Hess, Myra

Myra Hess

* 25 February 1890 in Hampstead (im heutigen Londoner Stadtbezirk Camden), England
† 25 November 1965 in London, England

Pianist, chamber musician, piano pedagogue, concert organiser, event organiser

"Miss Hess is a strongly individual artistic personality, self-possessed, reposeful, but she is one devoted wholly to expounding the music she plays and who takes no thought of injecting her personality into it or of making display of her powers as a performer."

(Richard Aldrich, New York Times, 18 January 1922, quoted by McKenna, p. 82)

Profile

After her successful debut in 1907 at Queen’s Hall in London under the conductor Sir Thomas Beecham, Myra Hess gave concerts throughout Great Britain. Alongside soloistic appearances, she was also active as a chamber musician, performing with Nellie Melba, Lotte Lehmann, Fritz Kreisler, Joseph Szigeti and her piano duo partner Irene Scharrer. However, Myra Hess had to wait for her ultimate breakthrough in her English homeland; for this reason, she initially had to earn her living by teaching. Her first major success abroad was her debut in Amsterdam, where she performed Schumann’s Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54 with the Concertgebouw Orchestra under Willem Mengelberg in 1912. In 1922 followed her debut in New York, where she was celebrated with equal enthusiasm. Her career advanced rapidly from that point onwards, and she rose to the position of one of the most successful pianists in her homeland during the ensuing years. During the 1930s, she undertook extended concert tours throughout all of Europe, including the Scandinavian countries, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Germany, France and Holland. At the beginning of the Second World War, when all of London’s concert halls were closed, she founded the legendary "Lunchtime Recitals" at the National Gallery, offering the London public a broad spectrum of high-quality programmes with both young and established musicians. She herself performed at the National Gallery 146 times. The concerts were held without interruption until 10 April 1946. In 1941 Myra Hess was honoured with the title "Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire" for her special efforts on behalf of musical life in her homeland. After the Second World War, the meanwhile famous pianist regularly gave concerts in her native country and in the USA, where she enjoyed great popularity. In 1951 and 1952 she played at the Prades Festival in Barcelona, organised by Pablo Casals. She travelled to America for the last time in 1961; during the same year she gave her final public performance at the Royal Festival Hall with Mozart’s Piano Concerto in A major, K. 488 under Sir Adrian Boult.

Cities an countries

After her debut at Queen’s Hall (1907) in London, Myra Hess had her first foreign successes in the Netherlands and within the British Isles. Starting in the 1920s there followed concert tours through the United States, Canada and Europe. At the beginning of the Second World War, Myra Hess decided to remain in London, where she founded the National Gallery Concerts. After the end of the war, Myra Hess resumed her intensive concertizing activities in the USA and in the Netherlands, also performing at the Prades Festival organised by Pablo Casals in Barcelona in 1951 and 1952.

Biography
Childhood and education
Myra Hess was born on 25 February 1890 as the youngest of four children in Hampstead, today located in the northwest of London. Her name at birth was Julia Myra Hess, but her family called her only by her middle name, Myra, already at a very young age. No musicians are traceable amongst her antecedents, but her mother, Lizzy Jacobs, is supposed to have had a beautiful soprano voice in younger years and to have enjoyed accompanying herself at the piano (McKenna, p. 4). Her father, Frederick Salomon Hess, ran a textile factory and, like his wife, was of German-Jewish extraction. Much value was placed on a well-founded musical education for the four children, already in early years. Thus Myra Hess received instruction in violoncello and piano starting at the age of six. Her preference for the latter instrument soon became readily apparent, and she passed the entrance examination of the Trinity College of Music in London at the age of seven, becoming its youngest pupil. Somewhat later, she changed to the Guildhall School of Music, where she received instruction from Julian Pascal and Orlando Morgan. Concurrently with these studies, she was sent to a private school for girls, where she – in accordance with the Victorian spirit of the times – received rudimentary instruction in subjects such as handicrafts, singing and dancing. In addition, Myra Hess made such rapid progress at the piano that she won a stipend at the age of twelve enabling her to study with Tobias Matthay at the Royal Academy of Music. Matthay’s fame in England was especially due to his scientific studies concerning piano technique carried out over the course of many years. These studies were recorded in several books, the best known of which was “The Act of Touch”, published in 1903. He not only had the most important musical influence on Myra Hess, but also remained a lifelong friend and staunch supporter of his pupil. Myra Hess wrote an essay containing her memories of piano lessons with Matthay that was published in 1966 in the journal “Recorded Sound” (No. 24, pp. 98-101). During her student years, musical gatherings were regularly held at Myra Hess’s house, at which her fellow students played music together. Frequent guests were the violinist Joseph Szigeti, the pianist and composer Arnold Bax and the pianist Irene Scharrer, Myra’s closest female friend during her student years and later her piano duo partner.

