

# The power of Bauer

*Harold Bauer started his career as a violinist, encountered Paderewski in Paris and enjoyed an international reputation as a concert pianist. Despite his fame while alive, he has been all but forgotten today. John Joseph Mortensen reintroduces this idiosyncratic master of the piano*



**Harold Bauer was born** near London on 28 April 1873, and recalled that his earliest response to music ‘was one of fascinated terror.’ In his autobiography *Harold Bauer, His Book* he reminisced that in the London streets:

...there was the Italian barrel-organ grinder, accompanied sometimes—oh, bliss!—by a monkey; an occasional violinist; a man who played a bright yellow clarinet; two men in Highland costume, one of whom danced to the playing of the bagpipes (the most exciting sound in the world, I think) by his companion...[there was] a glorious individual who went about with a dozen different instruments distributed over his person, playing them all at the same time... I longed unspeakably to grow up and conquer my fear of the sounds, so that I could wield the power he possessed—some day!

Bauer did conquer his ‘fear of the sounds’ and, it could be argued, eventually wielded at least as much musical power as the gentleman with a dozen instruments. He began the violin at an early age, taking lessons from his father. His aunt taught him the piano. At the age of nine he wrote to Joseph Joachim, prominent violinist and friend of Brahms, asking him to play Bach’s G minor Prelude and Fugue in his next programme because ‘I play that piece too.’ Joachim wrote back and arranged a meeting with Bauer, at which the former offered to place the young boy at the Royal College of Music. Bauer’s father instead sent him to an eminent London teacher, Adolph Pollitzer.

Even at this age Bauer felt at odds with the prevailing standards of violin technique and in spite of a string of mild successes in London, he could see no future there as a violinist. His friend Leopold Godowsky suggested that he leave and an anonymous gift of £50 provided the means to relocate to Paris. While preparing to move, Bauer met Paderewski. At this encounter Bauer played on both the violin and piano, and the older musician pulled him by the hair, saying, ‘You must become a pianist—you have such beautiful hair’, a subject on which Paderewski was an acknowledged authority. Under Paderewski’s patronage and shortly before leaving for Paris, Bauer performed a piano recital in the Erard building in London. At this time, aged 19, he did not consider himself a serious pianist at all, and apparently learned pieces casually, in his spare time. He certainly had no teacher. Therefore it is noteworthy that his nine-item programme included works of the standard of Gluck-Saint-Saëns’s *Air de Ballet*, Beethoven’s Piano Sonata, op.101, Paderewski’s *Legende*, and Liszt’s *Feux Follets*.

He reported the results as follows: ‘A remarkable feat, even if I do say so, for a boy of my age who was devoting his energies to making a career as a violinist. I daresay the performance was very poor... I have no record of any comment made upon it in any newspaper.’ Nevertheless some of the pieces from that programme remained in Bauer’s repertoire for years, and the *Air de Ballet* featured among his few acoustic recordings.

