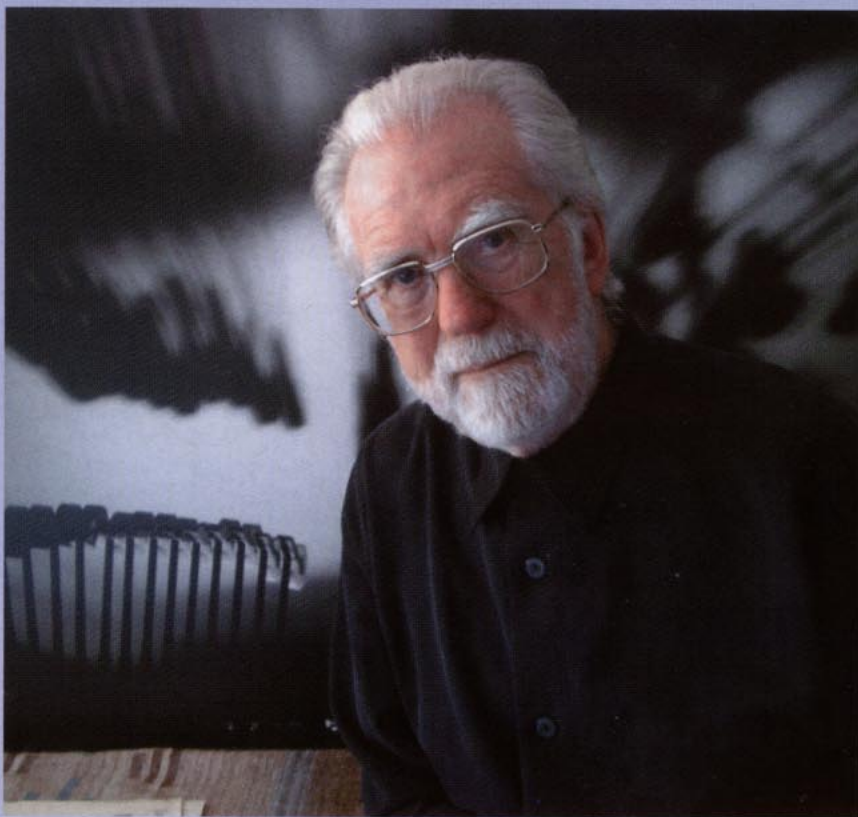


The touch of Harry

Roger Taylor finds a distinguished British pianist alive and well and living in Switzerland, but almost forgotten in his native country



Right: Hubert Harry pictured in Lucerne in 2003

PHOTO COURTESY HARRY FAMILY COLLECTION

In Lucerne lives an Englishman who plays the piano in a unique way, with a sound quality all his own. His innate modesty cannot gainsay the greatness of his artistry, which was recognised before he turned to teaching and opted for a largely local reputation. I owe my discovery of him to *CRC* writer Rob Cowan, who co-hosts *CD Masters* on BBC Radio 3. Browsing at a stall in Watford Market in 2002, he found an Armida two-LP set: 'It was cheap. I had never heard of Hubert Harry, so I tried my luck ... and was bowled over.' In February 2003 he broadcast a Bach chorale, 'Ertödt uns durch dein' Güte' – 'a track by a pianist I know nothing about, recorded in Switzerland'. Listening on the car radio, I pulled over and stopped the engine. From a quiet and serene start, the chorale built through a perfectly judged crescendo to a crashing, octave-laden climax. Tremendous applause followed. But who was Hubert Harry? There was nothing in standard reference sources, nor (at that time) on the web. Inquiries led me to Harry's pupil Siegfried Droews of Armida, who told me he had published six CDs of music performed by Harry but they were available only as a box set costing well over £100. Then I received a message from Heidi Harry: she and Hubert sent their best wishes and were delighted to know he had been broadcast on Radio 3.