Initial concert successes in London
One year after completing her studies, in 1907, Myra Hess made her debut at Queen’s Hall in London. Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58 and Saint-Saëns’s Piano Concerto No. 4 in C minor, Op. 44 were on the programme, with Thomas Beecham conducting. The success of this debut is verified by the following review from the “Musical Times” (1 December 1907), amongst others: “Miss Myra Hess, with the assistance of the New Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Mr. Thomas Beecham, gave a most artistic concert on 14 November, at Queen’s Hall. The talented pianist was heard in Beethoven’s Concerto in G and in the Concerto in C minor by Saint-Saëns, playing in each with a womanly charm and engaging vivacity that elicited the heartiest manifestations of appreciation from her numerous audience.” (The Musical Times”, 1 December 1907, p. 809) Just two months later, on 25 January 1908, she gave a solo recital at London’s Aeolian Hall, where she presented works by Franz Schubert, César Franck, Johannes Brahms, Frédéric Chopin and her teacher, Tobias Matthay. One month later, on 22 February, she appeared again at the Aeolian Hall with compositions exclusively by Beethoven on the programme, a daring undertaking for a pianist of just 18 years of age. The performance was only a moderate success and her playing of Beethoven was found to be immature and “like a schoolgirl” by some reviewers (McKenna, p. 35). The disappointed Myra Hess, who, remarkably, was so highly esteemed precisely for her Beethoven interpretations during her later years – she programmed the last three sonatas especially often – temporarily laid his works aside during the following years. Her early predilection for the music of Beethoven was also reflected in an essay “How to Play Beethoven”, written at the age of 18. Here, she stated: “Beethoven is my favourite composer because his works seem to appeal more strongly to my own temperament” (quoted from McKenna, p. 35).

Also in 1908, on 2 September, Myra Hess appeared at a Promenade Concert for the first time, at which she played Liszt’s Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major under the conductor Sir Henry Wood, with whom she performed over 90 times altogether.

Despite her thoroughly successful performances, Myra Hess had to earn her living by teaching during her early years. In an interview given in 1936, she summed up this period as follows: “It took me years before I was established. People think because I have a good time now, it all came easily. For years I had to earn my living by teaching. I had a very slow success. My reputation in Eng-
land was built by giving a recital every season, and it took every penny I could save to pay for it." (BBC Radio Times, 3 July, 1936, quoted from McKenna, p. 36.) Thus Myra Hess missed no opportunity to perform, and thus gave concerts in the houses of London’s higher social classes. She also performed frequently at concerts with other musicians including Nellie Melba, Lotte Lehmann, Fritz Kreisler and Joseph Szigeti.

Beginning of her international career

Myra Hess undertook her first tour abroad to the Netherlands in 1910. She was accompanied by the violinist Aldo Antonietti, with whom she had recently become acquainted in her homeland and with whom she had a love affair for a time. They presented concerts on a small scale in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Haarlem, including works such as Beethoven’s ”Kreutzer Sonata”, several pieces by Chopin and several of Antonietti’s own compositions as encores. The concert tour was not a great financial success, but it enabled Myra Hess to establish contacts with important personalities in Dutch musical life. Thus, on 10 February 1912, she was granted the honour of performing Schumann’s A-minor Concerto with the renowned Concertgebouw Orchestra under Willem Mengelberg. The Dutch debut was a grandiose success according to McKenna (see above, p. 47), for Myra Hess’s playing apparently reminded some listeners of Clara Schumann. Myra Hess also performed regularly in the Netherlands during the ensuing years, and could always be assured of an enthusiastic audience and the acknowledgement of the critics.

During the First World War, she undertook concert tours within the British Isles with the London String Quartet and with her duo partner, Irene Scharrer. It was during these years that she developed her profound knowledge of the chamber music repertoire. She was gradually able to establish herself as a pianist of the first rank in her homeland through her numerous appearances. In the year 1920 she played nearly 100 concerts in Great Britain and throughout Europe.

In 1922 Myra Hess embarked upon her first tour in the USA – apparently the decision to undertake this journey was not easy for her, for she doubted her ability to live up to the expectations of the American public, accustomed as it was to sensations (McKenna, p. 80). Her American debut finally took place on 17 January 1922 at Aeolian Hall in New York. The programme consisted of Schumann’s ”Papillons”, four short sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti as well as pieces by Chopin and Debussy. Myra Hess’s misgivings proved unfounded, for she was also able to win over the American listeners. The press reviews of her New York debut were also correspondingly positive – for example, H. E. Krehbiel, one of the leading New York music critics of the time, wrote in the ”Tribune” for the next day: ”She is every inch an artist; every fibre in her comely and well poised body is musical. Her knowledge, instincts, technical skills are of the highest order. She possesses not only fancy but the higher gift which is imagination. Her expositions are not merely intellectual, they are poetical also. The book of music is open to her [...]” (”New York Tribune”, 18 January 1922; quoted from McKenna, p. 82)

During the years 1923 and 1924 Myra Hess traveled once again to the USA, performing with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski and the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Pierre Monteux, amongst others.

