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Music Conquers Time at Nursing Home

By MERRI ROSENBERG

FOR most professional pianists, the attentive silence of a concert hall -- punctuated only by the occasional cough or rustle of a program -- is essential to the performance.

But the pianist Amiram Rigai seemed oblivious to the distractions around him early this month when he performed his first hourlong program, which included the "Pastorale" Sonata by Beethoven and the Polonaise in A by Chopin, at the Hebrew Home for the Aged here.

Instead of the hushed surroundings of Carnegie Hall or the Merkin Concert Hall in Manhattan with their perfectly tuned Steinways, here Mr. Rigai had to play on an out-of-tune piano, many of whose keys had been stripped of their ivory, and contend with the nearly constant interruptions of staff members' pagers and public-address announcements along with visitors walking in and out of the open lounge where the concert was held.

The audience, many of whom were wheeled into the lounge by attendants or were able to make their way to their seats with a cane or a walker, took some time to settle quietly. Professional Career Started at 9

None of this seemed to affect Mr. Rigai, who performed with the same sort of passionate enthusiasm and virtuosic technique that he brings to patrons at professional concerts. As winter sunlight filtered through the picture windows to reveal a view of the Hudson River and the Palisades, his elderly audience focused on the music with almost the same intensity that Mr. Rigai did.

Some people watched, moving their fingers in a pantomime of the pianist's gestures. Others listened, with half-shut eyes, as if the music triggered emotional memories that they wanted to recall without external distractions. By the end of the concert, many shouted bravos -- and those who could stand offered a standing ovation.

"I love to play for these people," said Mr. Rigai, an Israeli-born pianist who lives in Riverdale with his wife, Deborah Klonymus, an anesthesiologist, and their 15-year-old son, Jonathan, and performed at Carnegie Hall with Leopold Stokowski in 1963. "I feel very close to them. They're so responsive and full of life. These people need encouragement. When you first come into the nursing homes, they look so gloomy and without hope. Music is a tremendous therapy, more than drugs, for the brain and the soul. You can cheer them up and give them new life through the music. Face it, we will all end up like this. The body can break down, but if the spirit is alive you can stimulate it."

Mr. Rigai -- who has performed professionally, starting in Israel when he was 9, and now tours in Europe, Asia and South America when he is not playing in the United States or Israel -- gives at least 20 concerts a year in nursing homes and hospitals in the New York City area. He began doing this when he was a teen-ager and gave concerts to wounded soldiers in Israeli hospitals. Usually Mr. Rigai plays a week or two before his professional recitals as a way to test his repertory, but sometimes he takes his music into the hospitals and nursing homes simply for the pleasure it gives him.

"When I'm playing professionally, you couldn't give me a million dollars to play on an instrument like this," Mr. Rigai said as he gestured toward the piano in the Hebrew Home for the Aged. "But I can't be fussy about a piano here. Why should these people, these wonderful people, be deprived of going to a concert hall? Sure it's a challenge to play under these conditions, but it helps me in teaching me to

perform under all sorts of experiences. I just concentrate on my music." 'I Could Listen to This Every Day'

Asked about what other pianists would face, Maria Scaros-Mercado, director of therapeutic activities at the home, said, "We are currently refinishing a beautiful antique Wurlitzer piano in wonderful condition, which was recently donated to the home."

For members of Mr. Rigai's audience, the enjoyment was obviously mutual. "It's the best thing that has happened to me in the year and a half that I have lived here," Lillian Fishman said. "It heals up whatever has happened."

Rose Kaufman added: "I could listen to this every day. It goes through me. I hope he will come back."

Beatrice Siegel, a resident of the home and a pianist who had taught at the Greenwich House Music School in Manhattan for many years, said: "We all enjoyed it immensely. I was brought up in a musical household and played Bach and Chopin. This was a very nice program. If he could come again, we'd enjoy it."

The residents of the Hebrew Home for the Aged, many of whom are designated "well elderly" because they are ambulatory and able to handle most of their daily needs, are frequent recipients of New York City's cultural offerings. Juilliard students regularly perform in chamber music concerts, and jazz groups and other artists, like the Harlem Jazz Band and the singer Claire Barry, come to the home frequently.

"It's really a philosophy of ours," said Daniel A. Reingold, associate executive vice president of the home. "This is their home, and it's important to integrate cultural activities into people's day-to-day lives."

Mrs. Scaros-Mercado added: "Music is probably the most universal communicator across cultures and across generations. We find that music does use a certain part of the brain, or stimulates a certain part, that is related to memory, youth and feelings. These are areas we choose to stimulate here at the home, to help people become more alive. There is a certain dignity connected with being alive and having these sorts of feelings. So many residents don't look forward to anything, but they look forward to the music."