

## TOLSTOY AT THE PIANO

By THEODORE ELLERY MERRITT

ROMAIN ROLLAND once declared that Beethoven would have preferred the *hatred* of the man who wrote "the symphony of *War and Peace*" to the admiration of lesser men. This statement might, with equal truth, be made in reverse: Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy would have accepted with greater grace the criticism of a Beethoven than he did, actually, the attempted flattery of the mediocre. On more than one occasion he fled, terrified, from the spontaneous adulation of the hysterical masses. Yet, on the other hand, he related gleefully his Moscow encounter with a drunken fellow who, recognizing him, said: "Count Tolstoy, I am your adorer and imitator!" One knows what would have been the reaction of the great Russian to the worshipful public gaze on which contemporary mediocrity feeds. Suppose, instead of being the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy had become a Paderewski. What would have been his conduct before the klieg lights of to-day? I believe he would often have fled from them in terror!

A Paderewski? Or perhaps even a Sibelius? Could Count Tolstoy ever have become either? Who knows. Anyone who has read much from the millions of words written by and about this literary Colossus knows something of his revolutionary, iconoclastic, though often merely perverse, views on all art, including music. Fewer, perhaps, have wondered how much of a musician he was.

Crude as were some of the aspects of the life of Russia's provincial gentry, during the decades after 1828, when Tolstoy was born, it could boast a considerable knowledge and enjoyment of music, of the very best in music. In this respect, the Tolstoy household was typical. Indeed, as one reads of such aristocratic homes in the country as those of the Tolstoys and their Tula neighbors, he is a bit surprised to find music, particularly the piano, holding so much attention in a society in which at least the physical amenities were even less refined than those, let us say, of the plantation life of our own antebellum South. There was folk music, of course, to be found among the serfs and peasants, and there existed also much enjoyment by both the rural and the urban aristocracies of the music of the gypsies. But one is surprised, somehow, to find in typical homes like *Yasnaya Polyana* ("Clear Glade"), the ancestral home of Tolstoy's maternal kin, a fine imported grand piano, and members of the household playing duets, from Haydn or

Mozart, or one of them singing songs set to the poetry of Pushkin and Gogol, while another accompanied. Yes, here one heard something more than muzhik tunes on the *balalayka*.

In the Tolstoy home there was more than a merely typical interest in music. Though Leo Nikolayevich's mother died when he was an infant, much of the musical atmosphere of the home derived from her. In *Childhood*, one of his particular autobiographical works, the novelist gives a charming picture of "Mama" playing "Field's *Concerto*" or "Beethoven's *Sonata Pathetique*." This, however, is not an actual recollection of his own mother, who, nevertheless, is known to have played the piano well. That second mother, too, his "Aunt" Tatyana Ergolski, had played excellently in her youth and, years later, played duets with him, surprising him by the accuracy and beauty of her performance. The Tolstoy children of Leo's generation all grew up with the sound of the classics coming to them from one of the rooms at Yasnaya Polyana. Leo's younger sister, Marya ("Mashenka") Nikolayevna, also played, and the two were frequently to be seen together at the piano, long after they had ceased to be children. Aylmer Maude, perhaps Tolstoy's best biographer, says that the latter was very fond of playing duets with this sister. Sometimes, finding it difficult to keep up with her in unfamiliar compositions, Leo Nikolayevich would make amusing remarks until her laughter enabled him to catch up. Or he might suddenly stop and, as if in great seriousness, remove one of his boots, with the declaration, "Now, it will go all right!"

The Russian poet, Fet, in his *Recollections*, relates how Tolstoy, admiring the piano playing of a Mlle. Oberlander, performed duets with her, including "almost the whole of Beethoven." On that occasion, Leo Nikolayevich declared to Fet: "When we were young, such pianists travelled across Europe giving concerts. She reads any piece of music as you read poetry, finding just the suitable expression for each note." One cannot but feel that this lame bit of criticism came from the great Tolstoy's mind and lips in words that said a great deal more than the translation indicates.

