

### THE COMPLETE JOSEF HOFMANN, Vol. 3

*"Music is the spirit and form of chastity" – Josef Hofmann, Metropolitan Magazine, 1902*

This collection of discs made by Josef Hofmann for the American Columbia label between 1912 and 1918 is of utmost significance, for Hofmann was one of history's supremely accomplished and important pianists. His performances here are concentrated with dynamic inflections, tonal shadings, asynchronisms, agogics and other rhythmic, dynamic and tonal effects, all in the service of a superior musical mind. Hofmann's command of the instrument, his technique and tone, are astounding, but it is above all his interpretations which remain the most striking feature of his playing. The iron logic of his formal conceptions, especially in Chopin and Liszt, is overwhelming.

Beyond form, Hofmann's playing was electrically charged and powerfully expressive, which he paradoxically achieved with a feeling of classic restraint – his almost unimaginable trick. His art appears to have everything – elegance, precision, polish, taste, intelligence and the gift of melody, all coupled to a divine inspiration. Rachmaninoff and Stravinsky said he was the greatest pianist, and recently Lutoslawski declared that Hofmann was the greatest musician he had ever heard. Certainly, Hofmann's Columbias, arguably his best group of recordings, contain much information of importance to today's musical world.

Although these recordings could function as the Rosetta Stone of the "lost art" of Romantic piano playing, only a few intelligent discussions of them have appeared, mostly by Harold C. Schonberg, in his books and articles, and in a 1983 University of Iowa Doctoral thesis by Stephen Husarik, entitled *Josef Hofmann, the Composer and Pianist, with an Analysis of Available Reproductions of His Performances*. Here I propose to provide a road map to some of Hofmann's more obvious Romantic devices, which almost any listener can easily identify.

A few words about actually listening to these crudely recorded discs: despite the care taken to obtain the best possible sources, and to play them back at the right speeds and with the right needles before transferring them to the digital medium, these and other early, acoustic discs need a certain discipline in hearing before they readily yield their contents. The first rule is to be completely familiar with the selection before listening to an acoustic performance; you may already know these Chopin waltzes well and can easily "tune-out" the surface noise and disregard the low fidelity. But if you've never before heard Hofmann's "Sanctuary" or Fanny Dillon's "Birds at Dawn," do not be quick to judge the performances of the pieces until you have heard the selections many times. Second, it is recommended that you playback at a slightly louder than usual level, and pay attention to the piano playing, not the surface noise.

These compact discs represent the culmination of twenty years' effort on the part of the producers and many other friends. That they have finally been produced commercially is due to the good offices of Video Artists International, as well as the co-operative efforts over the years of Terry McNeill, Thomas Frost, Harold C. Schonberg, Valery Bukrinski, Ray Edwards, Don Hodgman, R. Peter Munves and Donald Garvelmann. The Historical Sound Recordings at Yale University Library, the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives at the New York Public Library, the library of the Curtis Institute of Music and the International Piano Archives at the University of Maryland each lent records from their collections; we thank each individual and institution.

Part of the reason for this long gestation is the time it has taken to locate as many superior copies of the records as possible, which are absolutely crucial to the optimum restoration of the sound on these recordings. At the time Columbia originally issued the Hofmann discs, the company used a notoriously inferior grade of shellac, so noisy that much of the musical tone was obscured by surface noise; these are the common tri-color Columbia banner label discs. Later on, Columbia re-issued some of the acoustic Hofmann discs on much superior, quieter pressings; mint copies of some of these are great rarities. In addition, we were fortunate to have access to several vinyl pressings made from the remaining extant pressing parts in the Columbia vaults. In the case of a very few selections, there was no choice: Either the item was originally unissued and existed only in unique shellac test pressings from Hofmann's own library (Chopin's first Impromptu) or there never was any superior-pressing issue (Schumann "Warum?" et al.).

There were seventeen Hofmann Columbia recording sessions between April 4, 1912, and April 7, 1918. A contract between Josef Hofmann and the firm known as the American Graphophone Company (whose major label was Columbia,

although the contract never mentions the name) is dated May 1, 1912. Judged by the standards of present-day practices in the industry, the contract is pitifully incomplete, and decidedly unfair to the artist. Under its terms, Hofmann agreed to record four selections, in return for which he was to receive \$500; Hofmann agreed that he would "not make talking machine records for any other person, persons or corporations" for five years: American Graphophone agreed that "If the four records mentioned should prove commercially satisfactory and it should be mutually desirable," Hofmann could record another four titles during the middle part of the five year term for another \$500, and finally another four titles at the end of the period for a third \$500. There is no mention of royalties.

