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Obsessive perfection

Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli's playing continues to infuriate and inspire in equal measure, a quarter of a century after his death. **Benjamin Ivry** explores the contradictory qualities of a fascinating and unique artist

A century after his birth, the Italian pianist Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli (1920-1995) continues to be a confounding figure. He produced stunningly cataclysmic effects across a wide range of repertoire, to the point of alarming some listeners – especially rival pianists. In time, he became revered for his transformative renditions of Rachmaninov's Concerto No 4, Liszt's *Totentanz*, Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*, Schumann's *Carnival Scenes from Vienna* and the Bach-Busoni Chaconne in D minor,

Michelangeli could bring unexpected urgency to neglected works, such as the Sonata No 5 in C by Baldassarre Galuppi, a composer rarely mentioned except by devotees of Robert Browning's poem *A Toccata of Galuppi's*. Yet pejorative stories continue to abound about the pianist. Slated for a reputedly tiny repertoire, in fact he studied and played far more works, including contemporary compositions, than he ever recorded. Murky tales about his wartime record and even rumours about his reading habits, supposedly limited to Mickey Mouse comic strips, leave questions open about the Italian virtuoso.

Critics who cared about such superficialities were baffled by his appearance, deeming him a 'mad scientist' because of his pallor and long, Romantic-era hairstyle. Some of his cherished beliefs about teaching and performance were held with a ferocity that could be seen as approaching madness, even by his disciples.

Most books about Michelangeli are by friends and colleagues who accept the positive narrative of his life. This leaves room for a more objective assessment, as found in Jochen Köhler's new biography, *Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli: In Search of Perfection* (Wolke Verlag). Köhler describes his first exposure to Michelangeli's artistry as a 14-year-old keyboard pupil. On that occasion in 1974 in Bremen, Köhler was seated in the front row alongside his father, who warned him to 'remain absolutely still; the artist is known for readily stopping concerts in the event of a disruption'. Michelangeli appeared onstage, compelling 'tense attention and absolute stillness' by his concentration, 'aristocratic … dignified and sovereign' bearing, and visible 'feeling of painful torment, a burden of responsibility'.

After the recital, in which every note was given expressive value, Michelangeli reappeared for a curtain call: 'With a small, slightly tortured smile on his lips, he grips the left wrist with his right hand, lets it hang loosely as a sign of exhaustion and thus apologetically indicates his tiredness. The audience continues to applaud for a while, but has understood that there will be no encore, and gradually moves away, half uplifted, half dazed.'

This life-changing impact was not experienced by every listener. Michelangeli attracted extraordinary obloquy from colleagues. In *Conversations with Arrau* (Collins, 1982), Claudio Arrau censured a pianist, presumed to be Michelangeli, for his 'silly perfectionism that people

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appreciate too much'. Arrau alleged that note-perfect results were meaningless, asking: 'Is that such a great thing?'

Michelangeli's live performances were great things indeed, in which he did on occasion commit finger slips, even if less often than other colleagues. Perfectionism was never his primary goal. Other misunderstandings burden his posthumous memory. In January 2007, András Schiff informed the Austrian magazine *Profil* that Michelangeli was a 'fantastic musician, but a hermit. I never liked hearing him because his playing paralysed me. It's insane that a person plays a small handful of pieces in the same way. Michelangeli practised all day. I don't think he ever read a book or saw a person.'

He was, in fact, no hermit, as he assured the music critic Bernard Gavoty in 1965: 'I'm a bear whose cave is accessible.' His gregariousness was most apparent in his nurturing of musical talent. He always taught pupils for free, beginning when he was just 14 – the same year he graduated from the Milan Conservatory. He went on to coach, among others, Martha Argerich and Maurizio Pollini. He asked students to play on an impromptu basis, with no rota, expecting them to be always prepared.

His methods were often unconventional: a pupil, Carlo Maria Dominici, was playing one evening when Michelangeli, carrying a candle, switched off the light. When Dominici complained that he could barely see, Michelangeli replied: 'You don't have to see; you have to feel. There are good pianists who are blind and play very well.' Dominici confessed, 'I began to think he was crazy.'

Michelangeli was a hero of piano concertos and solo recitals, but was also a civic-minded performer who in early years promoted the piano and its music in his hometown of Brescia. At 20, he hired young keyboard talents through his Brescian music society, including Agostino Orizio, later founder of the Brescia and Bergamo Piano Festival, and the Swiss pianist Paul Baumgartner, a future mentor to Alfred Brendel and Arie Vardi. In 1946, Michelangeli's generosity drew brickbats when he invited the soon-to-be eminent Gino Gorini and Sergio Lorenzi piano duo without preliminary approval for the doubled booking fee. After being criticised by the music society, Michelangeli, who felt his dignity and probity were being assailed, wrote

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Profil Medien PH18063

Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli: The Complete Warner Recordings
Warner Classics 2564615488

Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli: Complete Recordings on Deutsche Grammophon
DG 94796277

Michelangeli plays Schumann, Chopin, Debussy & Mompou
Testament SBT2088

The Art of Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli - Beethoven, Galuppi, Scarlatti
Decca 4834059

Geneva Music Competition: 75 Years of Musical Discoveries
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Michelangeli plays Beethoven
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Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli plays Bach/Busoni & Beethoven
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Michelangeli – The Early Recordings Volumes 1 & 2
Naxos 8111351 and 8112052

Canti Popolari: Traditional Italian Folksongs harmonised by Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli
Coro della Sat/Mauro Pedrotti
Divox CDX69902

a cheque for the outstanding sum and resigned. Despite apologies from the carpers, he remained adamant.

