



ALBERTO JONÁS

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BIOGRAPHICAL

Señor Jonás is known as a Spanish virtuoso, but in reality he is a cosmopolitan in every sense of the word. He has lived in nearly all the capitals of Europe, and also he resided for many years in America. His learning is wide and comprehensive in other lines than music. The fact that he speaks Spanish, French, German and English with equal facility has enabled him to make researches in many departments of science and literature in many countries. He has devoted much special attention to the nerves in pianoforte playing and has a thorough understanding of the physiological aspect of the subject. Señor Jonás was born at Madrid, June 8, 1868. After study in Spain he graduated at the Brussels Conservatory, winning the first prize in pianoforte playing and two first prizes in harmony. Later he studied with Anton Rubinstein in St. Petersburg, and made an international reputation as a pianist.

NERVOUSNESS IN PIANO PLAYING

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NEURASTHENIA, THE AMERICAN DISEASE

MUSICIANS, notably music teachers, have the reputation of being nervous, and since America has been called by many "the country of nerves" it would seem that American music workers should be sufferers. This, however, is by no means an exclusively American disease nor are the only victims to be found among the American musicians. Pathologists, nevertheless, acknowledge that there is a great amount of nervousness in America and this is not said in the way of being a slur upon the country or its people. Inasmuch as an American physician, Dr. George M. Beard, as long ago as 1881 wrote a book entitled *American Nervousness, Its Causes and Consequences*, in which he dwells upon the fine organization of native Americans, their delicate skin, hair of soft texture and small bones, there can be no offense when American nervousness is discussed.

MUSICIANS USUALLY KNOW LITTLE OF CAUSE

Musicians who know little of other professional work than their own, naturally have only a very vague idea of the nature of nervousness or its causes. They do not realize that nervousness is in

part the result of heredity, of environment, of personal habits and of mental attitude. With hereditary nervousness, the musician has little to do. He may guard his own habits of health to protect the nervous organization of his descendants, but it is only disconcerting to learn that he may himself have had an ancestry tending to predispose him towards nervousness. His environment, however, is a very different matter. That at least is partly open to his control, and moreover his habits may be regulated so that many "acquired" forms of nervousness may be avoided.

The musician should also know that the normal cure for nervous conditions is not to be found so much in medicine bottles as in work accomplished without hurry or flurry, but with care and a happy mind, plenty of rest, the right food and the right mental attitude (state of mind). The healthy, well-balanced person whose nerves begin to give way unconsciously seeks rest or finds a remedy. The musician, however, is kept up to a high tension by the enthusiasm for his work and his ambition to excel. He forgets his health and before one knows it there is a disastrous breakdown which enforces months of idleness. When he does discover that he is nervous, he promptly sets out to nurse his nervousness and ultimately makes it much like some grievance or some trouble for which he feels him-

self in no way responsible and for which he is ready to blame any person or any thing.

A SELF SUGGESTED COMPLAINT

Putting aside heredity and pathological conditions, nervousness comes under the head of self-suggested complaints. If one were to isolate the microbe of nervousness it would probably be found that it was nothing other than the magnification of self, although on the contrary in some cases it might be laid to the neglect of self.

Take the matter of food, for instance. Musicians eat at all hours, consume rich viands, often hurry through their meals and some unfortunately are addicted to the over use of alcohol. I do not refer now to those who indulge in wine or beer occasionally, but to those who consume the very strong drinks. As a matter of fact, there is less alcohol in a glass of well-brewed beer (German beer has 3½%) than in a poorly cooked potato. A raw potato contains 65% of alcohol. Nevertheless, the books by specialists on nervousness are filled with injunctions against the abuse of alcohol which is a most excellent fuel and motive power for machinery other than the human stomach.

I have seen American musicians rush back to work directly after a meal just like their brethren in the American business world. The German or the Frenchman rests after his meals, rests for per-

haps half an hour and then returns refreshed with his digestion undisturbed by business cares. There can be no question that dyspepsia and nervousness are closely connected in many cases. Get the best book you can upon diet and eating, the right selection of foods, etc., and then use all of your will power to create habits of correct eating. This may show in your playing and study. Who knows, it may be just what you need most to get rid of nervousness.