### **Paris beckons**

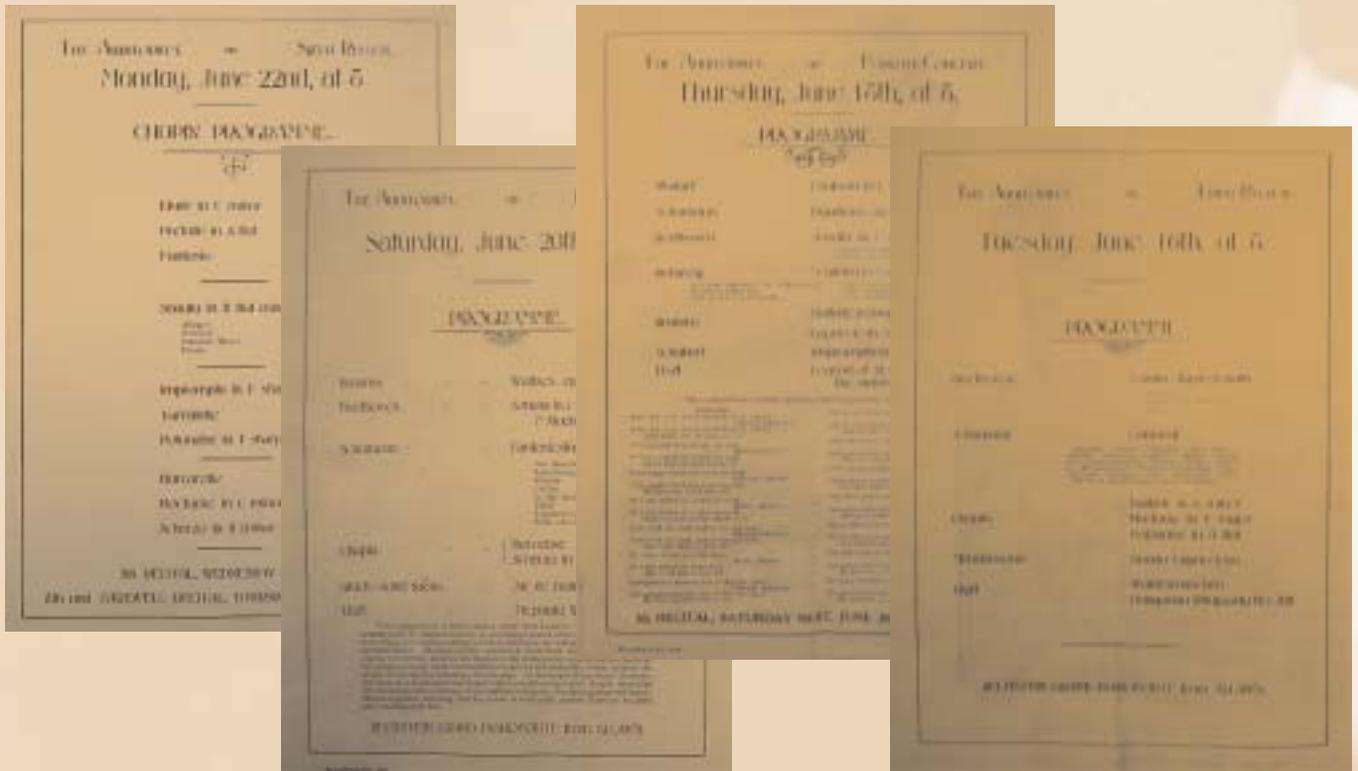
In 1893, at the age of 20, the young man took his £50 and crossed the Channel. Bauer enjoyed these first days in France immensely, having a freedom of schedule and mobility he had never previously known. His hope was that upon Paderewski’s expected return to Paris, the latter would help him secure recital engagements. Indeed ‘the Master’ invited Bauer to move to an apartment not far from his own opulent quarters, an arrangement that was ‘convenient ...to respond without delay to the Master’s call.’ Paderewski offered his encouragement to the young man on several occasions:

He was wonderfully kind to me in many ways, and occasionally let me play the piano for him ... I learned a great deal from my temporary association with this great man, although, just as a matter of record, I feel I should state that he was in no way responsible for my change from violinist to pianist... He recommended me as a violinist, in fact, to many people, but nothing came of it. I discovered to my bitter disappointment that there were many difficulties in the way of obtaining engagements in Paris. It seemed to me that only successful pupils of the Conservatoire had any chance.

As these observations suggest, nothing came of Bauer’s aspirations on the violin, so he began to accompany on the piano to make a living. After a recital at a private house, a manager – whose name Bauer apparently forgot – asked him to travel to Russia to accompany a singer on tour. Bauer agreed enthusiastically. The singer, Louise Nikita (a stage name; she was an American by the name of Nicholson), had debuted with success at the Opera Comique in 1894. Bauer reported:

The man who offered to engage me as her accompanist was her uncle and manager. He told me: ‘We are going to make a tour in Russia, where this lady is a great favourite, and she cannot sing all evening. You will have to fill in the programme by playing piano solos.’ I said, ‘I do not know if I can play well enough for that, because I am a violinist.’ He said, ‘That will be splendid. You will

opposite **Caption**  
Photo Tully Potter Collection



above **Big bills: a selection of programmes from a concert series given by Bauer circa 1908**

*Photo courtesy of John Joseph Mortensen*

play accompaniments for her and then play the violin.' I asked, 'Who will play accompaniments for me?' He said, 'In all the places we are going to there are excellent musicians, and I will get accompanists for you in Odessa, St. Petersburg, and so on.'... I was engaged at a very modest salary to go on a tour of uncertain duration.

### Russian season

The plans for the tour were altered by the death of Tzar Alexander III on 1 November 1894. Because official mourning lasted five or six weeks and public performances were not allowed during this time, the impresario made arrangements to play in private clubs in the provinces, where the Tzar's death was regarded as more of an inconvenience than a tragedy.

