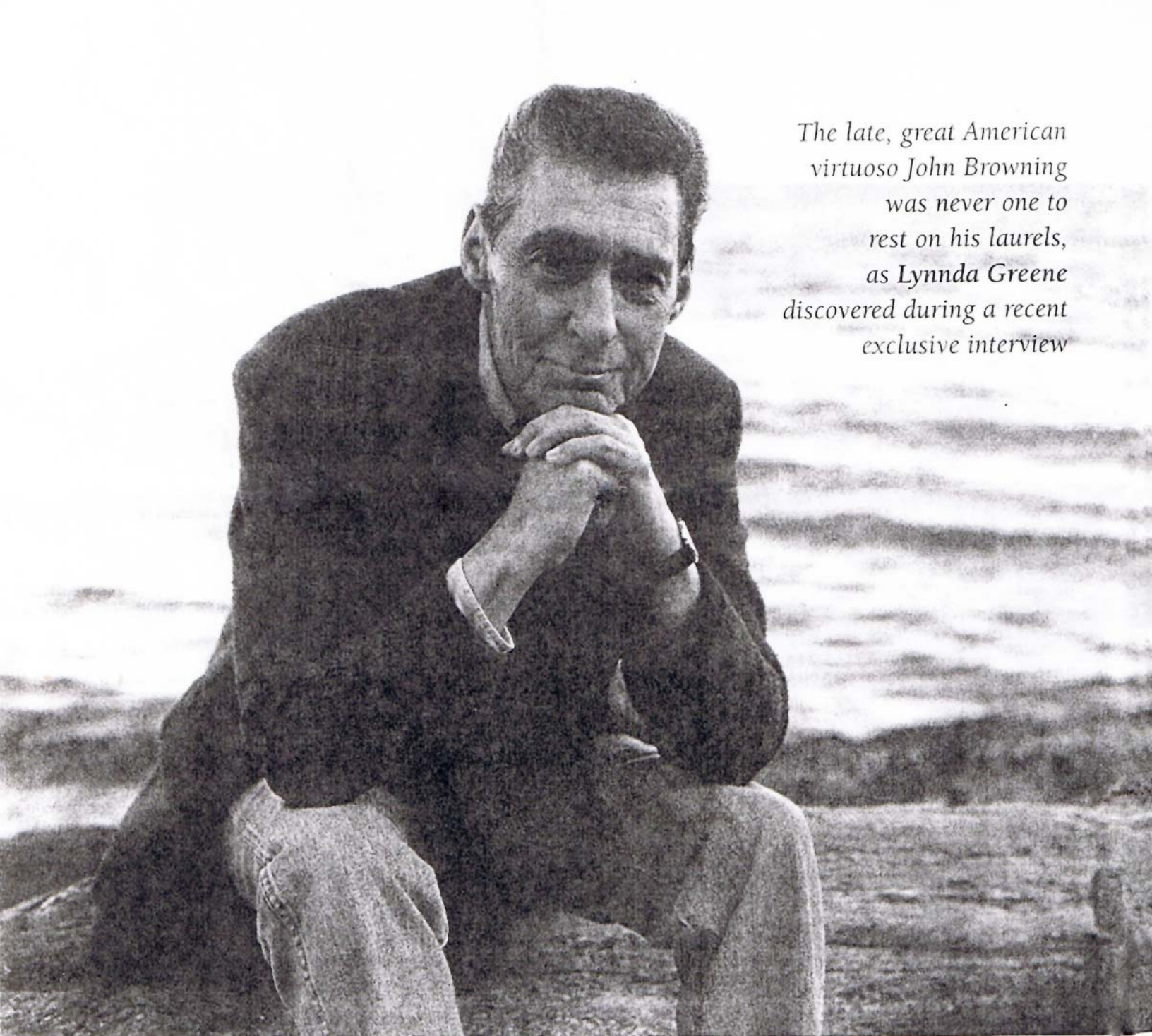


Editor's letter

As we go to press we have received the sad news of John Browning's death at the age of 69. Our thoughts are with his family and friends at this most difficult time. This is especially poignant for us as Lynnda Greene's interview with John (see p.36) was so upbeat and full of enthusiasm for the future. As a tribute to the Maestro, we have decided to publish the article exactly as it stands, with only a few minor amendments where the rendering of original tenses would now feel inappropriate.