When Tolstoy became the head of his own large family, the *zala* at Yasnaya Polyana was the center of a rich musical life for the entire group. A teacher might perhaps come over from Tula to give lessons to some of the children. All were more or less musical, and some had considerable talent. One of the sons, Sergey, in a sketch "Music in Tolstoy's Life," contained in *Family Views of Tolstoy* (Boston and New York),

Houghton Mifflin Co., 1926, pp. 129ff.), says : "In the 'seventies, my father was so carried away by music that he played for three or four hours a day. The impression produced by his playing is one of the most vivid of my childish recollections. When we children went to bed he used to sit down at the pianoforte and play till midnight and after, sometimes taking part in four-hand pieces with my mother. . . . I remember my first sweet impressions of music heard by me from afar—from the upper storey where my father was playing—impressions mingling with childish half-unconscious dreams, merging gradually into sleep. . . . Remembering now my father's playing, I should say it was rhythmical and expressive, but sometimes interpreted in a way of his own rather than as the composer intended; and insufficient technical mastery hindered him from fully expressing what he himself intended."

Leo Nikolayevich, long after his older sons and daughters had passed beyond the early stages of their own instruction, continued to enjoy his musical favorites, not vicariously but actually, at the piano, alone or with another performer. During at least the early years of their long life together, the Count and Countess Sofya Andreyevna often played duets together, sometimes enjoying themselves until late into the night.

Their children came into a considerable musical heritage from both parents. For the family of Sofya Andreyevna, *nee* Behrs, was also blessed with a love of music. Her brother, Alexander, was very musical. Her younger sister, Tatyana Andreyevna, was perhaps the most gifted of both groups. Tolstoy called her his "Mme Viardot." The almost ideal relationship between Tatyana and her brother-in-law was enhanced still more by a mutual passion for music. Stepan Andreyevich Behrs, another brother, wrote: (Tolstoy) "often sat down to the piano before beginning to work (at his writing). . . . He always accompanied my youngest sister (Tanya) and enjoyed her singing very much. I noticed that the sensation music evoked in him expressed itself by a slight pallor and a scarcely perceptible grimace, suggestive of something like terror. Hardly a day passed in summer without my sister singing. . . . Occasionally we all sang together, and he always played the accompaniments."

The Countess Tolstoy, finding herself, underservedly, between the two millstones of, first, the conflict of her own views with the more revolutionary ones of her husband, and, second, the great and mutual love between them, often wrote in her diary poignant references to the music performed and heard in the *zala*

of their home in the country. And these entries reveal to the unbiased reader a musical feeling in Sofya Andreyevna quite as profound as that of which an admiring world made so much in Tolstoy. At the peak of this moving drama, the unhappy Countess found solace in a platonic relationship with the distinguished composer and pianist, Sergey Ivanovich Taneyev, whose playing affected her almost as deeply as had the literary masterpieces of her great husband. This only aggravated the tenseness of the situation. But unprejudiced study shows that the musician's attraction for Sonya was completely intellectual and aesthetic. This, I am sure, Tolstoy himself never doubted. There was much in Taneyev, the man, if not in his very cerebral music, that Tolstoy must have admired, had the latter not been guilty of a jealousy that he unquestionably knew to be unjust. Few pages in any diary are more touching than those in which the Countess records her painful but inspired reaction to the beautiful music to which she and her husband listened, at Yasnaya Polyana and in their Moscow home.

Much better known, of course, is Tolstoy's own response to music that moved him. His daughter, Alexandra Lvovna, in her *Tolstoy: A Life of My Father* (New York, Harper and Bros., 1953), makes many references to the effect of good music on the impressionable Tolstoy. Among other musical visitors, she mentions Wanda Landowska, whose playing of Mozart and Haydn delighted Leo Nikolayevich. He was often so touched by some particularly inspiring or disturbing passage, that he simply could not sit quiet in his chair, but must pace the floor at the rear of the *zala*, or even flee from the room. This, in the almost perfectly sincere Tolstoy, was no affectation. For him it would have been an insincerity to remain. The supreme genius of Leo Tolstoy was as little controllable as the daemon that drove Beethoven to do unconventional things. The divine *raptus*, whether literary or coming down from Apollo, is a disturbing *elan vital*, and not to be kept on the leash of respectable decorum. More than once, as I have read of the violent shock to Tolstoy of passages from the *Kreutzer Sonata* or the *Pathétique*, have I been forced to ask: may there not have existed, in this modern Homer, another Beethoven as well, denied to the world only because mankind needed no less urgently the intellectual and moral superman that dwelt in the author of *War and Peace* and *My Confession*? Yes, I dare to think that Tolstoy might have become, not only a Paderewski, but even another Beethoven.

