



Preface

Blessed with a colossal technique and a superabundance of musicianship and intelligence, Egon Petri was one of the supremely gifted pianists of this [20th] century.

Bryan Crimp, 1994

I have long wanted to gather together and share reminiscences of our teacher and friend Egon Petri (1881–1962). A goodly amount of these are in his own words, since in his last year of life I met with him weekly for intimate question-and-answer sessions, using an ancient tape recorder. Throughout, he was ever cordial, generous, frank, and (it still seems to me) utterly truthful. He always spoke with that charming combination of confidence, worldly knowledge, and humility.

It is clear now, in 2018, that Egon Petri's story, his performing and teaching art, are as relevant as ever, an invaluable link from the past to the future. His remarks, mottos, and maxims by no means encompass his artistry and instruction, but they do represent his modes of thinking—arresting, penetrating, sensible, time-independent. He was not only a great twentieth-century virtuoso, but also a great teacher. You will see this for yourself, Dear Reader, and this is fitting: Petri always insisted that his ideas stand on their own.

I have divided this account into four sections: 1. Youth; 2. Influences; 3. Teaching; 4. Repertoire and Performance. In addition to the taped interviews, these chapters also reflect information gathered from personal conversations over the years, as well as materials from private lessons and master classes.



Heidi Elfenbein (my future wife) and I were already studying with Egon Petri when we met. Besides our weekly lessons with him in his home, we performed in his summer master classes at the San Francisco Conservatory and Mills College in Oakland, California. During those years, we experienced the joy of Petri's company socially as well as professionally. Lessons always went overtime. His generosity even included the purchase of music: one day at a lesson, Egon was horrified with Heidi's edition of the Beethoven Sonatas (Schnabel).

"My dear child," he said, "you must go right away to the Berkeley Music House and buy the Tovey edition!" When she replied, "I'll do it soon," Egon immediately added, "Just put it on my account."

Moreover, lessons regularly metamorphosed into social occasions. Dinner would follow, with special attention to the choice of wines. Stories and wit would illumine the night. There seemed no end to the tales of events, persons, places, or bemused speculations over causes, devices, or results. Egon attended a rehearsal for my debut with the San Francisco Symphony (Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto); the fee allowed Heidi and me to marry. In fact, Egon was best man for our wedding in San Francisco! For us, these were exhilarating times.

We always attended Egon's performances in various locations in the Bay Area. As usual, he played a wide range of literature. Although he was then in his seventies, his concerts retained their vigor, structural acumen, and emotional breadth. This included a performance of the F-minor Quintet of Brahms with the Budapest String Quartet, and, at age seventy-nine, his presentation of the thirty-two Beethoven sonatas in six recitals at the San Francisco Museum of Art. I turned pages for these recitals. Egon seldom looked up or glanced at the score. Several times, as I sat entranced, he rescued me by deftly turning pages back for repeats, a quicksilver smile signalling forgiveness.

Egon seemed always cognizant of what his pupils (and former pupils) were doing. Whenever Heidi and I performed somewhere, he wished to know what, when, where. In our live solo broadcasts over



radio KPFA in Berkeley, he always rang up the station at intermission, acknowledging us, urging us on: “Lovely! Go on, go on.” He always tuned in and thus helped validate our forays into literature we knew he had performed so brilliantly all over the world. Such generosity seemed singular then. Many decades later, it only seems more rare.

In the 1950s, several of Petri’s LP recordings appeared, including a Westminster disc of Liszt transcriptions (Mendelssohn, Gounod, Mozart, Beethoven) and the Mephisto Waltz, an album of Bach-Busoni transcriptions (including Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, and the “St Anne” Prelude and Fugue in E-flat), and a recording of a stunning performance of Beethoven’s “Hammerclavier” Sonata. An album of Busoni followed, which included the Fantasia contrapuntistica of which Jan Holcman, in a retrospective in the *Saturday Review* of 25 May 1972, stated, “In this disc Petri’s pianism reaches spectacular heights.” A Concord disc of late Beethoven sonatas also appeared. The critics proudly proclaimed the “Hammerclavier” Sonata a recording of Petri in his prime. Egon was very pleased, for he said, “How nice! For no one likes to sit on his own tombstone.”

After his death in 1962, recordings occasionally surfaced, such as HQM 1112, an EMI reissue of sterling performances from earlier 78s, and a dell’Art disc (DA 9009) gleaned from Petri’s radio broadcasts during a six-month residence in Basel, Switzerland. This recording includes Franck’s Prelude, Chorale, and Fugue, Liszt’s Petrarch Sonnets, and pieces of Medtner and Busoni. The Franck, especially, is a haunting performance, seeming to sum up a lifetime of sorrow, resolve, and triumph. These kinds of epic pieces seemed to suit Egon best.