Born in Denver in 1933, John Browning gave his first public appearances as soloist with the Denver Symphony aged just ten. He subsequently studied with Rosina Lhevinne at The Juilliard School, won the Steinway Centennial Award and the Levintritt Competition, and was placed second in the Queen Elisabeth Competition in 1956. Six years later he gave the premiere of Samuel Barber's Piano Concert, a work with which his name would be indelibly linked for the remainder of his distinguished career. As the *Los Angeles Times* memorably put it: 'By dint of unremitting application and a vast reserve of talent, John Browning has built one of the most enduring careers of any American pianist solely on merit, and with invariable dignity.' He will be greatly missed by all who knew him and his countless admirers around the globe.

Julian Haylock, EDITOR



*The late, great American
virtuoso John Browning
was never one to
rest on his laurels,
as Lynnda Greene
discovered during a recent
exclusive interview*

Aiming higher

There was no American pianist on the circuit quite like John Browning; never had been. Critics had long since given up trying to describe him or assign him a niche. Instead, they just continued to write as they had since his debut in 1954, consistently excellent reviews which, if anything, had only got better over time. Technically brilliant, yet possessed of an elegance that was never studied, a sensibility that was both patrician and utterly sincere, Browning's pianism always represented the purest distillation of all that was best in the new American sound that emerged in the post-War years: lean but lyrical, intense but not (as was sometimes remarked of his peers) mechanical or calculated.

In many ways, his persona and pianism conjured up the old American archetype of the lone hero as he appears in film and literature: able, amiable, agile, singular and definitely marching to his own drummer. Like a fine writer, he was always engaged by a rare, deft command of the language at hand, an uncanny ability to impact the one word in the poetic phrase that will infuse the whole. But, also like the author who retains his place on the bookshelf for the sheer reliability of wisdom on tap over time, he required he be met halfway. Colleagues and critics generally agreed that while he was not an open-hearted player, his finely-honed craftsmanship allowed him to get inside a score, wrestle the nuts and bolts of it and render music that is so consistently satisfying both emotionally and intellectually that one must go back to it again and again, like the great classics on the top shelf. 'There are many kinds of emotions,' he liked to say, just a little drolly. 'It just doesn't have to be physical; it can arise from other things.'

Approaching his 70th birthday at the time of our interview, John Browning was one of those people of whom one exclaimed, upon meeting anew after some lapsed years, 'He hasn't changed a bit!' – and mean it. Boyishly slim and vigorous, he maintained a busy concert career from his Door County base in northern Wisconsin to the end. A phone chat from his lakefront home last autumn confirmed that he had retained all of his early personal appeal – a laconic persona and a keen intelligence spiked by an earthy wit sharpened by years of experience playing the stages of the world – and watching many a hot young thing come and go. The conversation snapped along, a pungent pot-pourri of slang, witticisms and the thoughtful observations of one who'd seen it all yet need settle no scores.

Born in Denver, Colorado, in 1933 to a pianist and a violinist, Browning began piano studies at the age of five, and gave his first public concert with the Denver Symphony Orchestra at ten. 'My parents were not only superb musicians but wise parents,' he recalls. 'My mother, who had studied with Leschetitzky, knew better than to push me; that was crucial to my progress; there was no pressure.' When the family moved to Los Angeles in 1945, he worked a couple of summers with the Russian émigré pedagogues Joseph and Rosina Lhevinne, who later invited him to study at the Juilliard School in New York City.