Columbia began to issue and promote the records in August 1912, falsely advertising in a brochure filled with typical industry hype that these were Hofmann's "first records ever made" and that he was the "Foremost Pianist of all the World.... It remained for the Columbia Phonograph Company to convince Josef Hofmann that he could positively be given adequate artistic representation through the medium of sound records, and though he persistently refused for years to listen to proposals of this nature from any source, he was at length been won over by the merits of the Columbia process."

The Hofmann records sold for \$1.50 each retail, and must have sold very well, for American Graphophone/Columbia negotiated a new, more comprehensive contract with Hofmann just before the 1912 contract expired. A draft version of this new contract is dated July 1916. Under it, the term is two years with three one-year renewal options; Hofmann agreed to record sound recordings exclusively for Columbia and to inscribe ten selections each year; there were still no royalties, but Hofmann was paid eight times more than in 1912, specifically \$1,000 per selection. Interestingly, Columbia also agreed that, in exchange for the "use and privilege" of Hofmann's name in advertising and literature, it would "place its recording rooms at the disposal of the Artist and allow him facilities for free experiments."

Hofmann, who was acclaimed as a scientific as well as musical genius, had made innumerable experiments in the field of sound recordings by the time he came to make his Columbia records. He had the distinction to be the first acclaimed artist to ever record when he sat on Thomas Edison's lap and played into a prototype cylinder machine, in early March 1888. Later the two corresponded and the inventor sent the boy pianist a cylinder phonograph of his own, with which Hofmann experimented incessantly. Also, before Columbia, the pianist recorded two series of piano rolls in Germany for Hupfeld and Welte, and at least five discs for Gramophone and Typewriter in 1903.

We do not know exactly what recording experiments Hofmann may have undertaken in Columbia's recording rooms. It is likely that the pianist was very directly involved with the recording process itself at his sessions. We can surmise that he worked closely with the Columbia personnel to achieve the forward sound captured on some of these discs, sound quality really quite exemplary for its day, and especially for Columbia. (Compare the Columbia discs made at the same time of pianists Xavier Scharwenka, Arthur Friedheim, Leopold Godowsky, Percy Grainger, et al., on which the piano sounds like a ukulele.)

Hofmann was very serious about making the Columbias, and considered the sessions hard work. He recorded more than enough approved selections to fulfill his obligation of ten titles in 1916, but for unknown reasons didn't record for Columbia at all the next year. In 1918, after recording the contractually obligatory ten titles, he stopped recording for the firm entirely. The reasons why Hofmann left Columbia are unclear – one thing we can deduce is that even with his active participation in improving the recording process, the Columbia records could not have sounded very good to him, given the poor Columbia shellac and the limited capabilities of contemporary wind-up record players. Then too, Columbia never issued any of the recordings he had made of his own compositions, which must have rankled.

As for the financial side of things, Aeolian, one of the leading promoters of "reproducing" piano rolls, succeeded at that time in inducing Hofmann to abandon Columbia with a deal ultimately worth the then staggering sum of \$100,000; as soon as the Columbia sessions were completed, he was to begin recording a total of one hundred piano rolls for its Duo-Art label over the next fifteen years, and was to receive \$1000 a selection – the same sum offered by Columbia. The difference was that while Columbia guaranteed ten recordings and \$10,000 a year for two to five years, Aeolian guaranteed thirty-five recordings and \$35,000 a year for three years.

By March 26, 1918, when Hofmann proudly wrote to his wife Marie Eustis about the contract with Duo-Art, two more titles were needed to complete the second year's obligation for Columbia. He mentioned the end of the Columbia arrangement: "The last recordings, however, cannot take place now (again my luck). The recording piano is out of order, and will not be ready before April 6th. Isn't it unbelievable?" The last Columbia session was on April 7th. A bit later he wrote her about recording Duo-Art rolls: "As these records [i.e., Duo-Art rolls] can be corrected at will, this recording is not one tenth as strenuous as for Columbia." The fascinating question remains: could Hofmann really have preferred Duo-Art reproducing rolls, which today seem so clearly inferior, to the Columbia acoustic records?

