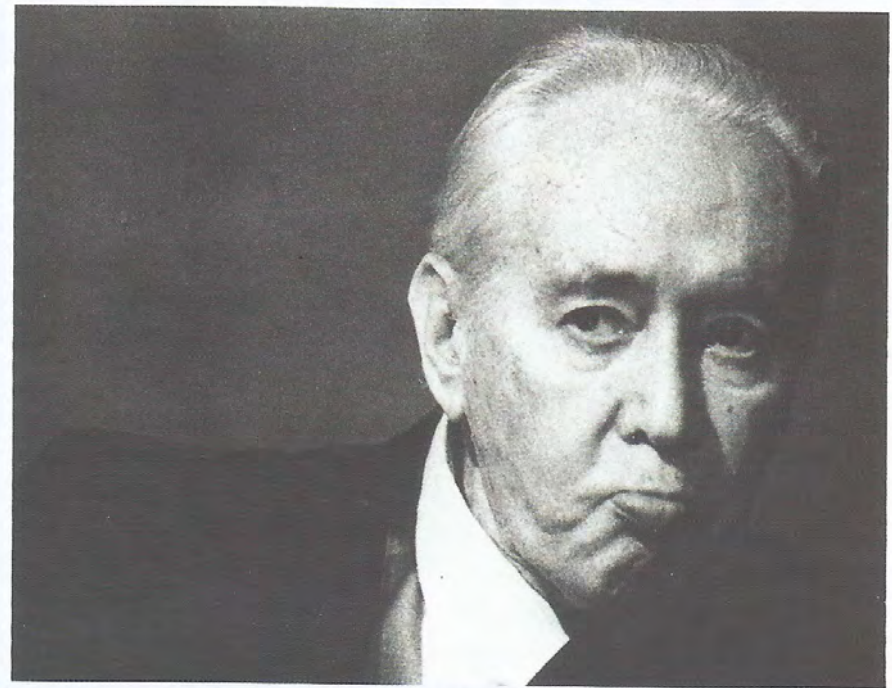


# Musician, Monster, Myth

Erwin Nyiregyházi was all of these. **Anton Kuerti** has been reading – and listening

**N**yiregyházi (pronounced NYEAR-edge-hawzee) is a conundrum. If he is right, the rest of us are completely wrong. Yet he was in his own way a unique genius, and was hailed as such from early childhood by many of the world's musical elite. But one cannot imagine a greater diversity of opinions than those that have percolated around him. Composers who stood at opposite ends of the musical spectrum practically deified him. Lehár declared him a genius at the age of 7, while Schoenberg, 25 years later, called him 'the person most replete with genius that I have ever heard.' Gregor Benko, president of the International Piano Archives, places him 'in the same category as Beethoven and Chopin and Liszt' and calls him 'the most extraordinary prodigy in history after Mozart, Saint-Saëns and Josef Hofmann'. Many of the world's most famous musicians, starting with Goldmark and Puccini, appraised him with only slightly more restraint. On the other side of the ledger, many prominent musicians take a quite opposite view. Vladimir Ashkenazy has described him as an 'amateur' and a 'joke', Earl Wild dismissed his celebrity as 'the biggest piece of baloney', while Abbey Simon said 'he sounds as if he hadn't practised for fifty years'.

Nyiregyházi's opinion of himself was unashamedly congruent with that of the first group, but he considered himself above all a composer and even a philosopher, rather than a mere pianist – indeed his self-assessment of all his abilities was staggering. He had no inhibition about telling his



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*Outrageously individualistic: Nyiregyházi in 1982*