'But I was hesitant,' he explained. 'I wanted an academic education, and I knew that would be difficult once I got to Juilliard, so I went to Occidental College in Los Angeles for two years and did a triple major, studying English, history and philosophy. I'm so glad I did that academic work first because it gave me a solid base in humanities when I really needed it, just as I was concentrating on piano – and it's been a tremendous resource ever since, one I keep nurturing. The deepest emotions in music have to come from the deepest emotions in yourself, and if you don't feed them, the music isn't going to happen.'

By the time he transferred to Juilliard in 1950 (and joined Van Cliburn and Misha Dichter on Rosina Lhevinne's roster) American pianism was a relatively new phenomenon. A whole generation of European careers had been lost or derailed by the Second World War, leaving a window of time into which young American pianists (Malcolm Frager, Eugene Istomin,

Seymour Lipkin, Claude Frank, Leon Fleisher, Byron Janis, and of course, the two sons of America's heartland, Van Cliburn and John Browning), themselves largely the children and/or students of European refugees of that war, could move. After Gary Graffman's and Leon Fleisher's win of America's Leventritt and Belgium's Queen Elisabeth competitions in 1948 and 1950 respectively, a whole crop of young Americans seemed poised to charm the title of 'American Horowitz.' By the time Browning won the Steinway Award in 1954, the Leventritt in 1955, and then the second prize of the Queen Elisabeth in 1956, he was considered quite possibly the country's brightest pianistic light. He had won full management, a recording contract and a European tour well before Cliburn was widely known.

And then in April of 1958 the Texan went to Moscow. Hindsight in 20/20, but even 45 years later it's still hard to know how much of America's rising musical stars could have accommodated the fall-out of the nuclear blast that Cliburn's Tchaikovsky win was to the classical world. There was no precedent; never before had there been such a cataclysmic collision of variables – geopolitical, cultural, technological – all tumbled to a megawatt static charge by the burgeoning new medium of television.

Both Browning and Cliburn have always insisted there was no rivalry between them. 'We didn't feel it because we were completely different kinds of pianists,' he reflected with just a hint of frustration. Lhevinne wanted to push him into more Classical repertoire – Schubert, Mozart – to help him differentiate himself from Cliburn's big Russian sound, but Browning resisted, aiming instead to develop virtuosic muscles he knew he had in Romantic works. In time he would pack a remarkable 43 concertos into his repertoire and carve a solid niche for himself with conductors and presenters who recognized early on his exceptional musicianship and ability to play just about everything – from Bach to Liszt and back again – with rare technical ease.

One of the first to see this was Samuel Barber, who was so impressed by his 1956 debut with Dmitry Mitropoulos and the New York Philharmonic that he invited the 23-year-old to his home to play through his big Sonata, which he'd written for Horowitz. The composer so liked what he heard that, when asked to contribute to the inaugural celebration of New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in 1962, he conceived his celebrated Piano Concerto especially for Browning. In fact, they talked a lot all through the writing as Barber, a virtuoso composer, wanted to write to the strengths of Browning's Russian training, specifically Lhevinne's penchant for the flutter pedaling, cross-hand work and complex double-sixths going in opposite directions. But the last movement came slowly, wrested as it was from depression following his sister's sudden death. 'When I finally got the score, I had only two weeks to learn it,' he recalled, 'and I was practicing fourteen hours a day because I couldn't play it at his tempo!' At Browning's urging they took it to Horowitz for his opinion of its playability. 'I was sweating bullets that he would just sit down and play it right off, but he agreed it couldn't be done, and Sam did change it.'

But Browning simply owned the work from the opening bars, playing it with such dazzling skill and lean power with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Erich Leinsdorf that acclaim was immediate and ecstatic. He subsequently performed the work hundreds upon hundreds of times and recorded it twice, first with George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra for CBS in 1964, and again in 1991 with Leonard Slatkin with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra for RCA, a benchmark performance which won him a Grammy award for 'best concerto performance' the same year. Though many have since recorded the work, none has ever matched Browning's fluent mastery of its distinctly American blend of Romantic lyricism and sinewy 20th-century tension.