There were to be no more Hofmann recordings for Columbia for thirty-six years. In 1931 the Columbia firm was bought by another conglomerate, and the new Columbia executives wrote to Hofmann regularly, trying to entice him to make more Columbia recordings. Despite one test-session when he tried out the Columbia facility with a single inconsequential recording, Hofmann declined Columbia's blandishments until 1954, when he permitted the company to issue a portion of his 1937 Golden Jubilee Concert on a long-playing disc.

Our compilation begins with Chopin Waltzes from the first note of the A flat Waltz, we are in another world of piano playing perhaps bewildering and over-ripe with Romanticism for some. Immediately the individual Hofmann touch and his actual piano tone are clearly apparent. After the introduction, Hofmann segues into the waltz itself with a subtle, perfectly gauged *ritardando*. He extends an upwards-rising scale passage from two to three octaves, and ends the piece quietly, not *fortissimo* as written. There are continuous rhythmic effects, including *rubato*, of the most patrician order.

Always tied to his scheme of dynamics, these rhythmic dislocations (which seem like distortions to the modern listener) are probably the most immediately recognizable feature of Hofmann's playing, and are unquestionably the basis of his melodic and expressive style. Often his rhythms seem somehow based on the melodic contour of a phrase, pointing up and giving the melody direction. (This strange-to-our-sensibilities Romantic convention was once explained in very few words, by Adolph Christiani in his important 1885 book, *The Principles of Expression in Pianoforte Playing*: "The theory of musical dynamics has to do with melody alone.")

By the first few inflections of the next Waltz, in C-sharp minor, the pianist has established a different, melancholy mood. Hofmann's teacher Anton Rubinstein, in his lectures, lessons and books, often expressed a prime tenet of Romantic pianism – first pre-determine a piece's innate mood through study and meditation, then in performance establish the character at once. Recalling descriptions of Rubinstein's performances, the melody notes here are "sung" in the 19th-century Romantic vocal style. At certain points, Hofmann gives out a most chaste and chillingly beautiful *jeu perle*.

The E minor Waltz contains some astonishing, "spinning wheel" left-hand accompaniment figures, perfect for their evenness despite the imperfections of the human hand. Here we have an apt point of comparison with Rachmaninoff, who also recorded this Waltz. Is there any other pianist whose recordings are more appropriately compared with Hofmann's? Rachmaninoff, at least for the Victor Talking Machine on February 8, 1930, ended his E minor Waltz quietly; Hofmann plays it as in the score.

After the restrained Polonaise comes the A-flat Impromptu, which must surely be the premiere performance on disc. Hofmann approved this take, but Columbia never issued it. Both Impromptus are especially notable for the execution of the trills. At the end of the *Fantasia-Impromptu* we get another example of the "spinning wheel" left hand; here Hofmann uses the Klindworth edition. He ends both Impromptus with half-pedal effects – eerily, we can actually hear the subtle overtones in the early recording.

The *Berceuse* may strike some as too fast, for we are accustomed to today's slower performances. Hofmann makes certain breaks, most probably because of his small hands, and indulges in some extraordinary tempo fluctuations, with the pulse always remaining steady as he retards and accelerates — an example of pure *rubato*. We can note that on the Columbia disc the pianist does not accent every A-flat in the "tolling bell" part at the end, as he does in the 1937 Golden Jubilee version.

"My joys" contains much miraculous scale playing. In "Liebestraum," Hofmann uses Liszt's own ending, unlike the recordings by the composer's pupils. Here the brilliance and clarity of the passagework is almost inhuman. Hofmann's performance is on the fast side, and we can say, in general, that most performers of Hofmann's day played faster than performers do today! (Harold C. Schonberg seems to be the only musicologist who has written extensively about this phenomenon).

In "Waldesrauschen," we become aware of how little pedal Hofmann uses to achieve his effects. This kind of "finger-playing" allows him to texture the accompaniment line without touching the melodic. The rubato during the transition passage out of the loud section near the end is magical, the start and stop of which can't be pinpointed, so smooth and flexible is it, all part of a flow with each element absolutely clear. Yet this rendition seems strict and classical, compared to those of the Liszt pupils!