THE AMERICAN TEMPERAMENT AND NERVES

America is a land of such amazing opportunity that the musician, like the business man, keeps himself constantly under a great strain to get ahead. No one can tell me that the Americans are not temperamental but many misconstrue the meaning of temperament and imagine it must be a form of nervous agitation. On the contrary it is a highly developed nervous organism under adequate control of the will. It is a lively exuberance and forceful expression of the feelings. In music it includes enthusiasm and the ardent desire to do justice to the beauties of a composition. The temperamental player will put more emphatic force in his strong utterances. He will give more passionate expression to phrases of love, sorrow, courage and despair. On the other hand, he is by the very nature of his art apt to step over the bounds. This exaggeration,

which is ruinous to the interpretation of a great master work, is quite as apt to come from lack of the right artistic balance or judgment as it is from lack of a strong nervous system, but it probably comes more frequently from the latter.

SOME WONDERS OF THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

In order that the musician may gain a better idea of the marvels of the nervous system and perhaps a higher respect for the wonderful piece of physiological machinery which we all have within us, I would suggest that he secure some good simple work upon the nerves and do a little close reading. In the first place, the number of nerve cells in the body is prodigious. Of course they have never been counted because it would be almost as easy to count the stars in the firmament. Estimates, however, place the number of nerve cells in the human body at hundreds of millions. Yet all these are connected in some mysterious and wonderful manner with the brain and the spinal cord. Sever certain nerves in your arm and you may apply a burning brand to your hand without feeling it. This illustrates how closely connected is the nervous system with the brain. Although you seem to feel pain in your finger when it is pricked with a pin, the sense of pain is after all in the brain. This is a very important fact for musicians to note. There are inferences which might be drawn therefrom

which if properly understood would easily show how the pupil may be saved hours of labor by the right mental control.

Each nerve cell or neurone may be said to be independent, an anatomical physiological unit living by itself but at the same time connected with other nerve cells in a manner so marvelous that it is beyond the province of words to describe it. Nervous breakdown is usually caused by the slow disintegration of the nerve cells and nerve fibre. In some cases this disintegration has no serious outward signs. In other cases the hair commences to fall very rapidly, muscular action is less coordinate, at times even erratic, and the memory commences to weaken. Beware of these signs of nerve decay. It is time for you, Mr. Pianist, to investigate yourself and strive to build up your nervous organism.

SOME THINGS THE PIANIST SHOULD KNOW ABOUT NERVES

The pianist should know first of all that every effort requires nervous expenditure. That is, the something which caused the effort that was consumed in making it. It then becomes necessary for new nerve force to form. Just as a storage battery which has been used up needs to be charged again, the nerves must be re-charged with force for future endeavors. The storage battery gets its re-charge from the dynamo; but whence comes the force

which re-charges the nerve cells no one really knows. The nutrition of the nerve cell is, however, in large measure dependent upon the blood supply and it may be assumed that anything which will improve the condition of the blood will at the same time make for better nerves. It may also be seen that the circulation of the blood must be kept in the very best possible condition.

There is no more stupid way in which the pianist or the piano student can waste his time than by long continued periods of practice without relaxation, general bodily exercise and plenty of deep breathing. A quick walk around the block, interspersed with good full breaths, often restores the nerve force and insures progress. For that reason short practice periods and many of them are better than one long period.

ARE PIANISTS ESPECIALLY LIABLE TO NERVOUSNESS?

I do not think that pianists are more liable to nervousness than people in other professions as a result of the fact that the pianist is continually hitting with his highly sensitized finger tips all day long. As a matter of fact, the violinist exerts far more pressure upon the fingerboard of the violin. In other words, note for note the physical force demanded in the case of the violinist is greater than in the case of the pianist. Piano playing in itself

does not promote nervousness. One has only to judge by the well-known performers. Most of the virtuosos I have known are exceptionally strong persons, with hearty appetites and good nerves. The great pianist must have fine nerves. He would never be able to stand the strain otherwise.

Nervousness comes to those who have not yet learned how to control themselves mentally and physically. The little teacher who worries and frets all the time—who tortures her life with imagining that awful things may occur and who takes every set-back as a calamity—she is the one who is the victim of neurasthenia. The teacher imagines that because success does not come at once she must be lacking in talent or is going behind. Real success in music study is at the end of a long journey. The piano student must learn to control his nerve-breaking eagerness to rush ahead.

