

# The Eminent Slonimsky

BY ALAN RIFKIN

Seventy-five years ago, when Nicolas Slonimsky was nineteen, his troubles were dark, terrible, Russian ones. He looked out across St. Petersburg back then, drew a breath and tried to take stock of things—uneasily because the first two items on his list were enough to set him running and pulling his hair at the same time. They were his twin torments, crises in sex and identity. Katia Ivanova was Sex. Slonimsky had been helping her count change in the ticket booth of a pre-revolution silent-movie house, and she kissed the back of his neck by surprise, an ecstasy he made the mistake of recording in his diary. Now his mother was lecturing him on the medical horrors of syphilis. Slonimsky had only recently *heard* of syphilis but understood that if you had to be lectured about it your moral standing had already slipped in some irretrievable, public way. Never mind his deeper terror, that given the opportunity he'd take his chances and kiss Katia Ivanova back.

In the identity department there was Pepito Arriola. Pepito was a knee-soxed, cherubic pianist who had made it into newsprint with a skilled recital of works by Schumann and the Romantics. That put a nice, long crack in Slonimsky's mirror. Until then he'd regarded his own precocity as something of a birthright, and his life as a kind of hilarious command performance. His teachers had called him "Talent." His parents had nicknamed him "Newtonchik," for "Little Newton"—*in utero*. His forte as a pianist, his turf, had been Schumann and the other Romantics.

Whether Slonimsky's attempt to hang himself at home, in response to all of this, was wholehearted or not

is subject to some uncertainty, encouraged by Slonimsky. He points out, wearing a cryptic half-smile, that suicide was "fashionable" at that time in St. Petersburg. It's nearly impossible sometimes to know whether Slonimsky is speaking literally. To the news that Oxford Press, for instance, wants to change the



working title of his autobiography, *Failed Wunderkind*—they complained that it was "negative"—he slaps his forehead in exasperation. "But I keep *telling* them, this is *irony!*" he shouts. Yet take him at his word, assume he's aware of his own stature as a 20th-century musical Prime Mover (ultramodernist composer; "piano pounder" to Serge Koussevitzky; conductor of first performances of works by avant-garde outlaws Charles Ives and Edgard Varèse and Henry Cowell; editor of *Thompson's International Cyclopedic* and *Music Since 1900* and the

indispensable Baker's *Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*) and he will turn coat on himself, begin to swallow elaborately, mumble about his perennial "failures to focus." Some cross between humility and superstition is at work here. Depending on which day you ask him, the noose he strung from the bathroom ceiling in 1913 represented either a "genuine gesture of despair" or "just a bid for attention." (Of course, it could have been both.) Even his memoir is evasive, deferring to journal extracts from a younger brother. The brother in this account appears as a stiff-lipped soldier slapping sense into Nicolas, who'd collapsed in a Failed

time that his boy-wonder calling was worth dying for. That's been an impossible level of passion to sustain. Slonimsky today builds a kind of character on the idea of himself as anachronism: The Man Who Survived History and Landed in West L.A. He decorates his walls with junk mail. ACT NOW N. SLONIMSKY (a message from Ed McMahon) CLAIM THE TEN MILLION DOLLARS YOU MAY HAVE JUST WON. It's a great equalizer, this false fame; it keeps coming at you no matter who you are. NICOLAS SLONIMSKY: YOU'RE INVITED TO COME FACE TO FACE WITH SOME OF THE TERRIFYING GHOSTS OF ALL TIME FOR TEN CHILLING DAYS—ABSOLUTELY FREE! Every afternoon the mail brings more of it, along with correspondence from amateur researchers, possessed characters who trudge through obituaries in the public libraries of Boston or Rome to update an entry in Baker's; every time the envelopes drop through the slot in the door, Slonimsky's enormous cat Grody (short for "grody to the max") will poise and stare and finally pounce, nail them to the rug, his daily conquest. On the front door a scroll reads PREMISES GUARDED BY ATTACK CAT; in the bedroom there'd been a portrait of Brahms on his deathbed, until one of Slonimsky's secretaries (whom he calls his "odalisques") substituted Richard Avedon's famous nude photograph of Nastassia Kinski and snake.

Slonimsky is 93 years old. A widower. He has droopy gray hair, an imposing belly and soft blue eyes that follow imaginary cracks along the floor while he collects his breath or considers a joke. His voice is that of an astounded professor: lots of sharp syllables, mock disgust. Although he is one of the world's foremost lexicographers, he lives modestly (friends swap horror stories about how cheaply he sells his labors) in a tiny bungalow, small desk facing the street, one bookcase for his compositions and memorabilia—a bohemian existence that has itself become one of the in-jokes of his decor. MONEY MAGAZINE, another message shouts from the wall, IS ALL ABOUT NICOLAS SLONIMSKY'S MONEY AND HOW TO MULTIPLY IT. Next to SLONIMSKY'S MONEY, he has penciled in: "(\$24)." This flier, as it happens,