

A SECOND SET OF PIANISTS

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This is my second set of vignettes of pianists. There is no logic in the choice of them or in their groupings but just another attempt to make known pianists some of whom many be forgotten or ignored.

For easy reference these are the pianists whose vignettes appear below

Olga Samaroff, Gyorgy Cziffra, George Mantle Childe, Rosalyn Tureck, Raymond Lewenthal, Mindru Katz, Stephanie McCallum, Eugeny Kissin, Kathryn Stott, John Lill, Justine Verdier, Emmanuel Ax, Artur Balsam, Maurizio Pollini, Klara Wurtz, Richard Goode, Noriko Ogawa, and Jonathan Plowright.

Olga Samaroff was born in San Antonio, Texas on 8 August 1880. Incidentally, one of her pupils, Raymond Lewenthal, was also born in San Antonio, Texas. Olga was born Lucy Jane Olga Hickenlooper at Fort Sam Houston, her father being in the US Army. In 1900 they moved to Galveston where Olga went to a convent school. In the great hurricane of 1900 her father's business was destroyed.

There was hardly any doubt that Olga would become a concert pianist since both her mother and grandmother before her were. With her grandmother, Lucy Grunewald, Olga moved to Paris in 1894 and, a year later, enrolled at the Paris Conservatoire. Here she studied with Alkan's son Dalaborde and with Marmontel. She married a Russian civil servant, Boris Loutzsky, in 1900 and went to live in St Petersburg. Apparently he was a cruel man and she divorced him and changed her name to Samaroff. She self-produced her New York debut at Carnegie Hall in 1905 with the conductor Walter Damrosch in Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto no. 1. She performed with the New York Symphony Orchestra in 1908 and also with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In 1910 she had a serious illness and, thereafter, married Leopold Stokowski in 1911, but they were divorced in 1923. Stokowski left her for the actress Greta Garbo. It was said at the time that Olga was the more beautiful woman of the two.

It is said that Olga was the first woman to present all of Beethoven's thirty two piano sonatas at public concerts in America. An injury to an arm after a fall in her apartment in 1925 lead her into teaching which, with her daughter, Sonya Stokowski, took up her time. She wrote *The Layman's Music Course* (1935) and an autobiography *An American Musician's Story* (1939).

She mixed with famous figures such as George Gershwin, Irving Berlin and Cary Grant.

In the Great Depression, she set up the Musicians Emergency Aid. But she is best remembered for some of her pupils the amazing William Kapell, who died young in an air crash in 1953, Eugene List, Raymond Lewenthal, Rosalyn Tureck and Alexis Weissenberg.

She was a formidable character believing in two essential aspects of teaching and performance. You did not follow a method, but studied the work personally to arrive at your own understanding of it, and you played what was written.

Two universities awarded her degrees. These were Pennsylvania and Cincinnati. In 1944, President Roosevelt appointed her to the Advisory Committee on Music to the Department of State.

She died of a heart attack after a day of lessons in New York on 17 May 1948, aged 67.

Gyorgy Cziffra had a tough life and yet his pianism is legendary. He was born in a shanty town on the outskirts of Budapest on 5 November 1921 to parents who were gypsy musicians in Paris in the 1920s. His father played the cimbaloon and the couple played in cabaret, restaurants and cafes.

At the age of five, Gyorgy was fascinated by the circus. He was a frail child and often stayed in a sick bed watching his sister play the piano. He was the youngest member to join the Ferenc Liszt Academy when he was nine. He studied with Istvan Thoman who was a pupil of Liszt and had taught Bartok and Dohnanyi. In 1942, he was called up into the Hungarian Army as a foot soldier, then a tank commander and was the sole survivor of one engagement.

When Hungary became dominated by the Soviets, Cziffra was imprisoned in 1950 by the Red Army for his 'rebellious political views' and not released until 1953. While he was in prison, he was tortured and, as it was known that he was a pianist, his hands were savaged.

On the eve of the Hungarian revolt in 1956, and, after he had given a performance of Bartok's superb

Piano Concerto no. 2, Cziffra escaped to Vienna with his Egyptian wife, Soleika, and their son.