The abbreviated Liszt "Tarantella" is played with terrifying power, a titanic performance. How freely and naturally Hofmann treats the melody of the middle section Canzone Napoletana where we can hear another delicious rubato, while the rubato in the repeated section is different, but so subtly different! Then there is the pearly tone, and a supreme passage in sixths. The repeated notes again couldn't be more easily played or more evenly, and are played in a way no one alive could match, despite the fact that every conservatory student can play the notes.

The "Marche Militaire" is rendered for the most part with absolutely strict rhythm, and has an enlarged dynamic range which allows the piano tone to bloom. The "Erkönig," one of the pivotal works Hofmann studied directly with Anton Rubinstein, is played with freedom and inexhaustible reserves of dramatic power. The first grooves of the unique matrix of the unissued Gluck-Brahms "Gavotte" contain a noisy flaw and heavy surface noise, but still we can hear the shape of each melody note, uniquely Hofmannesque, so full and vibrant but yet so chaste; then there is rhythmic flexibility and ultra-discreet pedalling in the middle section. One cannot tell exactly where the pedal falls, but through this pedalling we can hear three distinct registers at once, the unbroken singing line surrounded on either side by staccato, the famous three-hand effect which Liszt copied from Thalberg.

The "Moonlight" Sonata first movement was approved by Hofmann but not issued; the length of his conception made the side too long, and the disc's label would have overlapped with the last grooves. He rejected another, faster take, which would have accommodated a label. This performance sounds strange to our ears, for we are unaccustomed to hearing Beethoven played with such rhythmic freedom, which Hofmann uses in making structural points. Here the rhythmic scheme is a work of genius, something we've not even imagined before in this over-exposed piece. Often Hofmann aligns these rhythmic dislocations in tandem with harmonic shifts, just as Furtwängler did in his performances of Beethoven. Today, ritards, like the perfect one Hofmann introduces at the end, are absolutely forbidden. Do we know more today about "correct" Beethoven performances than Hofmann did? From the historical and musical perspectives, this is probably the major item in this collection.

In Schumann's naive "Warum?" Hofmann plays the fioriture with *jeu perle*, which we can hear through the very heavy surface noise, and again there is amazing rubato. Grieg's "Papillion" and Mendelssohn's "Spinning Song," sharing one 78 r.p.m. side, enjoy good sound. Hofmann's guileless and sincere interpretations rescue these hackneyed works, as well as the other "Songs Without Words". The abbreviated "Rondo Capriccioso" is missing the entire introduction, due to the limitations of a side length, and is played matter-of-factly. It is one of several pieces Hofmann recorded for Columbia that are among a group of works he was just then editing for publication for the Art Publication Society of St. Louis. His editions do not contain any textual alterations, but do contain dynamic changes. And no, his playing here does not perfectly match his editions.

It is interesting to compare Hofmann's very slightly cut Columbia performance of the Moszkowski "Spanish Caprice" with his complete performance twenty-one years later at the Golden Jubilee concert, some forty seconds longer than the Columbia. As Dr. Husarik wrote, "Even though the overall clock-time of the later performance is greater, there is sufficient contrast between sections of slow and fast tempo, so that the slower (1937) performance seems much faster than its quick-paced counterpart from 1916." Like the Impromptus, the Paderewski "Minuet" has notable trills, and a startlingly imaginative harmonic scheme. It provides us with an opportunity to compare Hofmann with recordings by

Rachmaninoff, Ignaz Friedman and the composer himself. The famous leaps in Rubinstein's wacky "Valse Caprice" do not call attention to themselves here because they are played with superhuman perfection. In places it seems that the left hand is "fanning" the tone color out to the hearer through Rubinstein's figurations, and the end is one of the few places on these records where Hofmann plays a true fortissimo.

The same composer's Oriental march "Dachtarawan" begins with one of Hofmann's exquisitely timed slow crescendos; this work shares the same 78 r.p.m. side with Hofmann's own "Sanctuary," perhaps composed to show off a particular accomplishment in Hofmann's pianistic arsenal: brilliant accompaniment figurations which produce wave after wave of notes, feeling like a shower from a fountain of jewels. The work itself begins with a tolling bell, and seems to be a presentiment of the bird refuge in Florida founded by his friends, the Bok family, named The Sanctuary, the main feature of which is a bell tower with a carillon.