SOME THINGS THE PARENT SHOULD KNOW

Nervousness at the practice hour is by no means unusual, and piano practice in itself may be made a source of nervousness if proper conditions are not observed. The pupil should always practice in a room alone. There is nothing which makes the pupil more nervous than petty disturbances such as people passing in and out of the room, annoying parental admonitions, other children playing in neighboring rooms. I insist upon the pupil having

a comfortable chair during practice. There are certain positions in sitting and standing which are a great strain upon the nervous system. Ease at the keyboard can never be attained unless the pupil learns to sit easily and comfortably during practice, not on a revolving stool balanced like a performer in the circus, but upon a substantial comfortable chair.

Another matter which has to do with nerve strain is vision. See to it that the distribution of light in the practice room is right. The windows (and likewise the artificial light) should be behind or at the side of the performer, never in front of him. Eye strain may tire the pupil and lead to nervousness almost as quickly as in any other way. Many people are nervous and yet do not know that the cause could be removed by a good oculist. Another cause of nervousness which very few might suspect is the position of the music on the music rack. In the case of the grand piano the music is somewhat higher than in the case of the upright piano. Consequently when the music rack is too high the player's neck is held in a strained position. For this reason also (and for other reasons too), I discourage sitting too low at the piano. It forces the player to strain his neck, when reading music. All the great network of nerve ganglia located at the back of the neck is then strained.

THE NERVOUS PUPIL AT PRACTICE

When playing, the inexperienced pianist with tendencies toward nervousness seems for the most part afraid of missing notes or of forgetting some complicated passage. He does not seem concerned, however, over the equally important subject of whether his tone will be uniformly fine or whether his touch will be beautiful, whether the dynamic treatment will prove effective and within the canons of well-poised aesthetic judgment, whether the pedals are well employed, whether his playing will show a clear "distribution" or outline as regards the proper distinction of phrases, sections, periods, episodes, also of contrasts and climaxes. Yet were he to give serious, conscientious thought to all this while playing, he would in all probability not have time nor inclination to fret about accuracy or memory. Nervousness is often nothing more than self-consciousness unduly magnified over the real significance of the player's artistic message.

All this presupposes, of course, that the performer has completely mastered his piece. Mastery, that is a wonderful insurance against nervousness. I do not mean to say that anyone who has mastered a piece can not be nervous, but mastery brings a confidence hard to describe in any other way. When the pianist knows that he can play a work accurately and safely, and also beautifully, he should not fret.

If he does fret, he should look to the piece quite as much as to his own nerves.

But if one searches deeper, particularly into the psychological aspects of the subject, one will often find that underlying it all is a wrong, and let it be said frankly, not very noble attitude of mind. The performer is afraid because he consciously or unconsciously craves the applause and flattery of the listener. This should not be so and indeed is never the case with the true artist. He is, of course, glad if the audience understands him, he is also glad of the success and for all the good it may bring with it. But should the audience fail to respond and the apparent success not yet be his, then he should quietly investigate whether he has accomplished what he had set out to do, or whether the selections he had played were too deep, too abstract, or too new for the average audience to understand. There is certainly no real occasion for nervousness. The performer will honestly and sincerely criticize this performance with a view to future improvement and there will be no sterner nor fairer judge than he.

Therein lies the strength of the true artist with the view to future improvement. That thought will ever console him, for the artist lives in a world of ideals which he strives to reach, knowing full well that he will never quite attain them. Often an artist is greeted with great applause after the perform-

ance of a piece, but at the same time he realizes that he has not done his best. The true artist will forget the enthusiasm of the audience and set out to improve the defective passages even though the audience was mistaken.

Therefore whether the artist plays well or not well he will always strive to improve his work, either by keeping it up to the fine standard he usually attains or by endeavoring to excel his own past at future performances. The performer thus becomes a constant student of his own playing—the most absorbing subject he can possibly take up. How can such a performer big or small entertain the fear thought? He has far too much on his mind to think of worry or nerves. He approaches his task of playing for others without fear or trepidation, but rather with the spirit of sincere investigation. Nervousness in public playing then becomes an impossibility because his aim and reward lie higher than the immediate applause.

PRACTICAL TECHNICAL ADVICE ON NERVOUSNESS

Viewed from the practical, that is the physiological or technical standpoint, the nervousness of the pianist occurs mostly in the changes of the hand position at the keyboard. The more skips there are in a composition, the greater is his fear of missing notes. He has therefore to learn by painstaking exercise to control himself more and more carefully

when changes of position occur. On the other hand "too much care will kill a cat," and he must acquire the necessary abandon and confidence in himself and attain the desired accuracy without seeming concerned about it.