The London ”Lunchtime Concerts”

When Great Britain officially entered the Second World War on 3 September 1939, Myra Hess immediately cancelled her upcoming America tour. Since all the concert halls and cultural facilities in London had been closed, she decided to organise musical performances on her own, which was a revolutionary act of political significance.

Whilst searching for an appropriate venue, she seized upon a friend’s idea of organising concerts at London’s National Gallery. The then-director of the National Gallery, Sir Kenneth Clark, was thrilled with this idea, for the pictures and sculptures had, in any case, been evacuated in order to protect them from possible bombing attacks. Thus the way was paved for the legendary ”Lunchtime Recitals” originated by Myra Hess. These concerts took place on a daily basis, from Monday through Friday, at one o’clock in the afternoon. The composer Howard Ferguson and Myra Hess’s niece Beryl Davis helped with the organisation. In the programming of the concerts, Myra Hess pursued two aims: on the one hand, she wished to present first-class chamber music to the public at an affordable price; on the other hand, she wished to offer young as well as established musicians performance opportunities (Ferguson, Howard: The National Gallery Concerts and After. In: Myra Hess by her friends, ed. v. H. Ferguson. London 1966, p. 92). On 10 October 1939, Myra Hess herself performed for the first time at the jam-packed National Gallery for 1000 listeners, playing...
works by Scarlatti, Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin and Brahms. This was the beginning of a unique success story – a total of 1698 concerts took place between 1939 and 1946, at which highly varied programmes were presented by high-quality musicians, orchestras and musical ensembles. There were "mixed" programmes, primarily with compositions of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Schumann and Brahms; series of works by a single composer were also presented, e.g. the complete chamber music of Beethoven and Brahms, the Brandenburg Concertos of J. S. Bach and the piano concertos of W. A. Mozart, played by Myra Hess herself (with the New London Orchestra under the direction of Alec Sherman). Myra Hess also committed herself to the performance of works less popular at the time, such as the wind serenades and church sonatas of Mozart and the "Christmas Story" of Heinrich Schütz.

Amongst the performing ensembles and musicians were the Menges String Quartet, the Griller Quartet and personalities such as Harry Blech, Gaspar Cassado, Elena Gerhardt, Denis Matthews, Gerald Moore and Arnold Rosé. Myra Hess herself performed a total of 146 times at the National Gallery. Queen Elizabeth I ("Queen Mum") also attended several performances at the Gallery and expressed her appreciation of Myra Hess (McKenna, p. 133).

At short notice, during the German air raids on England in September 1940, the concerts had to be given in the underground shelter of the Gallery. Although the National Gallery did not remain undamaged by the raids, Myra Hess continued the concerts without interruption. She received financial support from friends and patrons from the USA.

The title "Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire" was conferred upon Myra Hess by King George VI in 1941 for her efforts on behalf of British musical life during the war. From then on, she could call herself "Dame Myra Hess".

Continuation of her international career
After the war, Myra Hess resumed her concertising activities in the Netherlands and the United States, performing with such conductors as Bruno Walter, Arturo Toscanini und Sergei Koussevitzky. Between 1946 and 1959 she gave 14 concerts at Carnegie Hall in New York. In 1951 and 1952 she played at the Prades Festival in Barcelona, organised by Pablo Casals, and beginning in 1956 she could be heard regularly at the Edinburgh International Festival with the violinist Isaac Stern.

The final years
Myra Hess suffered a heart attack in 1960, but she did not yet consider retiring from the concert stage. In 1961, despite serious health problems, she undertook another concert tour through the United States and suffered a stroke during that tour. From that time on, she was no longer able to fully regain her motoric abilities. Astonishingly, she nonetheless performed Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major at a London Promenade Concert under Sir Adrian Boult during that same year. Moreover, she played two piano concertos of Mozart (K. 414 and K. 453) at the Royal Festival Hall on 27 September 1961. Her last public appearance was on 31 October with Mozart's Piano Concerto in A major, K. 488 with the London Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir Adrian Boult.

The final years of her life were overshadowed by rapidly deteriorating health and depressions. Myra Hess died on 25 November 1965 in London at the age of 75.

Her numerous pupils included Ann Schein, Joel Ryce, Solomon Cutner, Yontry Solomon and Stephen Bishop-Kovacevich.