As one reads the thousands of pages written with the troubled Tolstoy household as background, he finds it refreshing to enter

the *zala*, which was less apt to be invaded by a group of "Tolstoyans" than some other parts of the house, notably the Count's study. Many distinguished men and women passed through the *zala's* doors. Pictures reveal it as by no means the luxurious *salon* of a haughty aristocrat. On the contrary, its ancestral paintings and antique furniture created an atmosphere that even the most crackbrained disciple could not have justifiably protested—a simple, rather shabby good taste, nothing more. For some of its artist visitors it must have had great charm, as photographs show. And of course the Tolstoy must have a piano in their Moscow home. In her diary of 1883, their daughter, Tatyana, records: "We have bought a Backer piano for seven hundred rubles. Everybody says it is a very good one." At Yasnaya Polyana at least there were two grand pianos, in the *zala*.

So turbulent a household was that of the Tolstoy, with its stream of callers from every corner of the earth and its ebb and flow of relatives of both families, that it must have been pleasant indeed for the Countess to find the *zala* now and then empty of the curious, the cantankerous, the egotistical, even the physically offensive, along with the great who entered there. When she found time, from her duties as mother, wife, and amanuensis to her famous husband, she liked to sit down at the piano to play from Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*. (One of her severest critics, who knew her difficult position too well to be forgiven such injustice, found her fondness for this tender music a sign of a supposed inferiority to the great Tolstoy!)

Her illustrious but difficult husband once discovered the Countess playing Beethoven, when he came into the room for tea. Since the incident occurred in April of 1910, only a few months before Tolstoy's dramatic and, for her, ineffably tragic flight and death, one realizes the tenseness of every such meeting. When Leo Nikolayevich, with something of his old tenderness, told her he had been listening with pleasure to her playing, she flushed and exclaimed "You're joking!"

"No, not at all."

Later, Sofya Andreyevna declared: "I never so much regret being a bad pianist as when Leo Nikolayevich hears me." Though almost as independent of spirit as Leo Nikolayevich himself, the Countess often reveals a supersensitive dread of Tolstoy's disapproval, and it is touching to read in her diary of the reluctance to being caught at the piano by a too critical husband. One can be sure that, had the latter become a professional musician, he would indeed have been a critical one. Even though an amateur, he was never the dilettante. Tol-

stoy could not have been the dilettante even at spreading manure!

With others, he helped found the Moscow Musical Society, which later became the Moscow Conservatoire, of which Nicholas Rubinstein was the Director.

In 1876, Tolstoy met Tchaikovsky, who had been Director of the Conservatoire. The novelist was then about forty-eight, the composer thirty-six. In view of Tchaikovsky's having called Tolstoy "this greatest knower of the heart," how profoundly it must have moved the composer to have Leo Nikolayevich seek him out! There were several visits and Peter Ilych wrote, to a friend, of "two whole evenings" spent with Leo Nikolayevich. The world knows, of course, what would be the reaction of Tchaikovsky to the physical presence of the author of *War and Peace*. What it may not know so well is that Leo Tolstoy could experience an equally exalted response to the androgyne in a fellow artist. Tchaikovsky and Nicholas Rubinstein arranged a musical evening in Tolstoy's honor. Tchaikovsky's *Andante in D Major* was performed. Afterwards, the composer wrote: "Never, perhaps, in my life was I so flattered, or my vanity as a composer so touched, as when Leo Nikolayevich, sitting next to me and listening to the quartet performing my *Andante*, bust into tears." One is surprised to find that, under such Olympian auspices, there was no further development of this relationship between two artists of such stature.

When about twenty, Tolstoy wrote out for himself a life program so ambitious that it would seem amusing if we did not know that during his life he carried out a great deal more than its equivalent. The eighth item in this was: "to reach the highest perfection I can in music and painting." In one of his earliest diaries, Tolstoy discusses music and its study in a manner prophetic of the revolutionary, excessively individualistic way in which he would approach it and all things else in later years. Here and elsewhere he gives evidence that, in those earlier decades at least, his interest in music was no less serious and absorbing than his enthusiasm for literary creation. Indeed, in view of the fact that he recorded in these earliest journals no great determination to become an author, one reading these first entries might have predicted for the very original, forceful youth a career, not as a writer, but as a musician.