Lastly, in early 2016, a kind of milestone appeared, a caring, deft remastering of all Petri’s Columbia and Electrola solo and concerto recordings from 1929 through 1951, by Appian Publications & Recordings Ltd., UK (APR 7701), on seven discs. Here are the epochal recordings of Petri’s performances of Bach, Bach-Busoni, Beethoven, Liszt, Chopin, Franck, etc.—nine hours and one-minute! I



comment on this recording set at the end of chapter 4, “Repertoire and Performance” (see the “Postscript” section in chapter 4). Here, I say only that APR has done us an incomparable favor, for now one can hear Egon’s unique artistry in new clarity and depth.

A note regarding my taped interviews mentioned at the outset. Alas, the original tapes from 1961 to 1962 no longer exist, due to our nomadic lives, many residencies, and the passage of time. The small portable tape recorder, which recorded via small spools (at 33 1/3 speed), is also no longer extant. It was completely worn out, with the constant forward and backward turning in order to transcribe the text via typewriter, in the years 1962–1963. This acute and punishing process was accomplished almost entirely by a brave Heidi Elfenbein-Kanwischer over many months. Currently in our possession are the transcriptions themselves, almost two hundred pages, legal size, typed, double-spaced: Egon’s words exactly as he spoke them.

In addition, we still possess two booklets given us by Egon: one, an alphabetical repertoire list of Egon’s programs from 1892 to 1929 (the compiler unknown; see Appendix), and the other, replicas of Egon’s concert programs from 1931 through 1936, which show that Egon was concertizing throughout the 1930s in Europe, Great Britain, Scotland, the United States, and Canada. Naturally, I have leaned heavily on these booklets in chapter 4, “Repertoire.” These two documents alone, stating the simple facts, are astonishing in their scope and import. When Egon said to his students, “I think a pianist should be able to play everything,” he was obviously speaking to himself. To somewhat simplify his code: he expected singular excellence in everything whenever and wherever one performed. That he traversed such an enormous range of literature remains phenomenal.

In my opening paragraph, I mentioned, along with Egon’s extraordinary confidence and worldly knowledge, his essential humility. As he said, “I think that I am so chaste a man. . . I don’t play to the gallery. I don’t like to show the works. If you have a watch . . . you



want to see the time . . . and not all the springs inside.” “I try not to overshadow the composer.”

In short, then, through these years, Egon, who had seen worlds appear and disappear in his epochal life¹, remained always a cheering presence, ever rational, probing, bemused, ironic—kind—a philosophical pragmatist. Happily, he remained for us to the end both a formidable, exacting taskmaster and a generous, encouraging friend. As you will see, his story is as arresting as his art.

Note: It is already obvious that this will be a partisan narrative. Nevertheless, I have endeavored to tell the truth as Egon told it to me.

¹ Not only the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the advent of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the rise of Franco, Mussolini, the rise and fall of Nazism and Hitler, the rise of Stalin, but also smaller occurrences. Petri told us: “There is also a Russian church which was built in Warsaw on the big Satsky Platz (built by the Prince of Saxony, August the Strong, who reportedly had three hundred illegitimate children, who also became king of Poland). Satsky Platz was the old square in which all the riots were held. The Russians, to spite the Poles, built a church with onion-shaped domes and cupolas on this place. I was in Warsaw when it was Russian, in 1914, just before the war started, still under the Czar (and I played in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the Bach D-minor Concerto, etc.).

“The second time I came, the Germans were there. . . . They were taking what was supposed to be pure gold tiles from the onion domes. (The Russians, who had been in charge of all this, used copper and had just had the gold gilded on it, and thus cheating, they made their money.) The Germans needed metal for shooting, so they melted all these gilded copper plates and made them into bullets. They covered the domes with tin.

“The third time I was there, Poland was free, so they had razed the church to the ground, and there was the old Satsky Platz back again!

“Now, in reality . . . I wouldn’t be at all surprised if now (in 1962!), the Russians had again erected a church and the Poles all forced to be Catholic!”



To my entire recollection, Petri did not feel the need to alter, to deceive, to aggrandize. And whether he remembered clearly or not, he always admitted either openly and cheerfully.

