

WALKING UP THE MOUNTAIN TRACK
Review by Dr. Pavel Shatskiy (Moscow)

Walking Up The Mountain Track differs (as it seems to me) from many other books on music in which the so-called "scientific approach" kills the natural scent and flavouring of the subject. And this non-scientific way is much harder to achieve; a great victory for a writer. Congratulations!

My story about this book might be too personal for a review. But oddly it connotes the style of Mr. Eric Schoones' writings. So, it was a gift received from my friend — a brilliant musician and a wonderful personality — Ms. Zlata Chochieva. And the very title immediately struck me as being remarkably familiar in its nature, like as if returning to the 'Strawberry Fields (forever)'.

This déjà vu effect was produced by my own slight inclination towards Zen as a life philosophy. Unfortunately, we are living in times when this word is too easily spoken and too often heard. Just anything nice can become 'Zen'. But Mr. Schoones' book returns the reader towards the enduring values or even the Great Abstractions. It brings to light the essential meanings and symbol of the word Zen.

Many axioms of performing art are discussed in a profound manner. And it is remarkable to see how few words the author needs to unveil the inner senses. The book may look like a massive tome, but regarding the vast number of problems discussed, it is rather concise. If one dares to speak from the Zen point of view, the most precious virtue of the folio is the spirit of invitation which the pages evocate. It is neither a request, nor an obligation. The readers choose for themselves whether to follow the mountain track or to reject this direction. Moreover, the concomitant commandments — let's call them this — result from one's gradual self-improvement and discipline rather than being stated by some authoritative thrusting force.

However, there is one more thing that makes the book an overwhelming success (in my humble opinion): it loses no value if faced as a purely musicological work. I mean that even if we disregard the spiritual aspect of Benjamin's Morgenlandfahrt — and unfortunately it will be disregarded, dried, and evaporated in the air by a certain party of readers — his story would still remain a comprehensive study of piano playing as a development of technique and growth of the artistic personality.

In Part II, the crucial points of interpretation and music making are further displayed. So, the book can be very didactic if one is used to a more academic system of coordinates. For example, it can provide a basic check-list for any young performer wishing to fly higher. Yet the tutoring wisdom of the book never reaches a certain degree of snobbish admonition. It should also be noted separately that the style of Mr. Schoones' prose is very engaging. Unfortunately, many writings on music match the ironic formula by Bertrand Russell: the book should be unreadable to seem philosophical.

Another definite merit of the discussed 'liber' is the author's work as an interviewer. And I bet you that the selection, compilation, and building of the intersectional connections of this kind is a very difficult task to complete. Thus, at the end we see that book's script is topped up as rich as a jewellery box. It is also very clearly structured. The quotations, including the small epigraphs and recorded direct speech, can serve as references on many important aspects of performing art. On the other hand, those fragments bring the spirit and image of the speakers — the musicians themselves, who are literally portrayed in their own testimonies. The quoted material is not meant to fit the Procrustean bed of any theory — it lives its own life and freely addresses the impressions towards the readers.

In these last summing lines, I'd like to say this is a wonderful book by Mr. Schoones. It can bring delight to those interested in the very particular intertwining of spiritual philosophy and the music art (which can be found not only in the Eastern school of wisdom but, for example, in the European Naturphilosophie of Romantism). And there are no obstacles to appreciation for this work among those who share a mostly scholar point of view on what is called the history of performing art and the problems of pedagogics. I most positively recommend this book to my English-speaking students whereas the graceful literary style of the author opens its pages to a very broad scope of listening readers.

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