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Gunnar Johansen: The Gentlemanly Dane
by Solon Pierce

It is about three score and five years ago now since a certain Dane came to Dane County, Wisconsin—a decisive step, he later recounted on many occasions, "that I have never regretted." To this native Midwestern observer, it was a perfect fit. There was something homespun and authentic in the nature of the man—a sense that he was cut from the same cloth.

Gunnar Johansen (1906–1991) remains the most remarkable man I have ever met. I got to know Johansen in the final decade of his most remarkable life. My parents had clipped an article out of the Wisconsin State Journal in 1976 when Gunnar retired from the faculty of the University of Wisconsin, and several years later they had the temerity to call him up and ask if they could bring their two sons out to play for him. Of course Gunnar assented, and so we went, from Mt. Horeb out to his house in the woods just beyond the county line, in the unassuming burg known as Blue Mounds.

The enormous two-keyboard Steinway in Gunnar's living room genuinely scared me when I learned that I was about to play on it. "I think I'll just use one keyboard..." is how I remember nervously prefacing what seems now a rather unmemorable version of Chopin's Polonaise Militaire.

Today I'm going to talk a little about Johansen, in addition to playing some of his music, primarily because he himself loved to talk and was as much known for his affable and spontaneous commentary during his concerts as his voluble "holding forth" on topics as diverse as alternative energy (hydrogen power, nuclear fusion), hypersonic aeronautics, or cancer research. These serious interests led him to found what he called The Leonardo Academy after the original Renaissance man Leonardo da Vinci, to integrate and concentrate human knowledge to deal with some of mankind's greatest present day challenges.

Johansen was born on January 21, 1906 in Frederiksberg, outside of Copenhagen. Although 2005 is undoubtedly H.C. Andersen's year, 2006 will be Johansen's centenary, and thus a singularly apt time to
remember and reflect on his legacy and achievements. Johansen’s mother, Signe Christensen, was from Jutland, a nurse in a religious calling who had a great deal of influence in laying a spiritual groundwork for Gunnar’s developing consciousness. Johansen’s father, Lars, was a violinist in Copenhagen who also taught piano, and it was he who gave the young Gunnar his first piano lessons. Johansen started out on violin but switched to piano at age 10. Lars Johansen was at that time a violin pupil of Borge Rosenbaum’s father. Borge Rosenbaum in later years would turn out to be another immigrant to the United States, who eventually went by the name of Victor Borge. The Hindsberg grand piano he played in his youth reposes today at the Danish Immigrant Museum in Elk Horn, Iowa.

Victor Borge became Johansen’s lifelong friend, but strangely enough they did not meet in Denmark (they met in Los Angeles in 1941) even though they had studied with the same teachers both in Denmark and Berlin: Victor Schiøler, who was a pupil of the great Polish pianist Ignaz Friedman; Frederic Lamond, a Scottish pupil of Franz Liszt; and Egon Petri, the foremost pupil of Ferruccio Busoni. Johansen’s pianistic lineage was thus thoroughly conducive to the musical and intellectual path he would earnestly forge and ultimately follow for the rest of his life.

In the 1920s, Johansen gave approximately 30 performances in the Odd Fellow Palace in Copenhagen, the main concert hall in the city at that time. Just glancing at the breadth and depth of Johansen’s printed programs (e.g., see Figure 1) during these formative years would be enough for one to conclude that he must have gone through music like a knife through butter. Johansen became close to a bona fide musical star in the Danish press during the 1920s. Even after he left Denmark in 1929, when he returned on concert tours during the 1930’s he certainly provided “good copy,” and his image—naturally photogenic—was splashed over the papers giving endorsements for Hindsberg pianos and in announcements of his marriage to a young American lady who was a model for toothpaste ads.

Before he left Denmark, Johansen made some striking recordings for Danish Columbia in 1928 (see Figure 2), including some of his own arrangements of Danish folk songs. One is a combined setting of two melodies, Jeg gik mig ud en sommerdag (text by Grundtvig) and I skovens dybe, stille ro (text by Fritz Andersen).
Gunnar Johansen
22° Klaver-Aften.

Program.
   - e-moll
   - As-Dur
   - D-Dur
   - F-Dur
   - e-moll
   - cis-moll
   - b-moll
   - f-moll
   - Ees-Dur
   - e-moll.
   - Prélude e-moll (Beeth. vivace)
   - Croque — Chasse nuit
   — Strophanes — f-moll (Allégro agitato)
   — Visions (Fête du bœuf de Napoléon)
   — Wilde Jagd
   ~ Peux inférieurs
   ~ Paysage
   ~ Monstres.
   - D-Dur
   - e-moll
   - As-Dur
   - Ees-Dur
   - cis-moll
   - G-Dur
   - f-moll
   - Ges-Dur
   - cis-moll
   - F-Dur
   - C-Dur
   - e-moll.

Plygd: Steinway & Sons (New York — Hamburg)
(A. H. Gertler & Co., Otherrupade 49)

Figure 1

Figure 2
And so he came to America, crossing the Atlantic on the liner *Oscar II*, composing music aboard ship. A brief paragraph in the *New York Times* from April, 1929 mentions simply: “Danish Pianist-Composer Arrives.” America’s shores beckoned, and Johansen’s interest in things mechanical, motorcycles, airplanes, and automobiles undoubtedly had something to do with why the wide open spaces offered by America held such an extraordinary appeal to him: “Once I had seen the sun setting over the Pacific, I don’t think I ever really thought of going back to live in Denmark.”