How closely nervousness is connected with fear must be evident to anyone who has observed closely. *Every soldier* who goes into battle for the first time is *afraid*. If he manages to stick to his post while the bullets whiz past his head it is because disobedience or retreat would bring him death with equal certainty. It is only after repeated experiences that the soldier learns to keep cool while danger surrounds him on all sides. In the same manner it takes repeated experiences for the performer on the concert stage to master the courage which makes him oblivious of the audience.

Do not minimize that matter of courage. Were I to epitomize every conceivable requisite of good nerve control, whether intellectual, physical or moral I would choose that word *courage* as embodying them all. It takes courage at all times to make the nerves subservient to the will, courage to regulate one's life habits, courage to be oneself when in the presence of others, courage to entertain one's own artistic convictions—*courage, COURAGE, COURAGE.*

SENSIBLE REMEDIES FOR NERVOUSNESS

Let us consider for a few moments some of the sensible things which may be done to remedy some states of nervous trouble. Of course no one must suppose that there could be anything written in an article of this kind that would supply the assistance which only a trained physician can give in advanced cases of nervous breakdown. However, I am certain that there are a number of simple things which may be controlled and which will unquestionably help the musician, teacher, and student, if a little patience and persistence is employed to pursue these cures.

First of all the nervous musicians should remember, as we have previously said, that nervousness is often largely a matter of pose and self-consciousness. Like the child who cries only when some one is around, many people have nerves which are for exhibition purposes solely. Their manifestations of nervousness are really nothing more than appeals for sympathy. What is this but a mental angle, a wrong way of looking at things? Get out of it. Fight it. Be sincere and genuine, and you will realize that the world is not going to stand or fall because of the manner in which you play a certain piece. When a man looks for sympathy what he needs most of the time is a good kick. Those who deserve sympathy get it without begging for it.

It would be a splendid thing if some of the

nervous music teachers, or rather those who think they are nervous, should read Molière's delightful satirical comedy *Le Malade Imaginaire*. The imaginary sick man simply does not want to be cured, and it is not difficult to see how the tired teacher could take some very slight nervous disturbance and nurse it into a genuine case of neurasthenia.

RIGHT LIVING FOR MUSIC WORKERS

We are living in an age when there is a colossal appeal for higher and higher efficiency. The so-called efficiency expert places first of all good bodily health. Standards of musicianship constantly ascend so that one simply must possess good nerves to keep "in the swim." Here are a few of the essentials which in my opinion lead to good nerves.

1. Good healthy, simple food, cooked without unnecessary strong spices, eaten at leisure amid congenial surroundings and with an untroubled mind, not swallowed down in haste, with the mind worried by the care of the day. Food, of course, is assimilated in the stomach, but when one realizes how much the mind affects the circulation of the blood and the administration of the gastric juices in the stomach, one perceives how important the right mental condition during meals really is.

2. Abstinence from strong stimulants. If you have any doubt upon this subject, get almost any book on nerves, and you will find that the evidence

is uncompromisingly against the abuse of alcohol, or in fact any drug destined to affect the nerves. An exception might in some cases be made of well-brewed beer or good wine, partaken of in moderation.

3. Good moral habits. It need hardly be emphasized that immorality of any sort will in time undermine the strongest nervous system. It is the surest, quickest, deadliest, enemy of good nerves.

4. Plenty of work, physical and mental, *done with joy*.

5. Exercise in the open air, not occasionally but every day. *Deep breathing, when in the open air, done every day*.

6. In so far as possible, consistently early hours of retirement.

7. Sensible regulation of the day's work. Don't practice four hours one day and one-half an hour the next. If nerves are not helped by pose they are helped by poise. Think a little—is this the wise thing or is it a foolish thing? Your intellect was given you to guide you. Don't rush from a hurried lunch to a game of lawn tennis or a moving picture show. See that intervals of repose come between your intervals of energy. Attend to this for a few months and you will surely note a difference in your nervous condition.

8. Freedom from worry. Get rid of the idea or the habit of worrying, else all remedies for nerve

betterment will fail. Musicians, perhaps through too much confinement and long sedentary labor, are prone to worry about things of very little real consequence. Here again is the magnification of self. Just jot down somewhere the fact that you and all of your petty troubles will be out of the way only a very few years hence. This is a world of trouble or a world of joy pretty much as you choose to look at it. I do not mean with this to advocate callousness or indifference to the real issues of life. What I mean is that most of our worry is misplaced. As for real causes for grief, these will be dealt with according to our greater or lesser strength of mind and of purpose and to the stoutness and faith of our heart. No advice can be given here. Shakespeare has said it. Everyone can master a grief but he that has it.