Hubert Harry was born in 1927 in Dalton-in-Furness, an industrial town south of the Lake District. His was a musical family – mother a singer, father an organist and composer, elder brother able to take over as parish organist when his father died in 1938. Two years after that, when his brother entered the navy, 13-year-old Hubert assumed the organist's duties. A child prodigy, he was playing the piano at 2½ and later could manage Rachmaninoff: 'It was, inevitably, the famous C sharp minor *Prélude*. My first contact with Rachmaninoff's music took place when I learnt this piece as a five-year-old, from an organ transcription of my father's. About that same time, my older brother brought home our first gramophone, together with records of Rachmaninoff playing his Second Concerto. The effect this music had on me was enormous, and I still remember the

feeling of wonder that music could sound like that! To this day, my admiration for this great composer and pianist has remained unchanged.' In the mid-1930s Hubert began studies at the Matthey School in Manchester with Hilda Collens. He remembers a weekly three-hour rail journey via Lancaster for the hour-long lesson with Miss Collens, followed by a similar journey home. In the school history, 'the earliest of four references to Harry records a summer students' concert at Milton Hall on 8 July 1937. The *Manchester Guardian* reported, without naming him: 'Quite an astonishing performance on the pianoforte was that of a boy of nine, who gave some little pieces by Schumann with such aptness of touch and sensibility of feeling that it is possible on the strength of this early appearance to predict a bright future for him. In these days fluency among extremely youthful pianists is not rare – the competitive festivals prove that – but the boy heard last night shows certain qualities that enable him, to some extent at least, to re-create his music in terms of his own imaginative insight.'

First Steinway

In 1942-43, with the help of Dr Walter Carroll, friends got Harry his first Steinway grand. Paid for by donations at private recitals, it is still in daily use for practice and teaching at his Lucerne home. Studies continued through the war years. Reports of concerts by the teenage Harry in 1945 and 1946 cite 'brilliant playing', 'imaginative insight and subtlety', 'eloquence'. Repertoire included Beethoven's C major Sonata, Op.2/3; Chopin's A flat *Étude* and F major and G minor *Ballades*; Brahms's B minor *Rhapsody*; and Liszt's B minor Sonata and *Mephisto Waltz*. Among the artists who visited the Manchester School was Cyril Smith. Notoriously uncompromising and sparing with praise, he held a masterclass when Harry was 16 or 17 (1943-44). A girl pianist who played first was veritably savaged. Then Harry performed Liszt's *Funérailles*. A fellow pupil, Rob Jones, recalls that Smith did not interrupt and was silent when Harry finished. Then he asked brusquely: 'Are you tired?' 'No.' 'Well, you ought



PHOTOS: TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

Right: Potent influences (from top) Clifford Curzon, Dinu Lipatti and Sergei Rachmaninoff

to be! Apparently this was the closest Smith ever came to a compliment.

A frequent visitor to Manchester was Artur Schnabel's best-known English pupil. 'Sir Clifford Curzon was a mentor during my studies in Manchester, and later became a dear friend until his death,' Harry says, 'and I consider him one of the greatest musician-pianists of his time. When Curzon was ill toward the end of his life, he wanted me to replace him as soloist with the "Emperor" Concerto at the Lucerne Festival, but because we were away on a summer holiday in Italy, I was not available.' It was Curzon who in 1946 advised Harry to travel to Switzerland, providing him with a letter of recommendation to Edwin Fischer. In Lucerne Harry participated in a Fischer masterclass, performing the Liszt Sonata. Staying in Lucerne, he studied subsequently with Paul Baumgartner.

In December 1946 Harry attended a charity recital by Dinu Lipatti, who had been professor at the Geneva Conservatoire since 1944. Harry sees this encounter at the Hotel Schweizerhof, Lucerne, as a turning point in his life and career. He spoke with Lipatti after the concert and was invited for lessons at the Romanian's Geneva home; but only a few sessions were possible, as Lipatti was already weakened by leukaemia and Louis Hiltbrand had been appointed to assist him. 'Lipatti was a wonderful person,' Harry says. 'When he stepped on to the stage, you felt the spiritual perception of the hall was raised to a new level. He was a noble and kind person, but his character included a warm humour and he really enjoyed practical jokes.' Harry continued studies with Hiltbrand, whom he regarded as a great teacher – they kept in contact until the master's death in 1983.