Decades later, when a recording company in which he had invested declared bankruptcy and his assets were brutally seized, Michelangeli, innocent of any malfeasance, moved to Switzerland and shunned Italy as a concert venue until the matter was settled. Not merely an expression of wounded pride or vanity, Michelangeli's response demonstrated his conviction that, as he told students, 'Playing the piano is a question of morality'. Which explains his cancellation of a scheduled 1994 Barbican recital in London when Italian travel agents commercialised it by offering package deals combining hotels and restaurants with his music-making. This moralistic stance may have aggravated some of the denigration he received.

His moral probity was aided by a deep spiritual faith. He died clutching a copy of *The Imitation of Christ*, the 15th-century devotional book written by Thomas à Kempis. His favoured reading-matter often contained elements of spiritual allegory: the novels of Mikhail Bulgakov and especially the Italian decadent Gabriele d'Annunzio. The hero in d'Annunzio's novels, according to Pericles Lewis' *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel* (Cambridge), transforms the world 'in the image of his soul [by] demanding a transformation of life into art … as a sacrifice that serves to bind together the community.' This suggests that he didn't have a lighter side, which is unfair: a fan of fast cars and motor sports, he was rumoured to have participated in some races; he also enjoyed mountain hikes with students and friends as well as flying. He was rumoured to be an amateur pilot and even wartime bombardier.

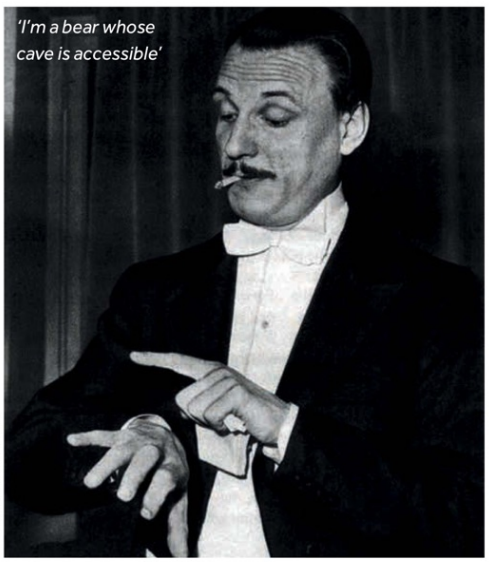
Michelangeli combined civic-mindedness and conviviality when he arranged 19 Italian folksongs for the *a cappella* Chorus of the Tridentine Mountaineering Society, an ensemble from Trent, Italy. These works are jolly and sociable, stylistically somewhere between Clément Janequin and the Comedian Harmonists. Other instances of his congeniality are described in the memoirs of Friedrich Edelmann, a long-time member of the Munich Philharmonic, whose conductor Sergiu Celibidache was a friend. After one night's rehearsal, ambient humidity made Michelangeli request that technicians dismantle the two Steinways he always travelled with and dry every part individually. At 4am, Michelangeli set off with Celibidache for a stroll through Munich's English Garden, and then returned to his apartment where he cooked a duck for the two friends to devour at 5am. Yet Edelmann also notes that Celibidache had warned the musicians not to talk among themselves or laugh during rehearsals for fear of distracting Michelangeli. Punters complained that he cancelled engagements, which he did when his health, or piano-playing conditions, could not meet his daunting standards.

Part of the issue may have been Michelangeli's terror-inducing, old-school persona. From the age of four, Michelangeli studied in Brescia with 19th-century musical noteworthies. The paralysis instilled in some colleagues may have been due to an acquired paternalistic aura. One abortive collaboration with the conductor Carlos Kleiber, described in Köhler's book, was scotched when Kleiber saw Michelangeli as a symbol of his own exigent, disapproving father, the conductor Erich Kleiber.

Intruding into other musicians' Oedipal nightmares by making few mistakes and casting an air of authority, Michelangeli may have also confounded them by discounting the sound of the piano itself as the source of his musical inspiration. In August 1977, he told the *New York Times*: 'To begin with, I did not like the piano at all but found it far too percussive. And so, I studied the organ and the violin … I discovered that the sounds made by the organ and the violin could be translated into pianistic terms. If you speak of my tone, then you must think not of the piano but of a combination of the violin and the organ.'

Indeed, the sound quality of his Galuppi sonata, among other performances, is paradoxically extra-pianistic. Inspired early on by the expressive singing of Italian tenors such as Beniamino Gigli and Tito Schipa, Michelangeli's finest orchestral collaborators included masters of the operatic repertoire such as Gianandrea Gavazzeni and Carlo Maria Giulini.

Despite ongoing controversies, Michelangeli created, as Köhler's analysis persuasively argues, an inexhaustibly fascinating and unique pianistic ideal. **IP**



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Jochen Köhler's Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli: Auf der Suche nach dem Vollkommenen *is now available from Wolke Verlag (ISBN 978-3-95593-045-5)*