Rachmaninoff's most famous prelude is played straightforwardly, without sentiment, even drily. Here again the playing gets very loud for acoustic piano records. In the G minor prelude, Hofmann plays much more straightforwardly than Rachmaninoff does on his recordings, but decidedly not drily. Note the unusual pedalling just before the middle, three-hand section on the dominant. Here Hofmann plays the G minor slower than on his two later recordings. Rachmaninoff actually marked the tempo "Alla Marcia", but most take it too fast.

The two American works by Dillon and Parker were included in Hofmann's 1919 series of all-American recital programs; Miss Dillon's trifle is the better of the two, showing genuine sentiment and using in one spot what must have seemed at the time like a daring, jazzy modulation. Constantin von Sternberg was a Liszt pupil and a close friend of Hofmann; here he composed a work that seems tailor-made for Hofmann's ability to play complicated figurations and scale passages rapidly and perfectly, with thousands of notes billowing around a pedestrian melody.

The recital ends with the 1903 discs recorded in Berlin for the Gramophone and Typewriter Company, five selections he was to repeat for Columbia. Some of these are among the rarest records in the world, but they are of lesser interest than the Columbias. The playing is generally straightforward and the sound poorer than on the Columbias, although in Mendelssohn's "Hunting Song" we can hear some lovely tonal effects.

I have pointed out here many of Hofmann's effects. Unquestionably he used considerably more pianistic, rhythmic, dynamic and melodic devices than modern pianists. Indeed, it would be impossible to name any modern pianist who does a fraction of what Hofmann does at the keyboard. Do not suppose, however, that Hofmann, or any of the Romantic performers, strove only for effects. They sincerely believed that such effects were entirely musical and served a greater musical conception.

Often I think of one particular disc, a record of the Tosti song "Ancora," sung by the great baritone Mattia Battistini (1856-1928). The final note of the performance, on the word "morir", contains more dynamic and expressive gradations than are heard in many a complete recital today. It makes a ravishing effect –musical, emotional, and spiritual – but of course, no performer today could indulge himself that way; the cries of "empty, self-aggrandizing virtuosity" would be inevitable. It's not explicit in the score, but it's there implicitly. To what musical impoverishment our modern ideas of good musicianship have brought us!

It is Hofmann's unique, almost indescribably perfect playing that lends these recordings exalted stature. On his Columbia records we can hear musical and pianistic effects which seem impossible, used to build conceptions that are coherent and complete. For him the piano was a form of speech, and his playing often speaks with an ultra-pianistic but peculiarly human voice: the whole universe epitomized by the piano. He apparently knew all the secrets of piano playing and perhaps of music itself. These recordings can help transport us back seventy-five years, to a time when piano playing was a mighty spiritual force in the world.

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## A Note Concerning Discographical Matters:

In the summer of 1967, Volume One, Number Two, of the International Piano Library Bulletin appeared and contained Part One of "A Josef Hofmann Discography," by Dr. A.F.R. Lawrence and this writer. Since that time some new information about the Columbias has become available, and we now know that the first session was in April 1912, and not in 1911, and that the last one was in April 1918, and not 1919; also, information about issued takes has been enlarged and corrected. The dates and take numbers enumerated here are the correct ones.

After examining dozens of pressings of each Hofmann Columbia issue, we have found that different pressings have yielded alternate "takes" for eight separate matrices. Generally, there exist two takes of each of these (only the Chopin C-sharp minor Valse has three), recorded at the same sessions, and essentially very much alike. Here we have issued only the one preferred take for those eight matrices. In the case of the four separate Josef Hofmann Columbia titles, there are two distinct recordings made on two separate dates. Here we have included the alternate, less well recorded versions of those four titles in an appendix, as well as the distantly recorded Chopin E-flat Nocturne; this had originally been rejected, but somehow was issued on a few inferior English Columbia pressings. Seven titles unissued by Columbia are presented here; two of these were included in a 1983 LP set of Hofmann's Columbias, OPAL 819/820.