These circumstances proved pivotal for Bauer as it was 'immediately apparent that nobody could be found in these places who could play accompaniments for the violin. So I had to play the piano to fill in the programme, whether I wanted to or not.' After court mourning ended the group began playing in the large cities, but by this time the nameless manager had determined that Bauer's violin was not needed—his piano solos worked nicely enough, and there was no need to dilute finances by hiring another accompanist. Bauer himself soon realised what had happened to his violin career as a result of the Russian tour:

The death of Alexander III of Russia proved to be the cause which ended my career as violinist, for

when I reached Paris and saw old friends and again made efforts to start playing the violin, I was laughed at because it was known that I had been playing the piano in public for several months.

Some friends decided to fund a debut piano recital for him, a frightening prospect since Bauer had no formal training and considered himself to be woefully deficient in technique. He began an urgent quest to understand that aspect of pianism without suffering through the years of mindless finger exercises that were the custom of the day. He attended a dance concert which proved to be an epiphany:

I went one day to a private house to see a young woman dance... I noticed that she was using gestures that seemed to illustrate all the dynamic variations of the musical phrase ... I imagined that if I could get my hands to make on a reduced scale certain motions that she was making with her whole body, I might perhaps acquire some of the fine gradations of tone which, to me, represented the most important qualities of piano playing.

This approach became the guiding principal of Bauer's pianism: one must first imagine the sound, and then find a natural and coordinated motion to produce it. His hands were not 'pianistic' at all; his fingers were relatively short and quite thick, and one wonders whether he would have survived a rigorous regimen of French finger exercises, particularly as he had no patience for them:

To my plaintive queries as to how I could learn to play the piano in the short time I had, students and artist of that instrument alike made the unfeeling reply, 'Stop playing pieces, and study technic for five years.' And as my livelihood depended on my pianistic activities, and as five years between meals is a somewhat inconvenient interval, I could never afford to follow the commandments of the orthodox, and continued to work my own infidel theories.

In addition to developing a command of piano technique out of nothing, Bauer also sought to discover the secrets of good piano tone. Probably because he had no time for the usual pedantic and unexamined explanations (one must have thick finger-pads, one must massage the key, et cetera) he directed his unconventional mind toward this question and reasoned that

...a single note on the piano...has no aesthetic value whatsoever. It may be loud, soft, long, or short, but no one of these characteristics is beautiful in itself, nor can it create an effect of beauty except through contrast. ... the unit of musical expression on the piano must be sought in the relation of one tone to its neighbour.

Based on these discoveries, Bauer distilled his approach to the piano based on two principles: In technique, first imagine the sound, then find natural co-ordinated motions which correspond to it; good piano sound is created from the basic unit of the two-note phrase; individual notes only have meaning in their relationships to others. Such ideas placed Bauer in opposition to (or at least outside the camp of) those who promoted the traditional technique of isolated finger motion.

Apparently Bauer's quest for technique and tone was rewarded; by 1895 he was receiving engagements around Europe. The precise manner in which he went from accompanist to prominent soloist is not known. His own account indicates that he built a reputation on a series of good performances, without competition victories, patronage, good looks, or (least of all) stage antics. He merely played well at a time and in a culture that eventually rewarded it.

A set of programmes from the United States Library of Congress (see pictures, above) illustrates the ambitious scope of his performing around the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Though they show neither year nor locale, it is likely that these concerts took place fairly early in his career, possibly in 1908. As the text is in English, they were most probably performed in the UK, over a period of 16 days. The only other clue to location is an indication that a Bechstein piano was supplied by 'Allan's'.

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Bauer continued travelling, performing, and making the acquaintance of prominent musicians such as Debussy and Ravel, each of whom admired the pianist and wrote works for him, although their conversations were sometimes blunt:

Once, in my hearing, [Debussy] mentioned that he had 'escaped' the previous evening from a concert where a Beethoven quartet was being played, just at the moment when 'the old deaf one' started to 'develop a theme.' There was something so hateful in the tone of his voice as he said this that I rose up indignantly and denounced him for his disrespect to the name of a great genius...I regret to say, that our relations were broken on the spot and not renewed for a number of years.

My friend Ravel was not nearly so violent when he said quite seriously that he loved the elegance of Mozart too much to be able to accept the coarseness and vulgarity of Beethoven. Ravel, although he esteemed me sufficiently to dedicate his very best piano piece, 'Ondine', to me, was unsparing in his criticism of me for being, as he said, a disciple of Schumann, who, 'just because he was a genius, had been able to poison general musical taste with his sickening sentimentality.'

### American successes

In 1900 Bauer received an invitation to perform with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He accepted at once, choosing Brahms's Concerto in D minor, on the supposition that it was less frequently played and would not invite comparisons between himself and the best-established artists, as would happen if he played Liszt or Beethoven. Brahms's work had, in fact, never been played in Boston at all, and that composer was not then in favour with the public.

