

One hundred years ago in March, with Romania in the midst of war and its future as a state in question, the pianist Dinu Lipatti was born in Bucharest. Tumultuous circumstances in which to begin one's life—yet for those of us who treasure Lipatti's recordings ("small in output but of the purest gold," in the words of the man who produced many of them, Walter Legge), the real tragedy was just how short that life would be. Longevity seems to be the rare gift of pianists, more so than with other musicians. Arthur Rubinstein and Mieczysław Horszowski gave their final recitals at 89 and 100, and just a few years ago, Menahem Pressler, who fled the Nazis as a teenager, returned to Berlin at the age of 90 to make his debut with the Philharmonic. As a consequence, a mythic aura surrounds those pianists who happened to die young, William Kapell and Julius Katchen, among them. So it is with Dinu Lipatti, who lived only to 33 before succumbing to the Hodgkin's lymphoma that darkened his final years.

He grew up in a musical household, his mother a pianist, his father a violinist who had studied with the famed pedagogue Carl Flesch and the Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate. As if the boy's pedigree needed further burnishing, his godfather was none other than the violinist and composer George Enescu, Romania's most celebrated musician. He began lessons with his mother at four and was soon winning prizes, not only for his piano playing but also for his compositions. (He would later become an esteemed teacher and critic, as well.) In 1933, he participated in the Vienna International Music Competition but only came second—tied for second, at that—leading one of the jury members, Alfred Cortot, to resign in a fit of pique. Cortot took Lipatti to Paris's Ecole Normale de Musique as his pupil, where the young man also studied with Nadia Boulanger, Paul Dukas, and Charles Munch.

A career soon commenced, interrupted only by the Second World War. Lipatti returned to Romania and eventually sought the safety of Geneva. The year was 1943, and this is when his mysterious illness appeared. The doctors had no idea what to make of the persistent weariness and fevers, unaware that these were symptoms of blood cancer. Not until 1947, the year Lipatti married fellow pianist Madeleine Cantacuzène, was a diagnosis finally made, but his health had so deteriorated that he had to curtail his concert activity. He continued teaching at the Geneva Conservatory, where he'd been appointed professor, and the occasional respite provided by cortisone injections, novel at the time, allowed him to make, over the next few years, many of the recordings that are so valued today. Cortisone, however, was never going to solve the problem. It wasn't just the fevers and fatigue: unbearable pain shot through Lipatti's arms. Barring deafness, I can think of few fates worse for a pianist.

Thomas Mann once said that Lipatti's suffering was matched only by his deep spirituality. I think about this whenever I listen to the pianist's final recording. On September 16, 1950, he played at a festival in the city of Besançon in eastern France, not far from the border with Switzerland—a performance that has become entrenched in musical lore.

There was a legitimate question of whether Lipatti would even be able to play. In the days leading up to the recital, he had taken severely ill, and by the afternoon of September 16, he came down with a high fever, with his doctor urging him not to perform. The pianist might well have cancelled, had he not learned that the Salle du Parlement was already packed. So he took a cortisone shot and made his way to the hall. By all accounts, he walked slowly, ponderously onto the stage, and once the applause died down, he warmed up with a simple arpeggio. Then he began to play.

It can be lazy at best, facile at worst, to allow what we know of a musician's life to influence the way we make sense of a particular recording. But in Lipatti's case, how can we not? How can we forget the toll it took to simply dress and appear before an audience that day, let alone play like an angel for well over an hour? The violinist Yehudi Menuhin once described Lipatti as the "manifestation of a spiritual realm, resistant to all pain and suffering," and this is precisely what we hear in this astonishing recital, from the first notes of Bach's Partita No. 1, the tone colors diverse and rich, the pianist's touch perfectly weighted upon the keys. If, by contemporary standards of scholarship, Lipatti's Bach is not quite "authentic," he would not have cared one bit. In an essay found among his papers following his death, he warned against relying only on history and research in shaping one's interpretations: "Never

approach a score with eyes of the dead or the past, for they may bring you nothing more in return than Yorick's skull." He was beholden to no dogma, only to his own keen intelligence and a deep communion with the score. Listen carefully to this Bach partita, to the delicacy of the Corrente, to the bright hymn-like Gigue, and every tempo, every inflection, and the shape of every phrase seem so carefully considered, as if Bach himself were speaking through this oracular presence seated upon the stage.

No less impressive are Mozart's Sonata in A minor K. 310, at once intimate and grand, with plenty of drama throughout, and the two Schubert Impromptus that followed, the cascade of notes in the second of these, in E-flat major, tossed off with a flourish. Chopin was next: a set of waltzes to conclude the program. I cannot believe that these are the performances of a dying man, so vital are they, so lilting and elegant. Lipatti's Chopin doesn't weep or sigh. Rather, it is eminently tasteful, full of finesse, without a trace of indulgence. And through it all, we hear that unmistakable, patrician touch.

He was to perform 14 waltzes, but as he got to the end, he started ever so slightly to falter. Even *his* Promethean endurance had its limits. Too exhausted to perform Chopin's Waltz No. 2 in A-flat major, Lipatti got up and walked off the stage, the audience making not a sound, unsure of what was happening. But he did indeed return, and instead of the Chopin, he offered the first piece he had performed in public, only 15 years before: Myra Hess's transcription of Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*. This performance was not, alas, preserved on the record that was subsequently issued, so we can only imagine what it must have sounded like when a man completely spent, his body wracked with pain and heated by fever, came out to play that placid, serene work, with its gentle melody and contrapuntal line tolling like a bell. Lipatti would be dead in less than three months, but these final, quiet notes, this fitting bookend to an all-too-brief career, must have been as pure a musical utterance as any artist could make.