Appreciation
Myra Hess enjoyed extraordinary fame as a pianist and chamber musician already during her lifetime, and this renown also survived her death in 1965. Many of her recordings are still commercially available today. Myra Hess's popularity is probably also due to her extraordiary achievements as organiser of the National Gallery Concerts in London that made a lasting impact on British musical life. During a time when concert programmes were still mixed, she had the courage to programme highly demanding chamber works by a single composer. Although contemporary works were hardly played at the National Gallery, the broad palette of performing musicians and repertoire remained unique in British concert history. The proceeds from the concerts went exclusively to the musicians and to the "Musicians' Benevolent Fund".

The fact that Myra Hess's programmes focussed on works by German and Austrian composers, and that the lieder programmes were exclusively in the German language, was definitely regarded as a provocation during the war years. Myra Hess, however, wanted this to be understood as a sign of peace and reconciliation between the enemy countries.

The pianist is still appreciated today as the organiser of
the National Gallery Concerts. "Myra Hess Day" is celebrated each year on 6 October at the National Gallery in order to commemorate the pianist's outstanding achievements. More information can be found under: http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/about-us/press-and-media/dame-myra-hess.

Although Myra Hess's repertoire was quite wide-ranging in her younger years, she concentrated on the works of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Schumann during her later years. Her piano transcription of the chorale "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" from J.S. Bach's cantata "Heart and Mouth and Deed and Life" BWV 147 attained world renown; one of the pianists who frequently included it on his programmes was Dinu Lipatti.

Reception

Despite her successful debut in 1907 in London, it took several years before Myra Hess was recognised in Great Britain as a pianist of the first order. The critics did indeed acknowledge her talent, but they could not always acquire a taste for her unorthodox style of interpretation. Thus a reviewer made the following statement after the concert at the Aeolian Hall in 1908: "Miss Hess has a great command of piano tone, but if she could get rid of the hard edge to her notes when she plays forte, her powers of expression would be further increased [....]." ("The London Times", 27 January 1908; quoted from McKenna, p. 34) In another critique of the same concert, one could read: "I missed any strong suggestion that the pianist had formed her own ideas of the compositions. The Schubert [...] and the Franck [...], so different in mood and technical manner, were practically played in the same style." (quoted after McKenna, p. 34 ff.) Myra Hess achieved her first resounding success abroad in 1912 in the Netherlands, where she rose to the position of "darling of the public" within a very short time; she was received with similar enthusiasm in the USA after her debut there in 1922.

The volume "Myra Hess by Her Friends" (London 1966), edited by Howard Ferguson, represents an important contribution to her posthumous reception; in it, various personalities who accompanied the pianist in friendship during individual life stages wrote down their memories of her. In addition, the biography by Marian McKenna, published in London in 1976, upon which this article is based to a large degree, deals in detail with the pianist's life and activities. Moreover, several lexicon and magazine articles have been dedicated to her (see sources).

Research

Important aspects of the artistic activities of Myra Hess and interesting facts concerning her private life are treated in the sources already mentioned: the biography by Marian McKenna and the collection of essays edited by Howard Ferguson. McKenna's biography, which does not especially concentrate on Myra Hess as a musician, but precisely traces the pianist's life story based on numerous previously unpublished sources such as letters, newspapers and interviews, contains in its appendix a listing of the most important archives with material by and about Myra Hess, as well as an extensive list of her recordings. In addition, there are voluminous collections in the British Library and in the National Gallery in London containing material compiled by Myra Hess herself, such as concert programmes, lists of performing musicians – and performed works.

Need for Research

Although Myra Hess's personal career and, to some extent, her contacts with other artists are relatively well developed in the biography by Marian McKenna, little is known about her style of interpretation – especially as regards the piano works of Mozart and Beethoven. Comparative analyses of her recordings would remedy this. In addition, a closer investigation of the circle of Myra Hess's pupils and artist colleagues would be revelatory in finding out more about her piano pedagogy and interpretative approaches to individual composers and their works. For example, the English pianist and Clara Schumann pupil Adelina de Lara mentions a performance given together on 23 January 1946 at the National Gallery in her autobiography, to which Myra Hess contributed the preface (Adelina de Lara. Finale. p. 204ff).

Nor has there yet been any research on Myra Hess's piano transcriptions of baroque music, especially the music of J. S. Bach.

Authority control

Virtual International Authority File (VIAF):

- http://viaf.org/viaf/61732095

Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (GND):

- http://d-nb.info/gnd/119370581

Library of Congress (LCCN):

- http://lccn.loc.gov/n87828540

Author(s)
Stella Oesch

Editing status

Editorial staff: Regina Back
Ellen Freyberg
Translation: David Babcock
First edit 27/01/2011
Last edit 06/03/2018

mugi.hfmt-hamburg.de

Forschungsprojekt an der
Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg
Projektleitung: Prof. Dr. Beatrix Borchard
Harvestehuder Weg 12
D – 20148 Hamburg