Another significant contact was made in 1948. 'Only then I learned that Rachmaninoff had lived nearby, in Hertenstein, in the house he and his wife had built before the war. Mrs Rachmaninoff spent a few months every year in this house, Villa Senar, and through a set of fortunate coincidences, I was invited to spend many days there. I played on Rachmaninoff's Steinway and also accompanied his granddaughter Sofia Volkonsky when she sang his songs. As can be imagined, this friendship with the Rachmaninoffs seemed nearly miraculous to me. Mrs Rachmaninoff asked me often to listen with her to her husband's recording of the

First Concerto, which was one of her favourites. It reminded her of the young Rachmaninoff, of the summers he would spend composing in Ivanovka, her family's country estate.' Harry also became friends with Sergei and Natalia Rachmaninoff's daughter Tatiana and gave recitals at Villa Senar in 1949 and 1950.

Hubert Harry's archive records a number of concerts given during those early years in Lucerne. On 3 July 1948 he played Chopin's B minor sonata, Op.58. On 3 December 1948 a benefit concert with the baritone Emil Naef included solo works by Bach, Rachmaninoff, Schumann (*Toccata*, Op.7), Chopin and Liszt (B minor Sonata). On 20 April 1950 came the first identified concerto performance – Franck's *Variations symphoniques* with the Lucerne Allgemeine Musikgesellschaft. These years as a student in Switzerland culminated in 1950 with the award of two prizes in Geneva. In June he won the Prix de Virtuosité avec Grande Distinction of the Geneva Conservatoire, awarded only four times in the previous 20 years. In September he was first prize-winner of the Concours International de Genève.

London concerts

In the early 1950s, following concerts in France, Belgium and the Netherlands, Harry twice returned to England to perform at the Royal Festival Hall, London. His début was on 30 October 1952 with the Philharmonia under Stanley Pope, playing the 'Emperor' in an all-Beethoven programme. Two years later, Harry came to London for Tchaikovsky's B flat minor Concerto with the RPO, again conducted by Pope. A week after that, on 25 October, came his début solo recital at the RFH Recital Room. The programme opened with Bach's E minor *Toccata*, then came Beethoven's C minor Sonata, Op.111. After the interval came Chopin's B minor Sonata and Balakirev's *Islamey*. An annotation in a copy of the programme in the RFH archive indicates that the recital concluded with Bach's 'Ertödt' uns durch dein' Güte' from the Cantata BWV22. This chorale became a talismanic conclusion to many of Harry's recitals – he initially adopted Myra Hess's version of 'Jesu, joy of man's desiring' but felt he could no longer perform it after Lipatti's death, so took up Harriet Cohen's arrangement in its place.

Harry was not paid a fee for any of those London concerts – a young pianist was expected to regard the publicity and exposure as sufficient recompense. In any case, they were to be his last public appearances in England. For in 1950, coincidental with the Geneva prize, he became a teacher at the ten-year-old Lucerne Conservatoire; and later he was made Dean of the Piano Department. His decision to devote himself to teaching evidently disappointed his Manchester teachers and Curzon.

In 1955 a young lady from Santiago, Heidi Pfenniger (her father was Swiss, her mother Chilean), returned to Switzerland to continue her piano studies in Zurich. Subsequently she joined Harry's professional class at the Lucerne Conservatoire. They wed in 1957 and have since lived in Lucerne. Harry played twice in South America, the first time through a strange coincidence. Heidi's parents wished her marriage to be confirmed in Chile; so while she flew there at her father's insistence, Harry arrived in Naples to board a ship bound for Buenos Aires. Also travelling was the orchestra Collegium Musicum Helveticum (formed by Richard Schumacher from the cream of Swiss players), with which Harry had performed in the past. It was agreed that in Santiago Harry would perform with them Bach's D minor Concerto. In mid-Atlantic, a concert was given in the first class lounge, where the grand piano had to be secured to the floor – Harry does not remember whether the same precaution applied to the piano stool. During a return visit to Santiago in 1959 it had been planned for Harry to perform Rachmaninoff's Fourth Concerto. However, the local orchestra was found to be on strike and so he gave a solo recital instead.

