charismatic and brilliant playing doubled by a high



level of virtuosity. But *the most striking maverick one* was his exclusive balanced style, between tradition and freedom undertakings. No recital of the same repertoire in a tour he gave, matched the previous one. For this characteristics, the audience, avid to hear his art in all its nuances of interpretation, followed him everywhere. Some recordings are made, especially from live concert rendition. He gained a lot of publicity and a huge success, a lot of his incomes he donated to charity causes.

**Alfred Denis Cortôt (1877-1962)** was an emblemizing French concert- pianist, chamber music player, conductor, piano teacher, disciple of the Conservatory of Paris by the pianist *Louis Diémer*. His *maverick* approach to music was conducted by his special sensitive and highly intellectual profile: as Rosenthal, believing in mental and emotional training, gaining knowledge in many Art forms fields, especially in the power of coordination of the artistic imaginary over (secondary) technical requirements. His objective: music has to overcome all asperities provoked by mechanical issues of handling the instrument, must be only transmission of a idea and pure emotion. His performances were very prized but for a fear of over practicing issue, almost inconstant. Many his contemporaries are recording unequal in mastery completion live recitals, but all filled with significant musical expression, on the audience taste. He formed a renowned trio with *Jacques Thibaud* and *Pablo Casals*. Famous for Romantic repertoire renditions (*Chopin, Schumann, Saint- Saens*) he was also a very effective teacher at Paris Conservatory and *École Normale de Musique de Paris* (that he founded in 1919), forming *Yvonne Lefébure, Dinu Lipatti* and *Vlado Perlemuter*. His recordings from different periods of his career are moments of joy and inspiration to nowadays musicians, too.

**Dinu (Constantin) Lipatti (1917-1950)** is an outstanding Romanian pianist and composer, whose career was tragically disrupted of leukemia illness at a young age. His short artistic life became soon a legend, magically started in childhood under auspicious blessing of his compatriot, the great composer and violinist George Enescu (his godfather). After a previous music training at the Conservatory in Bukarest, under the guidance of he Romanian pedagogue *Florica (Flora) Musicescu* he reach Paris, to work with the French concert- pianist and teacher *Alfred Cortôt*. His interpretive art highlights *a truly maverick profile*, and was marked in his formative period by Cortot's intellectualist and sensitive conception, but ennobled and elevated to magnificence by his own perfectionism and natural elegance of sonority doubled by an exquisite sense for musical phrasing. He played Romantic (Chopin, Schumann, Grieg), Classical (Mozart), Pre classical (Scarlatti and Bach) and Contemporary repertoire (Ravel, Enescu and his music) with a high distinction, very well proved in his available recordings (for *Columbia*), in studio or from concerts takings (his last appearance at Besançon it's an icon recital,

testimonial of his mature performing style). His confidants and artistic friends were Romanian concert –pianist *Clara Haskil* and French professor *Nadia Boulanger*. His *artistic maverick aim* is well synthetized in his own words, in this short paragraph: *“for me, the divergent indications left to us by some excellent treatises, but now very limited, make me take, resolutely, the path of simplification and synthesis. I keep inflexible the four or five basic principles you all know (at least I guess so), and for the rest I rely on intuition, this second and equally precious intelligence, as well as the deep penetration of the work, sooner or later, it ends up confessing the secret of its soul.”*<sup>6</sup> He taught piano performance at the Geneva Conservatory and is an appreciated Romanian composer of the interwar period in a neoclassical style. *“A master of the keyboard, would have developed into one of the supreme artists of this era. He was a pianist of the Rachmaninoff order, blessed with an enormous technique and a strong rhythmic sense.”* (Schonberg 1953, 339).

**Glenn Herbert Gould (1932-1982)** was the best known concert- pianist of the XX century of J. S. Bach’s repertoire. Canadian citizen, he was also a writer, conductor, TV broadcaster and a composer. He has shown special musical qualities since his early childhood, when he also suffered an accident that affected his vertebral column, which is why he had to always correct his position and technique by using a chair backrest, which he will carried with him in all his concerts. His technique is unique, developed on the maintenance of quick tempo with great clarity of sound and wit differentiation on musical lines, specific to the counterpoint art. For this reason he will strive into the repertoire of J. S. Bach and of the Viennese classics. *J. Hoffman* and *Arthur Schnabel* are his first piano mentors. The autonomy of his thinking (a quite maverick *quality*) and the desire to excel in everything determine him, even in the restrictive musical field of the Pre classics, to adopt ways of interpretation, considered in their time, quite eccentric. An astonishing imagination combined with brilliant adapted sound it was its quality mark. His erudition was equally developed, sustaining every phrasing and shape of sound he produces at piano in his renditions. One of his best known statements was: *“the purpose of art is not the release of a momentary ejection of adrenaline but is, rather, the gradual, lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity.”* (Kingwell 2009, 124)

**Radu Lupu (n. 1945)** a Romanian concert- pianist, is recognized as one of the outstanding pianists of our times. He studied in Bukarest with *Florica (Flora Musicescu)*, as same as *Dinu Lipatti* and during his Moscow Conservatories training, with *Heinrich Neuhaus* (Russian teacher of *S. Richter* and *E. Gilels*). He made his international high level appearances winning three major competitions (*Van*

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<sup>6</sup> My translation from Romanian language, Lipatti’s words accordingly to *Dinu Lipatti* Restoration Archive available on the internet

*Cliburn Competition 1966, G. Enescu Competition 1967 and Leeds Competition (1969).* Despite being a *Decca recording artist* (around twenty discographic projects) he is not the recording type profile, especially in his late career. His repertoire highly acclaimed spans from Mozart, Beethoven to the major Romantic Composers (Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, Grieg, Brahms) from impressionist style of Debussy to Bartók, Enescu and Janacek. His mesmerizing performing style seduce all kind of audiences all over the world, in many tour concerts all of his artistic life. A good description of *his maverick performing profile* we find in the next excerpt of one of many chronicle articles about his art: “*he is employing some sort of alchemy to work a spell over everyone. That, indeed, is just about what he did, for he has that mysterious something that goes beyond technique, erudition and general musicality to reach into the sensibilities of listeners.*” (Rockwell 1974, 1). In June 2019, Radu Lupu announced the retirement from the concert stage seasons.

#### 4. Conclusions

If we carefully analyze all these *maverick* musical profiles, we can easily draw some coordinates. Objective facts indicate that in some cases it is possible to aspire to an achievement position in music performance, by developing the inner ability to be completely special, an authentic artistic figure, a kind of paradox for a field where the rigor and respect for tradition is it at s rank of law. We also notice this cannot be achieved at random, nor by relying on sterile eccentricities.

In instrumental performing act, the line between precious innovation and tasteless exaggerations is very thin, and difficult to balance. In order to better understand this, one need to fulfill a series of requirements but any of these might not have a top application if there is no special musical endowment.

A solid instrumental rendition, to be well trained into the rhetorical mechanisms of the musical language, a good level of virtuosity, a dose of erudition and understanding Art in all its complexity, are common pre requirements only. Beyond these, a truly *maverick concert pianist* has to rely on his intuition, sensitivity, vivid imagination, musicality, the capacity of connecting vary stimuli to gain the large picture of the significant, to emphases subtleties reveled by a sound, a phrase, to impose oneself to and to have the power to convince and mesmerize the audience, in an authentic way, to believe in extensive study of a musical score, to approach it with care, patience, and to be able to reach for its inner and organic process of the creation.

To be able to convey to a sense of individuality, respecting the rigor, is a distant ideal for many and a fascinating possibility to reach, only for some chosen ones.

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