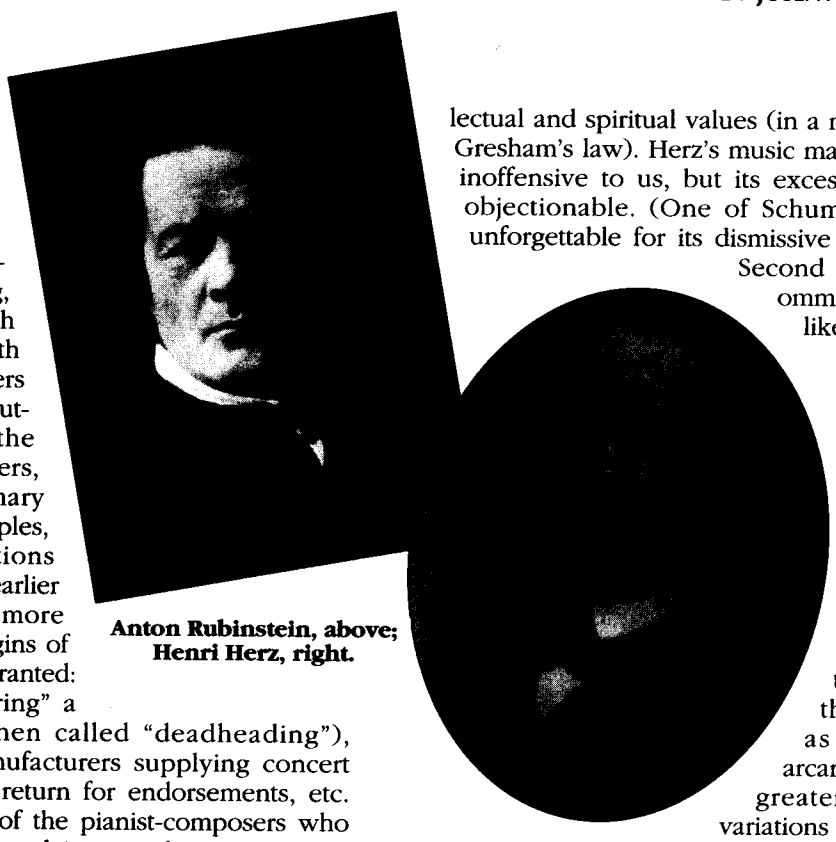
Doodlin' With SUSANNA

By Joseph Smith

R. Allen Lott's *From Paris to Peoria: How European Piano Virtuosos Brought Classical Music to the American Heartland* (Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-514883-5) is an absorbing, readable book in which music history interacts with social history. Some readers may be familiar with the outlines of this story, but the detailed account Lott offers, rich in quotes from primary sources and musical examples, modifies the generalizations and corrects the errors of earlier accounts. Perhaps even more interesting, we see the origins of customs that we take for granted: advance publicity, "papering" a hall with free tickets (then called "deadheading"), reserved seats, piano manufacturers supplying concert instruments to pianists in return for endorsements, etc. This article discusses two of the pianist-composers who toured the U.S., Henri Herz and Anton Rubinstein.



Anton Rubinstein, above; Henri Herz, right.

The Parisian virtuoso Henri Herz impressed Americans with his personal and pianistic elegance. His American debut was in 1846, a year after that of Leopold De Meyer—the first European pianist to tour the U.S. De Meyer had presented himself as a zoo animal: a wild, savage specimen to be marveled at by the public—he even called himself "the lion pianist." With Herz, however, we Americans found ourselves on the other side of the bars—Herz regarded *us* as strange exotic animals, and wrote accounts of our funny ways for the delectation of Paris.

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Herz was fabulously successful as pianist, composer, and, like the great Clementi before him, piano manufacturer. Schumann, however, continually cited him as an example of the most commercial, obvious, and shallow in music. Schumann believed that music like that of Herz, formulaic and obvious, drove out music with more intellectual and spiritual values (in a musical equivalent of Gresham's law). Herz's music may seem pleasant and inoffensive to us, but its excessive popularity *was* objectionable. (One of Schumann's comments is unforgettable for its dismissive succinctness: Herz's Second Concerto "...is recommended to those who liked his first.")

In Europe, when Herz played one of his variations or fantasies on themes from French or Italian opera, he was gratifying the public with familiar tunes. In the U.S., however, these works struck the average listener as highbrow and arcane. Here, Herz won greater success with his variations on the then universally known Irish folksong, "The Last Rose of Summer."