Brief biographies of Egon Petri often refer to a “heart attack” he reportedly suffered in 1946, after which he supposedly “abandoned the concert stage for a teaching post in California” (e.g., *Gramophone* review, Dec. 2015). This is not accurate. Petri did not have a heart attack, but rather a gastric attack, according to his physician, Doctor Deissler, a close friend of Petri and his daughter Ulla (who always lived close by). After arriving in California, Petri soon recovered and never abandoned the concert stage. As Ulla said, “If Pater did not play enough concerts, doors would start to slam.”

In his later years, Egon was advised by Dr. Deissler to spend one day a week at rest in bed “doing nothing.” Petri accepted this cheerfully, saying, “I am to do absolutely nothing, and I have an entire day in which to do it.”

On those rest days, Egon’s favorite activity was reading Dickens (also a favorite for recital days), or reading full scores of Haydn’s symphonies, which he especially prized. (Egon had a complete edition of Haydn’s one-hundred-and-four symphonies in his library.) As he said, “Haydn always cheers me. There are always places where I laugh out loud.” Petri held Haydn on a par with Mozart, an opinion not generally accepted then.

Egon had personal joys besides Dickens (especially the *Pickwick Papers*) and Haydn: he adored the sweet pea flowers that Mrs. Petri grew in her capacious garden. She always had generous numbers growing in long rows for Egon’s delight, and bouquets displayed in their home. Then, too, he held deep memories of the first crocuses peeking up through snow in the mountains surrounding Zakopane, Poland. No matter how often he witnessed the phenomenon, Egon recounted, it always moved him to tears. He prized California, too, “where one can grow so many things year ’round—even music!”



Egon was modest, though confident, as I have said, and for him, truth-telling emanated from a deep innate honesty, fierce integrity as an artist, and his humanity as a world citizen. Nearly sitting on his own tombstone, as he said, he felt even more free to tell the truth just as he held and recalled it. So, he did. And here it is.



Alfred, Heidi, Egon, and Heidi's mother in Berkeley, California, 1962, shortly before Sylvia was born.

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If there are any remaining errors in this book, they are mine alone.





Chapter 1

Youth: Violin and Piano

If ever there was a pianist who used a colossal technique merely as a means to a musical end, it was Egon Petri.

Harold Schonberg, *New York Times*, 10 March 1985

It's best to start as near the beginning as possible: the birth of Egon Petri, on 23 March 1881 in Hanover, Germany.

The first thing I want to say is that my name is not Italian nor Hungarian. All my ancestors on my father's side are Dutch. I have a book in my possession, *The Contributions of Holland to the Sciences*, that says there was a very famous mathematician in Deventer in the year 1575 whose name was Kalus Peters, alias Petri. So the name is Latin, because that was the language in which scientists wrote and talked together. . . . So that is the origins of my name—which is Latin and meant “the son of Peter”! I should call myself Peterson, but nobody would know who I am.

About his family on his father's side, he recalled:

I never knew my grandparents on my father's side. I only know that my grandfather was an oboist, probably in the Utrecht Orchestra. He was born in Geist, a suburb of Utrecht.

I don't know where my father learned to play the violin—probably from a member of the orchestra in Utrecht.

Egon recalled having musical uncles:



My father had three brothers, Martinus, Willem, and Albert. Albert died early of T.B. My two surviving uncles were also excellent musicians. Martinus was an oboist and organist, and Willem was a cellist, violinist, pianist, and theory teacher, who founded the Petri Music School—that existed until my uncle died at eighty-four. I’ve been in the building very often and practiced there. It was also his home. (The two brothers had homes opposite each other). . . . I had been practicing and eating there when the war broke out in 1939. Willem was the teacher of Willem Mengelberg²—the very famous conductor under whom I played very often in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw.

In 1883, the Petri family moved to Leipzig. Egon recalled:

In Leipzig, when I was three years old, I was in Kindergarten. Once my mother had a complaint—the teacher wrote a letter which said, “Will you please tell your son Egon not always to sing in thirds and sixths, because it upsets all the other children.” We were supposed to sing in unison, of course. I found it pretty. The first signs of musicality.

Early Music Education and Performances

Egon Petri remembered early lessons with his mother, Kathi, on a quarter-size violin, the first on his fifth birthday. This was a tradition, since she, too, had been given her first lesson at age five, on a quarter-size violin, by *her* father, then second violinist in the Berlin State Opera Orchestra. She came from a distinguished musical German family.

My grandfather was second violinist in the Berlin State Opera. He was not a great violinist—as my father was. My mother had been given a little violin when she was five years old which became a tradition in our family. I was given the same little quarter violin when I

² See note no. 15 and text later in this chapter for more on Willem Mengelberg.