9. Method and calm deliberation as to the distribution of your work and the disposing of the many things that have to be done daily: letter writing, telephone calls, visits, etc. If you find yourself confronted with a number of things to do, do not fret, but just take hold of the very first at hand and dispose of it calmly and with care.

10. Get *joy* out of your work.

THE HABIT OF NERVE CONTROL

I am of the opinion that by practice one can develop habits of nerve control that are in themselves

remedial. For years many musicians have retained that absurd idea that fighting and fussing and blustering was temperament and they have actually cultivated it. No wonder they are nervous. Unless they first of all cultivate the habit of repose they will continue to be nervous for the rest of their lives. They seem to develop a kind of artificial eagerness to get things done before they can possibly be done. If you are in a train, remember that you will not get to your destination until the train gets there. As a well known German author has said, "Don't travel with your train, your auto, or the street-car; let them carry you." Do not strive mentally or nervously to push the car forward with every turn of the wheel. This impatience is the juggernaut which grinds down more nervous systems than almost anything else excepting drugs. Sit down at the keyboard with the spirit of impatience in your mind and everything you play will be marked by nervous flurry.

Do you realize that nerves may be disciplined into behavior almost as naughty children are disciplined? If you set out to do something and forget what it was that you wanted to do before you have accomplished it, if you drop or fumble everything you take hold of, if you do not seem to be able to "hit a right note" when playing, remember the trouble is not in your hands or arms, but in your head, in your mental poise. The median, radial, ulnar and

musculospiral nerves control the muscles of fingers, hands and arms. But the nucleus of all these nerves is situated in the cortex, in the head, whence are issued the orders that set these nerves in motion. Quiet your mental self, gain command of it, and watch the immediate change in the greater quiet and certainty of your motions. At one time I was exceedingly nervous and this in fact was what set me to work studying the condition. I went to a noted Berlin specialist and he enjoined me to hold out my hand with the palm downward. Of course there was a nervous trembling so characteristic and so annoying. "Now," he said, "hold the hand in front of the body, the arm not at full length but slightly bent, with the fingers not quite stretched out straight. Now continue gazing at your fingers and soothe by thought until the relaxed hand ceases to tremble." The thought indeed seemed to soothe the nerves and after a little time spent in gazing the condition was much bettered. After this he had me turn the palm downward and repeat the exercise. The simple turn of the hand resulted in producing the trembling again but with the treatment of fixing the eyes and concentrating the attention upon the hand I soon found that it became quite calm. I practiced this exercise several times each day for many weeks with the result that my nerve control was so much improved that my hand stopped shaking and trembling entirely. Since then

ny nerves have become exceedingly strong and quite subservient to my will. This is a form of cure with which very few people are familiar and I consider it extremely valuable. It is especially useful for pianists.

An equally ingenious test of nervousness is to procure a small vial like the old fashioned homeopathic pill bottle and put a little mercury or quicksilver in the bottom. Mercury can be secured at any good drug store. Clasp the vial with the tips of all five fingers and hold it with the top up. If you are in a state of poor nerve control the mercury will dance in the liveliest fashion. If your nerves are fairly well under control the mercury will be calm on the surface. It is extremely unusual ever to see the mercury absolutely calm even in the cases of people with very steady nerves.

A VERY VITAL NEED

There is unquestionably a need for more consideration of the subject of nerves upon the part of American musicians. If I have given any advice in the foregoing which may prove advantageous to my American musical friends, it will give me great pleasure to know it. My attention has recently been called to a quotation from an article by Dr. Smith Ely Jelliffe, Editor of the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* which emphasizes my point. It reads, "Let it be remembered by the older

generations and taught to the younger, that training and economizing of nerve force are vitally important to health and efficiency and that the great workers achieve their ends by that very quality of nervous energy, which if dissipated degenerates into nervousness."

QUESTIONS IN STYLE, INTERPRETATION, EXPRESSION AND TECHNIC OF PIANOFORTE PLAYING

SERIES XXVIII

ALBERTO JONÁS

1. To what is nervousness generally due?
2. In what is the normal cure for nervousness to be found?
3. What is temperament?
4. How do long-continued periods of practice injure the student's work?
5. Are pianists especially liable to nervousness?
6. Write out ten remedies for nervousness.
7. State how habits of nerve control may be cultivated.

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