Since then any number of American composers have solicited his interest in new material, but with few exceptions, he finds all disappointing. The hard thing for American composers today, he said, is to find their own voice without seeming to imitates. ‘Lenny Bernstein said it best, that most of the twelve-tone stuff is a dead-end. Look at Barber and Rorem – they found their own way but they were always criticized for being too derivative of the past.’ And here, warming to a favourite issue, he indulged in a bit of steam. ‘Why must we judge a composer on the basis of whether we think he fits some template of our devising, what the academics think he should be doing? Rachmaninoff lived and wrote in the 20th century, yet his music has nothing to do with it. Most great composers wrote outside their own period. Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, Barber, Rorem, their language is what it is, it speaks or it doesn’t, and for me, it has to speak some basic truths. Quite frankly I’m tired of getting scores where it’s all so technical, with nothing going on emotionally – I get bored with that, it’s for someone else to do.’

Like Barber, Browning always remained true to himself, impervious to styles and trends, which explains why, at the end of the day, he remained so esteemed by musicians and presenters alike. He didn’t worry about the ‘in’ and ‘out’ of the business – he’d watched them all come and go. ‘Look at Barber, who started out brilliantly,’ he observed. ‘He had Koussevitzky and Ormandy and Walter on his side and they made sure his works were played when he was very young. And then he became *déclassé* in the Bernstein era of the New York Phil. Lenny rarely conducted his music because he was very into the Copland school, and Sam was not. But the joke of the whole thing is that Copland and Barber were close friends, and they delighted in each other’s success! It was the disciples around each one who made it so ugly – it was the old thing about Brahms and Liszt and the critics, and it was so silly because there was never any hard feeling between Sam and Aaron. But you know, in the long run the public always sorts it out, and they’re usually right. Both men have worn well because people simply love their music.’

Although the Barber Concerto opened doors for him around the world, Browning avoided being typed as a Barber specialist because he worked as hard at what he called ‘archeology’. A mid-life interest in Liszt led to some new ideas about *bel canto*, and that led to his working regularly with singers, which he said had changed his ideas on phrasing and rubato. A delectable recording of Barber songs with Cheryl Studer and Thomas Hampson rendered luminous results for all. ‘I think more like a singer now,’ he says, ‘and I think I “sing” a little more when I play.’

And he always loved collaborating, picking brains. George Szell, he said, taught him more than anyone, although he admitted to being scared to death of him at first. ‘He could be difficult, but if you knew what you were doing, and why you were doing it, he liked you, and in front of an orchestra he would carry you like a baby,’ he says now. ‘But what I learned was that he was tougher on himself than anyone else. And he was a fantastic pianist, and always kept it up; I think he needed to play at some level.’ Having recording the Barber together with the Cleveland Orchestra in 1964, Browning felt comfortable enough to ask if he could work with Szell during a Swiss summer break. ‘I just wanted to pick his brain, and he said fine so I got a chalet nearby and a piano, and we had three hour lessons three or four times a week, all the Beethoven, Schubert, Mozart I wanted – can you imagine? And I couldn’t get enough, He made me understand the architecture of large scale works, how to make a movement like a book, or how to end a chapter, a paragraph, how to punctuate... and how to breathe like a singer, which is the hardest thing to do. An amazing summer – as good as it gets.’