Though he arrived in New York and intended to perform there, the oncoming Great Depression undermined his efforts to get sponsorship and it was to be almost 20 years later that he would make his “official” New York debut, in Town Hall in 1947. Undaunted, he headed for the opposite shore—California—and settled in the San Francisco Bay area, destination for many Scandinavian immigrants. There he met with and enjoyed great success, beginning with what was his U.S. debut, in San Francisco’s Scottish Rite Hall. In the language of the time, Redfern Mason of the *San Francisco Examiner* described what he saw and heard:

> The little land which gave the world Hans Christian Andersen, Ohlenschlager, and the story of Hamlet sent us the pianist, Gunnar Johansen, who gave a recital last night in Scottish Rite Hall. To neighbor this lad of some 20-odd summers with a world figure like Andersen may seem to be going too far; but those who heard him play will back me up, I think, in saying that he is one of the pianistic elect[...]. The Dane is an artist, a great artist. Last night’s recital was his first in America; it will not be his last.²

After Johansen’s performance of the six Paganini-Liszt Caprices in 1935 in Palo Alto, the staff reviewer of the *Palo Alto Times* colorfully appropriated some regionalistic California dialect to convey her point:

> Mr. Johansen does not seem to be among those who dismiss Liszt with a sneer as a mere juggler of gilt balls; there was gold in them thar trills and musical substance in the marching phrases.³

Though California did not turn out to be Johansen’s final destination in the United States, he did maintain an old farmhouse he purchased north of San Francisco in the Mendocino County town of Anchor Bay, where he spent many summers in remote splendor, largely
undistracted by the conveniences of the modern world. The prominent American composer Harry Partch was Johansen’s guest there for extended periods of time.

Johansen gave weekly broadcast concerts on NBC radio in the Bay Area and stayed in California until 1939, when an offer came his way for a pioneering post as the first musical artist-in-residence at an American university—the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Johansen also received a similar offer at about the same time from Cornell University where his teacher Egon Petri was on the faculty for a time. One wonders, of course, in retrospect if Johansen had landed in upstate New York instead of the Midwest how it might have affected his subsequent life and work. Undoubtedly, he was happy to eventually find an old stone house in the woods just outside the idyllic hamlet of Blue Mounds, where he kept fit by chain sawing and reveling in the serene Wisconsin countryside where he could do his best work. Here he truly settled down: he wed Lorraine Johnson in 1943, his third marriage, which did turn out to be a charm for him, and the most productive time of Johansen’s life began.

Continuing the radio work he had begun at NBC in California, after the end of the War in 1945 he commenced various weekly broadcast series, going through complete cycles of composers’ works on the University’s radio station WHA: in 1945, evolution of the piano sonata through history; 1946, Beethoven’s complete piano works; 1947, Mozart’s piano sonatas; 1948, Schubert’s piano sonatas; and 1949, Chopin’s piano works.

Major anniversary years were Johansen’s impetus for huge projects: for example, 1950 was the bicentennial of Bach’s passing, and Johansen took the occasion not only to perform the whole of Bach’s keyboard output on the radio—which took three years, from 1950–1953—but also to set down a permanent record for posterity. For the first time in history, he recorded Bach’s complete keyboard works on 44 LP records, which he completed in 1961.

In 1961, another anniversary called him: it was the sesquicentennial of the birth of Franz Liszt. The result was another 53 LP records of most of Liszt’s keyboard music, a truly pioneering venture of scholarship and performance. He finished the project in 1976, the year he officially retired from his duties at the University. At the 100th
anniversary of Liszt’s death in 1986, Johansen gave all-Liszt programs that were among his final major public performances.

Johansen had begun composing as a teenager in Denmark and continued even while he crossed the Atlantic, but his most productive time as a composer was his years in Wisconsin, where from 1939 until virtually his final days in 1991 his output included 31 notated piano sonatas, 2 piano concertos, choral works and songs, and perhaps over 500 improvised sonatas captured by microphone, which he called “tapestries.”

And so we arrive at 2006 and a timely reappraisal of Johansen himself on the occasion of his centenary. This coming fall the University of Wisconsin will honor Johansen’s legacy in a 3-day celebration tentatively scheduled for September 15–17, to be held in Madison.

Gunnar’s art, like his life, was as rough-hewn as the firewood he loved to chop, made of stern and uncompromising headlong momentum, driving endlessly forward. Forward, just by chance, is the state motto of Wisconsin.

One commentator, in trying to put a finger on what made Johansen’s pioneering cycle of Liszt recordings unique, wrote:

Johansen is less concerned with where he is than where he is headed. His technique is not of the superhuman variety...but in the end, that only adds to the power of the performances....There is an adventurous virtuosity here, an attempt to transcend human limits. 4

For me, the essence of Johansen’s achievements rests not only in the tangible legacy he left in his work, but within the timeless example of his supreme humanism and unfailing generosity. He took up the mantle of Liszt’s genie oblige— with genius comes obligation—in earnest, and he raised it to a new level. His optimism on all fronts was contagious: he was ever the gentlemanly Dane, in any case, never a melancholy one. Perhaps that, in the end, is what will always stay with me about Gunnar: he helped me to realize that life’s proper posture is one of gratitude, generosity, and grace—one that he consistently upheld from the start of his life in Denmark to the very end of his days and perhaps even beyond. Although his spirit may now be at rest, it is yet always moving, like Wisconsin, his adopted home in America—forward.
2 Redfern Mason, “Scandinavian Acclaimed as Piano Genius,” San Francisco Examiner, 14 June 1929
3 Dorothy Nichols, “Johansen Reveals Greatness in Final Recital of Series,” Palo Alto Times, 12 March 1935