While one critic 'had no use for the Brahms concerto', he admitted that Bauer had 'given care to playing it'; other critics were more laudatory. The debut was a reasonable success, and by the time Bauer finished his subsequent American tour he had played thirty concerts.

In the years before World War I, Bauer toured in a manner that can only be called geographically ambitious. In addition to many concerts in Europe, he travelled to South America, the American West (including such then-remote locations as Indian

reservations in Arizona), California, Hawaii, British Columbia, and the American plains.

At some point (and no one seems to know when but certainly before 1925) Harold Bauer married one of his students, Winnie Pyle. From Wolfe City, Texas, Winnie had come to New York to further her piano studies, although she was already a noted pianist in her own right. Winnie's sister's son's widow, Mrs. Tommie Kirksmith of Texas, is the closest living relative of Harold Bauer. Kirksmith recalled that Winnie was 'an absolute legend ... a spirited lady ... a beautiful blonde', and that Bauer was attracted by all these qualities.

Preserved in the Library of Congress is an extended letter from Bauer to Winnie, titled *Lessons by Mail*. Though the letter addresses at great length the pedagogical particulars of Winnie's pieces, Bauer also goes a-courting:

I want you now to study the Liszt arrangement of Isolde's *Liebestod*. Here is a piece where unmixed sexual feeling exists in every note, sometimes purely sensual and sometimes spiritually transfigured, but throughout intense, vivid, and passionate to the last degree.

His performance instructions for the *Liebestod*, too detailed and picturesque for publication in a respectable journal, make it unmistakably clear that he was interested in matrimony. Soon.

A 1925 concert programme from New York lists her as 'Miss Winifred Bauer'; an odd and self-contradictory appellation. (She was by this time 'Bauer' but not 'Miss'.)

### Recordings and editing

Like most pianists of his era Bauer saw a future for both acoustic recording and piano rolls, but spent a great deal more time on rolls. It is instructive to compare his rolls with those of his friend Percy Grainger. The two pianists are grouped together on Nimbus Records' Grand Piano series (NI8804), with Bauer playing Schumann's Sonata no.1, op.11 and Toccata, op.7, and Grainger playing the Symphonic Etudes, op.13 and Sonata no.2, op.22.

Bauer's rolls are clean, voiced, and perfected. Grainger's, by jaw-dropping contrast, are a mess. There is no voicing at all; it sounds as if Grainger played the notes and ran off (as was his custom) without doing any editing at all. This seems a natural result of the personalities of these two friends. Bauer remarked that he made 'from first to last, some two hundred records [piano rolls], taking infinite pains in the editing that was essential to their completion.' In spite of all his work, the 'final result was always somewhat discouraging...for the reason that the dynamics, set to produce certain effects on the piano which was



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being used for such editorial purposes, varied when the record was played on another piano.'

Bauer also had an intense interest in editing music, and formed a relationship with Schirmer to publish the complete piano works of Schumann, among much else. His editions are by no means 'scholarly' in the modern sense; indeed just the opposite. Bauer believed that the composer usually did more harm than good once the notes were down on paper; that phrasing and other indications were 'superficially related to the music.' Further, that 'the average composer's written indications are sometimes, but not always, right, whereas his verbal directions for performance ... are almost invariably wrong.' Nevertheless he was by no means careless about his editions: just independent.

### Retirement

By the early 1940's Bauer was worn out from decades of travel and performing. He began to consider retirement from the stage. Some time earlier, tired of steamships and trains, his wife had

opposite **Caption**  
Photo Credit

already announced her retirement from performance, and never played again.