Although Cliburn’s career attracted most of the media’s attention through those early years, Browning continued to play over 100 concerts a year, and make some fine recordings (his

Chopin etudes for RCA won many accolades). But by the mid-1970's he'd begun to burn out, lose his sense of purpose, his sensitivity; and he knew it. Most artists smack up against this mid-life transition in the long arc of a career, but few possess the wisdom to recognize its significance and successfully negotiate the changing trajectory. In the years since then, Browning was open about that period when, in his forties, he knew he'd reached some inner walls. 'It happens to everyone,' he said. 'You realise that time is getting shorter and you're on the other side of the hill, and if you don't get going, you're not going to.' The secret, he determined, was pretty simple: re-evaluate everything you've ever believed in.

To do so he opted, rather characteristically, for the 'lone hero' route; he dared to step back from a public ever-eager to adore the next fifteen-year-old, to look inward to the equation itself, rather than the variable – management, repertoire, concerts. At some point he found answers in Catholicism, and a latent faith subsequently, quietly, launched a personal and professional renaissance. In later life he didn't feel the need to discuss it other than to note that daily mass and regular retreats facilitate a career that continues to flower. 'It's just discipline that works for me,' he said. 'That's all.' He didn't talk about it much because he didn't need to; the proof was in the playing, and a career which gained in speed and excellent at a time when many begin to slow down.

If anything, reviews got even better as Browning entered his fifties and sixties. His brilliant collaboration with Slatkin and the St Louis Symphony Orchestra on the Barber works led to adventurous new recording projects over the last decade: Mozart's K271 and K488 piano concertos, 30 of Scarlatti's sonatas, Barber's solo piano works (all for Music Masters), Beethoven's Triple Concerto (RCA) and the collection of Barber's songs (DG) to name just the highlights.

He fully credited his Russian pedagogy for a solid and flexible technique that has enabled him, nearly alone of his generation, to sustain a career over 45 years. 'Yeah, so many players of my time had hand problems,' he mused, 'but I don't subscribe to the pounding theory. I think it might have had something to do with early training, the way you learn to use our shoulders and arms. Rosina worked with me a lot on the physicality of playing and I know this was crucial for me, especially in the early years of my career when we found some horrendously bad pianos on tour. But the pedagogy... we're losing that here, and from what I hear, perhaps in post-Soviet Russia too. Like it or not, the Soviet conservatories did a marvellous job of teaching technique because they assigned the very best teachers to the most gifted six- and seven-year-old students. Rosina used to say to me, 'By the time they come to me, *eet ees too laaayt!*' It has to start then. I don't see the quality of pianism in this country we had even 30 years ago, and I think it's from lack of this kind of teaching. Now, I tend to think of the great American pianistic talents are in jazz.'

Right up to the time of his death, Browning was still playing about 80 concerts a year around the world. And at home and on the road, his constant companion was Mimi, a four-pound papillion who traveled everywhere with him, very nearly stealing any show she could. Orchestras and audiences adored her, but she had to sit in the hall with someone else during concerts because she's a shameless ham. 'Actually, she's full of hell,' he growled. 'But you can learn so much by living with an animal; it's one of the best things we can do, I think. She's great company, and now she's learning the ropes of the business too.'

When we spoke, John was still putting in five to six hours practice a day (Lhevinne's double-thirds and double-sixths were still a must) because he believed a serious artist's real life revolved around daily work, not what happened on the stage, and there was always room for

improvement. (“Will someone please kill me now?” he once famously pleaded, on hearing Rachmaninoff play his transcription of Kreisler’s *Liebesfreud* ‘I don’t want to play the piano again, ever!’) And he read widely. ‘History, art, philosophy... I’m really drawn to all that stuff I studied in college because this kind of discipline is intrinsic to what I do,’ he explained, and then paused. ‘I think you make consistently moral choices in art. I know that sounds funny, but I really think there’s an easy way and a hard way to play, a high road and a low road. It’s a lot more work to get the fingered legato just right, to work out that rubato so it breathes, and maybe an audience wouldn’t notice – but it’s so much more satisfying, that high road. So I’m always looking deeper to go higher, I guess, because at the end of the day that’s what has to drive you – going higher. I can’t do it any other way.’

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