

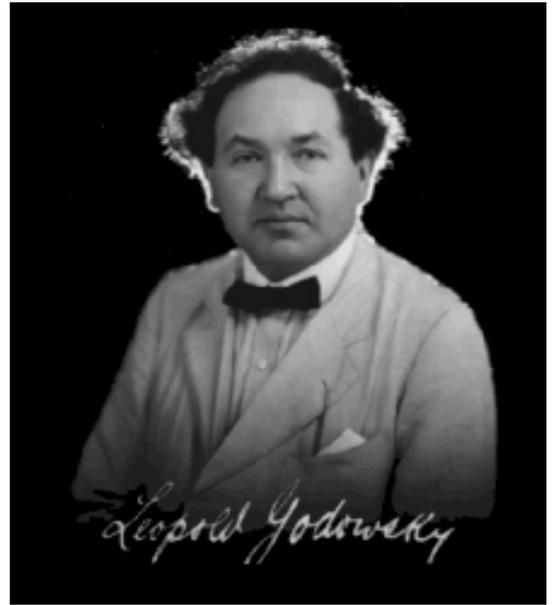
LEOPOLD GODOWSKY

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Leopold Godowsky was born on 13 February 1870 in Zosle which was then in Russia but is now in Lithuania. His Jewish parents were Maciej and Anna. His father died when Leopold was a child and his mother and foster parents, Louis and Minna Passinock, brought him up in Vilnus.

As a child, Leopold was composing and was competent both on the violin and the piano. His first concert was at the age on nine and he went on tour throughout Lithuania and East Prussia. For a short while, he studied with Ernst Rudorff in Berlin.

He left for the USA when he was 14 and, in that year, made his debut in Boston. In the next two years, he toured North West USA and Canada with the violinist Ovide Muslin.



1887 saw him back in Europe. He gave recitals in Paris and London and became a friend of Saint Saens.

From 1890, he was on the staff at the New York College of Music and the following year he married Frieda Saxi. Between 1891-1893, he taught at the Gilbert Reynolds Comb Broad Street Conservatory in Philadelphia and then at the Chicago Conservatory.

He moved to Berlin and in 1909 succeeded Busoni teaching at the Vienna Academy of Music. The war drove him back to the USA. The 1920s saw him touring extensively including visits to East Asia and South America.

His wife became seriously ill and his son, Gordon, married a vaudeville dancer and singer in 1928 and was disowned by his parents. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 caused financial difficulties for the Godowskys and in 1930 Leopold suffered a severe stroke. In December 1932 his son committed suicide and, in 1933, his wife died of a heart attack.

Godowsky developed further health problems and died of stomach cancer on 21 November 1938. He was 68.

His son Leopold Junior, together with Leopold Mannes, invented the Kodachrome photo transparency film. Leopold junior was also a violinist and married Frances, the sister of Gershwin.

Leopold Godowsky was a very fine pianist in the Liszt tradition and enjoyed popularity and fame. However, he is best known for his transcriptions including 53 Chopin studies in which he varies the originals to a vast extent although one wonders why. He transcribed Renaissance music by Lully and Rameau, Schubert songs and solo instrumental works by Bach which means that Godowsky invented harmonies where there were none. Many will think this is bastardisation and misuse of Bach whose music is of such quality that it should not be tampered with. He made transcriptions of Johann Strauss and produced a fantasy on Verdi's Rigoletto.

As to his own compositions he wrote a French Suite, a German Suite, a Hungarian Suite, an Irish Suite, a Java Suite, a Netherlands Suite, two Russian suites, a Swedish Suite which suites are educational music and based on national airs.

He wrote sets of piano pieces such as Three Pieces Op 12, Four Pieces Op 14, Three Pieces Op 15 and Four Pieces op 16.

His Toccata Op 13 is in six flats and is dedicated to Moriz Rosenthal and is fiercely difficult. Horowitz said it was impossible to play.

The Passacaglia lasts just under 20 minutes and is brilliantly conceived for the piano but the theme is sadly the opening of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony which is a bland theme. His massive Sonata in E minor has five movements and ends with a fugue. It is a phenomenal work and quite stunning, if a little overlong.

Opinion is divided over this composer but there is no doubt that his piano music is extraordinary but, as it is so difficult, I judge that few could cope with it. One wonders what is the point of writing piano music that is so excruciatingly difficult.



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