Harry's playing reflects the influences that he readily acknowledges – the poise of Curzon, the clarity of Lipatti, the unsurpassed musicianship and pianism of Rachmaninoff, the interpretative humanity of Fischer. He has said that, throughout his years of teaching, he gave concerts simply to prove to his students that he could still do it. Yet year by year, decade by decade, albeit mainly in Lucerne, reports of his concerts indicate both an extraordinarily wide choice of repertoire and a depth of appreciation by his audiences. Photographs indicate packed venues, and reviews glow.

He also gave chamber music concerts, mainly in the 1960s with the Lucerne Trio, in



PHOTO COURTESY HARRY FAMILY COLLECTION

Above: Hubert Harry as a promising young pianist in 1945

which he was joined by Walter Prystawski, violin, and Esther Nyffenegger, cello. On 31 August 1963 they gave the world première of Martinů's 1933 *Concertino* No.1, H231, at the Lucerne Festival, with the Festival Strings conducted by Rudolf Baumgartner, in the presence of Martinů's widow Charlotte and Madeleine Lipatti. An LP from May 1967 of music by Harry's Lucerne Conservatoire colleague Caspar Diethelm, recorded at the Lukaskirche, Lucerne (Nova Musica Helvetica ● FGLS30-4701), included a piano sonata and a fantasia for flute and piano. There were many concerto appearances, from Bach to Brahms and Rachmaninoff. It was as a soloist that he encountered Karajan in the mid-1950s, when he played the 'Emperor' repeatedly for a conductor's workshop.

Humble perfectionist

Heidi Harry observes that Hubert 'has always kept very much to himself, and has done none of those things which need to be done for a career as a concert pianist. The concerts were

always a great challenge to his need for privacy'. He is described as never having uttered an ill word of anyone. His modesty is indeed self-effacing and he takes pride in the success of those whose playing he has informed. His lifelong friend Rob Jones says: 'I first got to know Harry in 1946. Nothing has changed him in all those years. Humble, perfectionist, disregarding of his own achievements and always ready to find something to praise in others. A loyal servant of music, and a great pianist. Only now has he agreed to give a wider musical public the opportunity of sampling his impeccable grasp of pianistic styles from Haydn to Debussy.'

In the 1950s and 1960s Harry's performances were relatively frequent, but later he reduced them and increasingly restricted them to Lucerne. His rare recitals became artistic events, preserved from 1968 onwards on Siegfried Droew's Armida label. They are performances of technical and interpretative assurance, reflecting an individual pianistic voice and an aristocratic pedigree born of superb training and serious thought. They yield further rewards with repeated listening.

In 2003 the Harrys assumed responsibility themselves for the marketing and distribution of the six-CD set and had each disc repackaged separately (Royss Music ⊕ H190-01/6). A newly remastered seventh disc (⊕ H190-07) has live performances of *Pictures at an exhibition* from 1970, originally on LP (Armida ● HH112), and two-piano works played by Hubert and Heidi at a 1976 Lucerne Conservatoire concert. A performance of Rachmaninoff's Concerto No.1 has also now been issued. It stems from 19 August 1978 at the Lucerne Festival, with Ulrich Meyer-Schoellkopf conducting the Swiss Festival Orchestra. The direct broadcast by Swiss Radio SR DRS was interrupted by a technical problem and it was feared the concert would live on only in the memory of those present. Fortunately, in 2003 a complete tape of the concerto was found in the radio archives, where it had lain for 26 years. With the addition of studio recordings made in July 2004 – a Scarlatti sonata and pieces by Rachmaninoff and Scriabin – it is now on CD (Royss ⊕ H190-08).