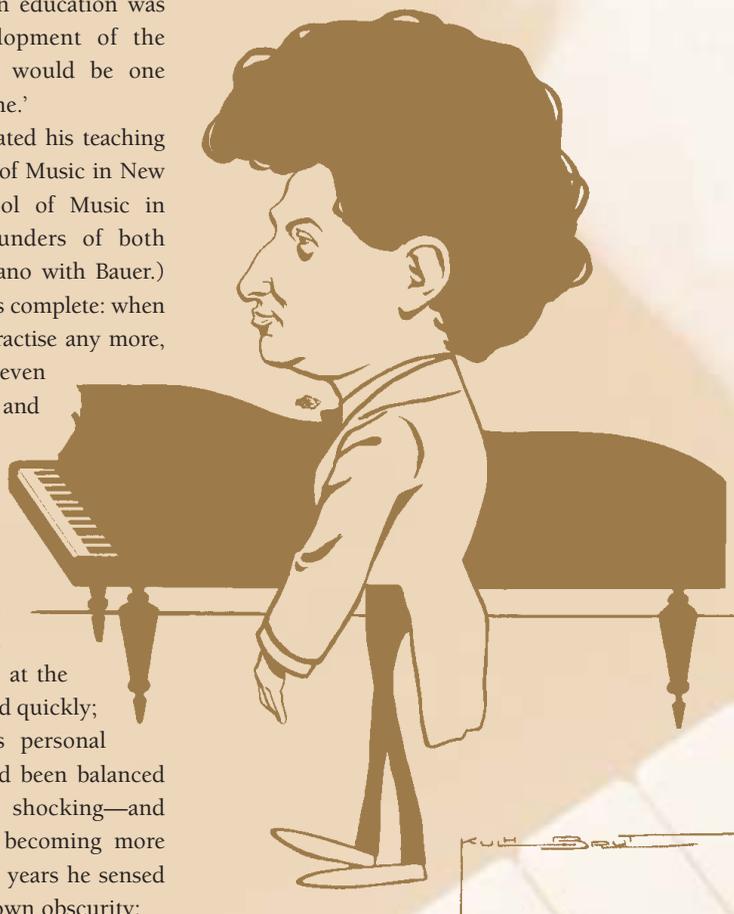
In order to find relief from constant performing Bauer arranged a schedule of lectures and master-classes with the Association of American Colleges, and visited twelve schools during his first year as a 'teacher'. His work was rather spontaneous and creative; in one case he took a group of engineering students to a concert hall to explain the mechanics of the piano. He ranged freely over many subjects but his point was 'that nothing in education was more important than the development of the imagination, without which life would be one horrid grind of monotonous routine.'

After World War II he concentrated his teaching activities at the Manhattan School of Music in New York and the Julius Hartt School of Music in Hartford, Connecticut. (The founders of both schools had previously studied piano with Bauer.) His retirement from performing was complete: when he was done, he simply did not practise any more, and played no more concerts, even informally. He found refreshment and invigoration in the slower schedule and relaxed atmosphere of teaching.

His teaching career only lasted a few years, however; early in 1950 he became ill. His health declined over the next year and he died in Miami, Florida on 12 March 1951 at the age of 77. Bauer's fame also declined quickly; it had always depended on his personal presence. His musical persona had been balanced and humane—never angular or shocking—and thus faded in a world that was becoming more noisy and fragmented. In his final years he sensed and accepted the approach of his own obscurity:

I had occasion recently to telephone to a large music store where there was every reason to believe that I was well known. The clerk took careful note of my order and then asked my name, which I had already given him.

'Mister Harold Bauer,' I said carefully, thinking he had not heard me the first time. 'Yes, Sir,' he answered respectfully. 'How is it spelled? B-O-W-...?' (P)



right  
**Illustrious illustration:**  
a cartoon of Bauer,  
showing the hair that  
Paderewski so admired

*Photo courtesy  
John Joseph Mortensen*

**IP+**

**IP Plus:** An interview with Harold Bauer's pupil, Raymond Hanson and an appraisal of Bauer's piano roll recordings, reproduced by Biddulph, are available. Please write to or email us at the address shown on page 4.

**Harold Bauer on CD**

**Nimbus Records ([www.wyastone.co.uk](http://www.wyastone.co.uk))**

- NI8817 Harold Bauer plays Chopin & Schumann
- NI8801 The Grand Piano Era. Various pianists. Bauer plays Schumann's Toccata, op.7 (rec. Jan 1922).
- NI8804 Schumann. Piano rolls by Bauer and Percy Grainger. Bauer plays Sonata no.1 in F sharp major (rec. May 1916), Toccata op.7 (rec. Jan 1922).
- NI8806 Brahms. Various pianists. Bauer plays Intermezzo in E flat major, op.117 no.1 (rec. Oct 1922) and Intermezzo in E minor op.119, no.2 (rec. Dec 1930).
- NI8808 Bach. Various pianists. Bauer plays Well-Tempered Clavier, book1 no.5 (rec. May 1915), Chorale from Cantata no.147, transcr. Bauer (rec. Dec 1929), Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue, transcr. von Bulow (rec. Apr 1929) and Two Part Inventions nos.1,6 and 8 (rec. Feb 1921).

**Biddulph ([www.biddulphrecordings.com](http://www.biddulphrecordings.com) – all discs no longer available)**

- LHW 007 Harold Bauer, 1924-28 Victor Recordings.
- LHW 009 Harold Bauer, Victor and Schirmer Records.
- LHW 011 Harold Bauer, Schumann/Liszt/Grieg piano works.