The best way to rouse the rabble, though, is to offer something with national associations. In 1848, therefore, Herz composed his *Impromptu Burlesques* [*sic*] *sur des mélodies populaires des Christy's mènestrels*, Op. 162. (Naturally, a composition published in America on American tunes would be titled in French—the language is so *distingué*.) The first of the two tunes used by Herz is Stephen Foster's "Oh! Susanna." Very soon, this song was to become the unofficial anthem of forty-niners headed to the California gold rush, and in fact Herz followed them, and their gold. The present first variation certainly has a pleasant jingling charm. Comparing this variation with Herz's variations on

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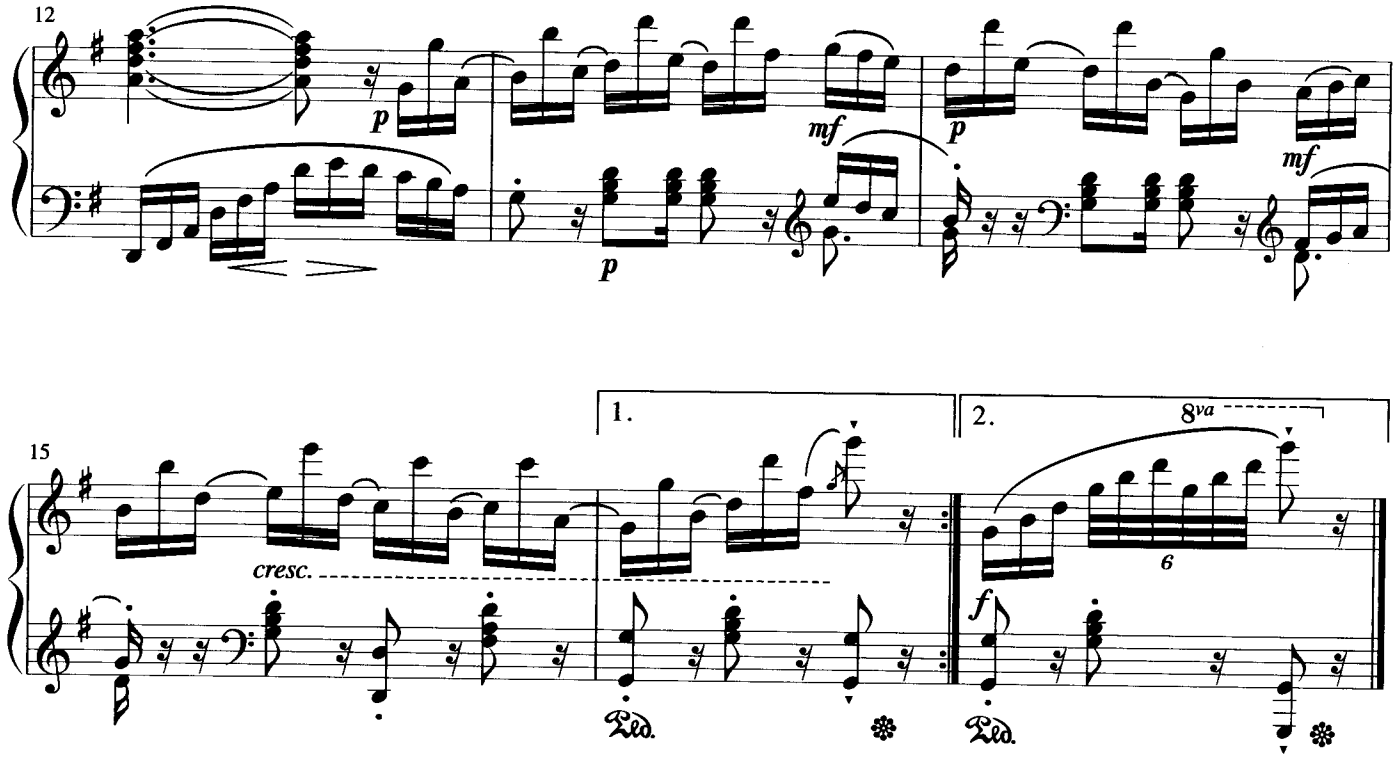


Rare Finds *continued*

other themes, however, reveals that his composing method was like that of a musical blender: whatever the texture of the original, it came out as a smooth, homogenous purée.

Anton Rubinstein's initial motive for coming here was the same as his predecessors: $'s. (He had originally asked to be paid in gold, but the inconvenience of this was soon apparent to him, and he allowed William Steinway to deposit his earnings in a bank.) But Rubinstein respected himself and his art too much to coast on the endless repetition of a few bravura pieces, as his predecessors generally had done. Even when he played on a mixed program with assisting artists filling out the evening (as was then customary), he programmed music of substance. Eventually, in major cities, he began performing long and difficult solo recitals. For instance, as a farewell to the U.S., he played a series of ten recitals in as many days in Boston and New York, with seven different programs, some as long as two and a half hours. His excitement at presenting masterpieces to a virgin public seems to have inspired him to give of himself with lavish generosity. One simply cannot overestimate the importance of Rubinstein to American musical culture. The public learned that great classics (including such difficult music as Beethoven's last Sonata, Op. 111) could in fact be thrilling.