The discs are described on a website,² along with three still available Armida issues. Most are of live performances – a Brahms disc of Opp.76 and 116-119 from 1995 (Armida ⊕ HH195-3)

is a studio recording. It is a measure of his perfectionism that Harry had to be persuaded to re-release his interpretation of the Mussorgsky *Pictures*. The concertos – Bach BWV1052 with Mozart K415 (⊕ H190-05) and Grieg (⊕ H190-03) may be accompanied by less than perfect student or festival ensembles, but Harry's playing transcends any orchestral shortcomings. Among recordings not currently available is a wonderful Schumann Concerto on a 'Musik in Luzern' disc from 1992 (Gallo ⊕ CD798) – an electric reading, with faster tempos and less sentimentality than we commonly hear, but with a combination of crystal clarity and transparent warmth. Another Schumann from a 50th birthday concert in 1977, with Bach's C minor Concerto for two pianos featuring Heidi Harry, was issued on LP (Pecla ● PSR00700).

Of two discs of major solo repertoire, one comprises Haydn's Hob.XVI/52, Mozart's K284 and Chopin's Op.58 (⊕ H190-02), the other Schumann's monumental Op.14 along with Ravel's *Miroirs* plus Chopin's B major *Nocturne*, Op.62/1, and B minor *Scherzo*, Op.20 (⊕ H190-06). The programme of the fourth disc includes Harry favourites: Scarlatti sonatas, an extraordinary selection of *Préludes* by Debussy and Rachmaninoff (⊕ H190-04). Another sonata disc (⊕ H190-01), highlighting Beethoven's Op.111 and Liszt's B minor, and the concerto discs (⊕ H190-03 & 05) contain encores and conclude with 'Ertödt' uns durch dein' Güte'. The Armida source CDs had all the applause surgically removed, however. For the rapturous reception broadcast by Rob Cowan, turn instead to Track 10 of the 15 May 1994 concert featuring Mozart's K415 and 449 with the Lucerne Festival Strings (Armida ⊕ HH194-5), or better still to Disc 2, Track 11 of the 3 November 1992 recital (⊕ HH192-01/02, two discs).

The Royss Music CDs were launched on 21 November 2003 in Lucerne. It was a highly charged, emotional event: electricity was in the air – 500 guests, including at least 50 of Harry's former pupils, overflowed the chandelier- and mirror-bedecked conference room of the lake-side Grand National Hotel. A brief recital – the first time Harry had played in public for nine years – included Scarlatti, Chopin, Schumann and some of the Scriabin Op.11 *Preludes*, and was received rapturously. After 40 minutes, it ended of course with 'Ertödt' uns durch dein'

Güte', invoking a stir of knowing acknowledgment. The warmth of his reception and all the personal greetings were moving to behold.

That performance in 2003 affirmed a particular pianistic voice which can be discerned clearly from the recordings, and is borne out by a recollection recounted that evening by an ex-pupil, now a Swiss Government diplomat. Some years ago he was walking past a Swiss monastery when from an upper window he heard piano playing exactly like the 'Hubert Harry sound'. Why was Harry playing in a monastery? Consumed with curiosity, he knocked on the door and was taken to the upper room. The performer was a recent monastic arrival who had been a fellow Harry pupil – still there, he is now in charge of the monastery's Gregorian music.

Hubert Harry's loss to the international soloists' circuit became Lucerne's gain. His recordings testify to a continuing talent that has benefited many students and the audiences lucky enough to hear him. He deserves to be heard by a wider public. ●

REFERENCES

- 1 John Robert-Blunn, *Northern Accent: The Life Story of the Northern School of Music*, John Sherratt & Son Ltd, Altrincham, 1972, p.44. The Matthey School (founded 1920) formally became a public institution in 1943, taking the name The Northern School of Music. In 1973 it merged with the Manchester College of Music to form the Royal Northern College of Music. 2 www.hubertharry.ch



PHOTO COURTESY HARRY FAMILY COLLECTION

Left: Hubert and Heidi Harry, partners on and off stage