In his late twenties, when he was trying to see in a certain young lady excellences that he knew were not there, he self-righteously begged her to fill her days with duties well done,

such as "doing your threes against fours very smoothly." To one who, like the present writer, has "lived" with Tolstoy for a quarter of a century, even the matter of how well he would have played "threes against fours" becomes of exaggerated importance. And what was the mood, if scarcely the musical values, of the improvisations that he used to do, after a walk through the Yasnaya Polyana woods?

In *The Truth About My Father* (New York, D. Appleton and Co., 1924), Count Leo Lvovich Tolstoy has much to say regarding the writing of *The Kreutzer Sonata*: "In looking back to-day on those wonderful evenings at Yasnaya, when my father, sunk in his armchair, listened to Beethoven's *Sonata*, I understood thoroughly what was passing in his mind. His gray eyes, filled with tears, fixed in front of him, he thought, felt, and created. . . . The music of Beethoven affected him so much that very often he could no longer stand it. The famous *presto* movement of the *Kreutzer Sonata* convulsed Tolstoy's heart each time he heard it."

How good a performer was Tolstoy, actually? There were no long periods, even in his earlier years, when he diligently worked at the piano with the same daemonic, or even plodding, dedication that soon seized him as an author. During his early married life, when his greatest literary masterpieces were being created, he wrote: "I must work like a pianist." This would indicate that he realized the need of the truly great musical artist, no less than the literary one, to dedicate his life to his task. His playing is often spoken of, consistently if somewhat vaguely, by those who heard him, as being good performance. From this, one gets the impression that, had he become a professional pianist, he would have been cited as an example of the artist who is great by the grace of God, not by hours of toil at the piano.

There is one aspect of musical performance in which it is possible to weigh Tolstoy's ability without other proof than the fact that, as his writing shows, he was the supreme artist. I mean *interpretation*. Assuming for Leo Nikolayevich an innate musical talent, and at least the minimum of indispensable study, his interpretation would unquestionably, have been truly great. He was, certainly, born with a tremendous musical *elan*, which, despite his perverse and sometimes eccentric evaluations of music and musicians, made him react to it, and therefore interpret it, as only an artistic titan could.

And, as V. Sackville-West has discerned, one ever present element in any interpretation by Tolstoy would be his extra-

ordinary *intensity*. One may be sure that he would, to the best of his talent, play Beethoven with the same intensity as that with which he wrote *Anna Karenina*. On this point, his son, Sergey, wrote: "Never in my life have I met anyone who felt music so intensely as my father."

And of course Tolstoy's unceasing search for God would be heard in his playing—and in his composing. Music would always be, to him, *of God*. Hence the indignation he felt at seeing the artist ignored by mediocrity—and which he expressed in his stories *Lucerne* and *Albert*, the latter based on his acquaintance with a talented but drunken violinist, whom he brought to Yasnaya Polyana.

When Tolstoy was fifty, the Countess, returning from a trip to Tula, wrote in her diary:

"Lyovochka was working at home and came out to meet us. There was such joy in seeing his gray overcoat in the distance. . . . We finished *Les trois mousquetaires* with much interest this evening. Lyovochka sat long at the piano improvising. He has a gift for that too."

It is very tempting to find in the "Divine Sarah" Bernhardt not only a supreme actress but a great sculptor as well. But there is always danger in this. Many have improvised who could not compose above the level of a radio "commercial." However, this moral and intellectual giant seated at the piano in the *zala* at Yasnaya Polyana, this titan in peasant's garb, is no ordinary human being, no dilettante, no one to toy with life. It is said that Bernhardt, when complimented upon a particularly inspired performance, used to say, "Yes, God was there!" In everything that Leo Tolstoy thought and did, there was always the postulate *God is here!* He cannot so much as drive a peg into a muzhik's boot without questioning God about it. Certainly he cannot "quote" from Ludwig van Beethoven without bowing before him as before God. Surely he would never, for a single moment, make musical improvisations without first appealing to Apollo himself! What, therefore, would one not give for the Countess's privilege of listening to those improvisations!