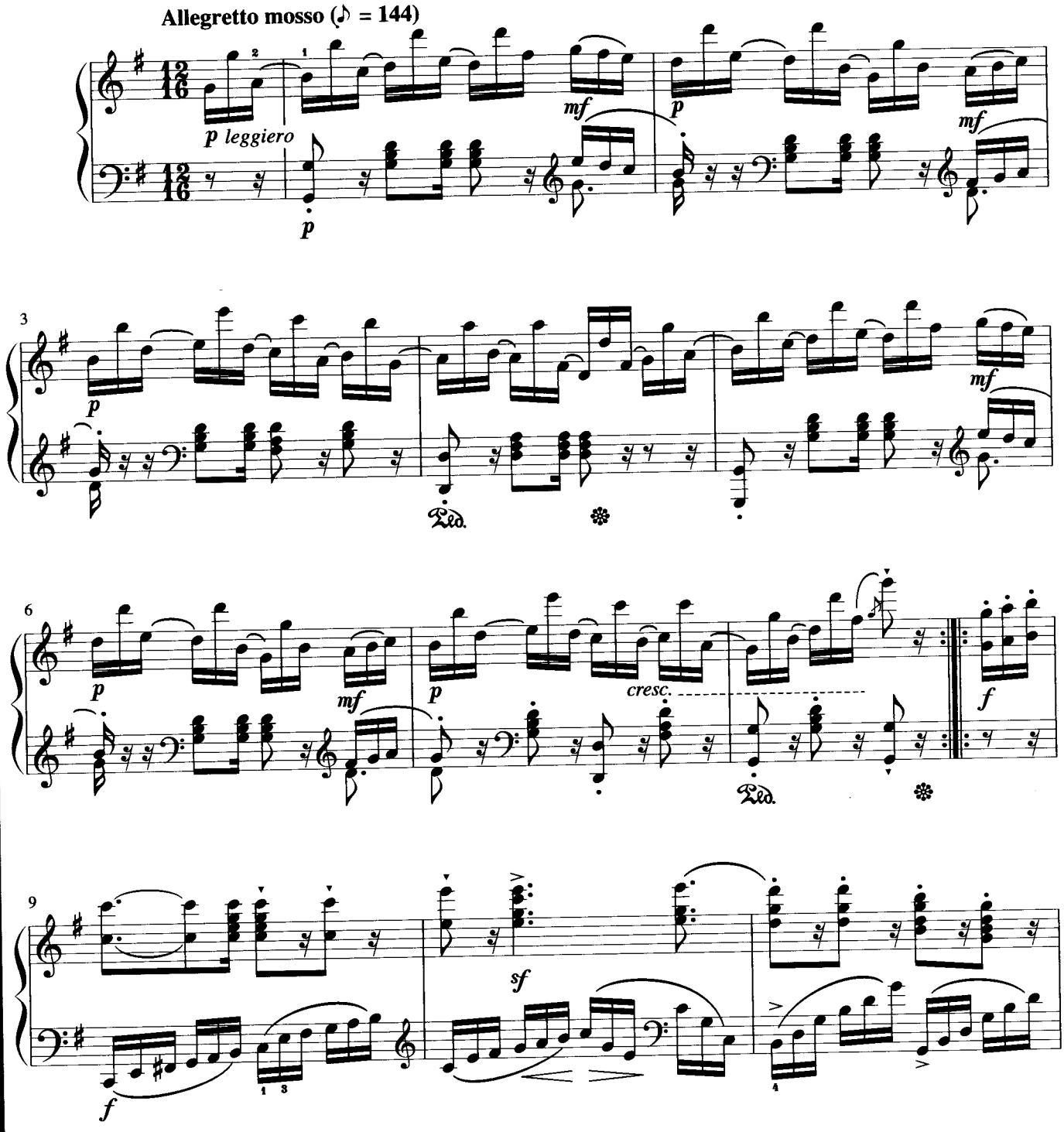
Rubinstein, like his predecessors De Meyer, and Herz, composed a work on a well-known American melody. He did not, however, present this piece until his farewell concert—in other words, it was not composed to pander to the public, but rather to thank Americans for their warm appreciation. Whatever he did, Rubinstein did in a big way. His *Variations sur l'air "Yankee Doodle"* is frightening in its earnest thoroughness. Rubinstein does not allow the tune to gallop away in a clatter of double octaves until he has wrested forty-three variations from it. As the three variations presented in this issue show, he does not just decorate the theme, but actually tries to re-conceive it. This can be considered the last pianistic word on "Yankee Doodle."

