

**An Excerpt from *A Dictionary for the Modern Pianist* by Stephen Siek
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Hofmann, Josef (b. Kraków, [now] Poland, 1876; d. Los Angeles, 1957). Polish-born American pianist, composer, and teacher, generally considered one of the giants of twentieth-century pianism. His father was a composer-conductor, and his mother was a singer. He was recognized from the age of four as a prodigy, and as a child he gave concerts throughout Europe. He reached America by the time he was eleven, where he was scheduled to give 80 concerts, and where more than a few observers compared him to the young Mozart. In November 1887, he made a spectacular impression on New York audiences when he performed the Beethoven First at the Metropolitan Opera House, so much so that when he returned, he played to standing room only. The *New York Times* pronounced him a “marvel,” observing that it was “impossible” to confer a critical judgment on his performance after a single hearing, since “the customary standards of criticism are abolished by this youthful prodigy.” Nonetheless, by the end of January, Casimir Hofmann, Josef’s father, was accused of exploiting him through overwork and—according to Hofmann scholar **Gregor Benko**—though he was largely blameless, Casimir was forced to cancel Josef’s remaining concerts, prodded by publicity seekers grandstanding for their own purposes. He was even threatened with suit by Josef’s American manager, but a settlement was reached after Singer Sewing Machine heir Alfred Corning Clark advanced \$50,000 to finance the youngster’s education—on condition that he give no more concerts till he turned 18. His father took him to Berlin that spring, where he played for several teachers, including **Moszkowski** and **d’Albert**, but his most important guidance came from **Anton Rubinstein**, with whom he began working in Dresden when he turned 16. Two years later, Rubinstein arranged for Hofmann’s “adult” debut in Hamburg, conducting him in his own D minor Concerto, and soon Hofmann was embraced as a master throughout the world.

In 1898, he returned to the United States, and eventually his popularity grew to the point that he was asked in 1907 to write a series of articles on piano playing for the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. These covered a variety of topics and they later became the basis for his book *Piano Playing*, first published in 1909, and filled with shrewd insights, but also viewpoints that occasionally took unexpected turns. For example, even though his teacher, Rubinstein, is often acknowledged as one of the greatest

colorists of the nineteenth century, Hofmann was quite insistent that the piano's tone could not be changed qualitatively, and that the best it could offer were, in his words, “monochrome” effects. Although Hofmann's recording career began virtually with Edison, for whom he made some wax cylinders as a child, he rarely embraced the commercial medium with much enthusiasm, admitting to many that he changed his mind so frequently that the interpretations preserved on recordings rarely satisfied him. In 1895-96, he recorded four cylinders for Julius Block in Moscow, and his first commercial recordings were made in Berlin in 1903 for the Gramophone and Typewriter Company (later the Gramophone Company), when he set down two Mendelssohn miniatures, as well as **Chopin's** “Military” Polonaise, and two Schubert transcriptions by **Tausig** and **Liszt** respectively. He made his largest series of recordings for American Columbia between 1912 and 1918 (over 30 separate selections), and he recorded 16 titles for Brunswick between 1922 and 1923, again mostly miniatures, but including remarkable renderings of Liszt's *Waldehrauschen* and the Second Hungarian Rhapsody. Regrettably, Hofmann never again released a commercial recording, though a few electrical test records exist which have recently been made available on CD, as well as some private recordings, some excellent HMV masters from the mid-1930s (originally intended for release), and a number of broadcasts and live concert appearances. It is believed that all of Hofmann's extant recordings have now been located and reissued, thanks to the efforts of Benko—who at this writing, is preparing his biography—and recording engineer Ward Marston. One of the most remarkable performances unearthed by Benko and (beautifully) restored by Marston is a March 1938 live broadcast of Hofmann's performance of the Chopin E minor Concerto with Barbirolli and the New York Philharmonic. While the tempos are faster than are often heard today, Hofmann's Chopin E minor demonstrates his supreme mastery through exquisite tonal colorings, joined to a seemingly inexhaustible imagination and originality of conception. Hofmann also composed a good deal of piano music, and after World War I, he adopted the pseudonym “Michel Dvorsky” for his piano concerto *Chromaticon* and several other works because he sought “unbiased” critical assessments.

In 1924, Hofmann and Leopold Stokowski served as advisers to Mary Curtis Bok concerning initial faculty appointments to the new Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, and Hofmann became the Institute's director in 1927. His most famous pupil there was undoubtedly the youthful **Shura Cherkassky**, who idolized him (though Cherkassky later acknowledged that he learned more about technique from **David Saperton**, then Hofmann's assistant). But Hofmann was forced to curtail much of his concertizing because of his teaching and administrative duties, and when he returned to London in 1933 (his first appearance there in 25 years), the audiences were small—in fact it seemed as though Europe had largely forgotten him. But his

popularity remained high in the United States, where he had become naturalized in 1926. **Rachmaninoff** thought he was the greatest pianist alive, and dedicated his Third Concerto to him, though Hofmann never played it. Although Hofmann’s formal training in science and engineering was minimal, even as a boy he had offered ideas to Edison for improving his gramophone, and in adult life he continued to be fascinated with machinery. He designed a multitude of piano enhancements which **Steinway** found so impressive that they employed a fulltime workman/technician to develop them further. Eventually, a “D” concert grand outfitted with Hofmann’s inventions accompanied him on his tours (Steinway built four such models in all), with modifications including a second **soundboard** installed on the underside of the lid, and narrower keys to accommodate the smaller width of his palm. At the end of World War I, he signed a lucrative contract to make rolls for the **Duo-Art** company, and he worked actively to improve the existing technology, for then the mechanism necessitated that an artist’s dynamic levels be added later, often creating highly inauthentic renditions. (See Appendix E.) His mechanical expertise extended to other areas as well, and in his lifetime, he held some 70 patents, the most famous and profitable being the air spring shock absorbers he developed for automobiles shortly after World War I.