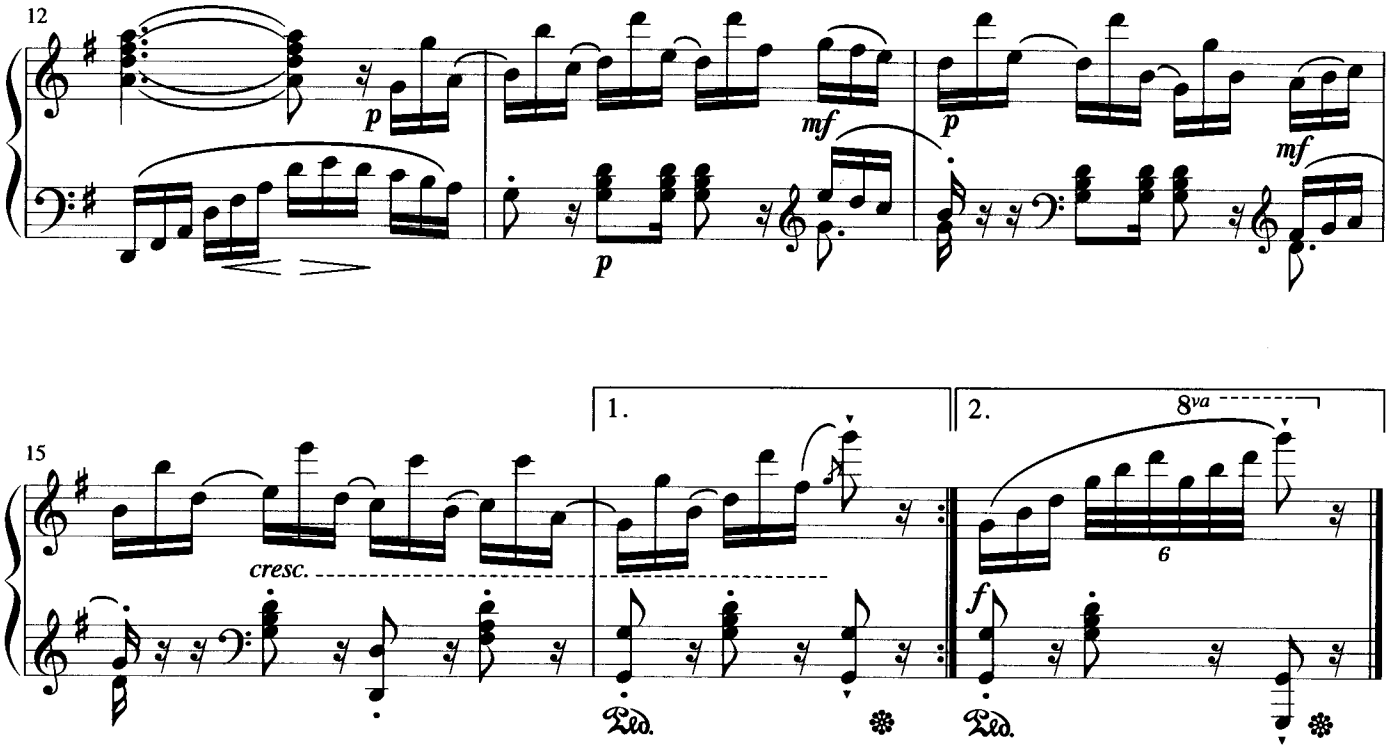
But, in fact, Rubinstein's giant work might have proven to be merely the *second*-to-last word on "Yankee Doodle." On one of his first concert tours of the U.S., Jan Ignace Paderewski told William Mason, the highly respected American pianist, that he was composing a fantasy on "Yankee Doodle" and was preparing to honor Mason with the dedication. Paderewski observed some involuntary reaction or gesture from Mason, and interpreted it as displeasure. Mason hastened to assure him that it was merely surprise at the coincidence that Rubinstein had already dedicated one piece of Doodliana to him. This seemed to have discouraged Paderewski from finishing the piece, and we must take Mason's word that the part Paderewski had completed was the best treatment of "Yankee Doodle" ever. ■

See this rare music by Herz on page 10 and Rubinstein on page 12.

VARIATION ON "OH! SUSANNA"

HENRI HERZ
(1803-1888)





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