His Paris debut created a major stir as did his London debut with Liszt's Piano Concerto no. 1. His performances were stunning and dazzling. He made demanding piano versions of orchestral music as well as transcriptions of trivial music by the Strauss family.

He became a French citizen in 1968. In 1981 his son, Gyorgy junior, who was a conductor, was killed in an accident.

His difficult life led Gyorgy senior to be a heavy smoker and somewhat of a toper. In the 1990s he developed lung cancer.

Gyorgy established a piano competition in his name, purchased the Royal Chapel of St Frambourg near Senlis which is now known as the Cziffra Foundation which he dedicated to 'spirituality' and the arts.

It was in Morgand-sur-Orge that he died of a heart attack on 15 January 1994.

A pianist who will be forgotten is George Mantle Childe because there are no recordings of him. He dropped the forename George since the three names would have too many consonants !

He was born in Sutton Coldfield on 17 December 1912 and won the Birmingham music competitions and had his first broadcast from the BBC in 1924 when he was only eleven years of age. Three years later he won an open scholarship to the Royal College of Music (RCM) in London where his sense of perfect pitch impressed the examiners. His studies with Marmaduke Barton were not successful but he continued with Leoni Gombrick, a student of Leschetzky and a refugee from Vienna, whose son was to become Sir Ernst Gombrick. Mantle Childe made regular broadcasts with the BBC from the 1930s onwards when the fee for a recital was £7. This continued into the 1980s. Earlier, he was invited to a professorship at the Guildhall School of Music where he also became examiner, composed technical tests and wrote regular articles for the periodical *Music Teacher*.

He was much admired for his playing of Schubert and he also gave many recitals of music for two pianos with Tom Bromley. He was not a concerto performer.

During the war he was directed to give concerts for CEMA (Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts) which eventually Britten and Pears took over having conducted a vicious and unfair hate campaign against the ladies who had previously led the CEMA and to avoid their being called up for active war service having fled to the USA to avoid the call up. Mantle Childe accompanied many of the world's finest musicians such as Leon Goossens and Kathleen Ferrier. On one occasion the venue for one such concert was bombed twenty minutes after the concert had ended.

After the war he was in demand for chamber concerts in Germany. But for most of his life he was a highly respected piano teacher in the Birmingham area.

Rosalyn Tureck is best known for her Bach performances on the harpsichord but that is only a small part of what she achieved. She gave the premiere of Williams Schumann's Piano Concerto in 1943, a recording of which I have and treasure.

She was born of Russian and Turkish parents in Chicago in 1914. She studied with Jan Chiapusso, who was a student of Frederick Lamond. She was only nine years old when she made her debut with two recitals. At the age of eleven, she made her debut with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

She also studied with Olga Samaroff at New York's Julliard School of Music and received her honours degree in 1936.

Tureck's association with Bach began in 1937 when she played the 48 Preludes and Fugues of the Well Tempered Clavier and the Goldberg Variations in a series of six concerts. This set her on the road to the deserved fame she enjoyed.

But she was not confined to Bach and the harpsichord. She performed Beethoven, Chopin, Scriabin and Debussy as well as the sonatas of David Diamond and Aaron Copland.

In 1957 she came to London where she stayed for twenty years and formed the Tureck Bach Chamber Orchestra and the International Bach Society. Here she delighted audiences as a conductor and her Bach was second only to the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra under the legendary Karl Munchinger.

It was during this time that I met her and she introduced me to Scriabin from which I have not recovered.

In 1977, she was back in New York and repeated her concerts of forty years earlier with the Well Tempered Klavier and the Goldberg Variations to great acclaim.

She died in Riverdale, the Bronx in 2003.

Raymond Lewenthal was born of French-Russian parents in San Antonio, Texas on 29 August 1923 and

became a child actor in Hollywood until he was fifteen. He studied the piano with Lydia Cherkassay, the mother of the famous Shura Cherkassy. In 1945 he won all first prizes in the three piano competitions he entered and continued his studies with Olga Samaroff at the Julliard School in New York and later with Alfred Cortot and Guido Agosti in Europe. Lewenthal made his debut in 1948 with the Philadelphia Orchestra playing Prokofiev's Third Concerto with Dmitri Mitropoulos conducting. Mitropoulos had played the concerto himself many times. Lewenthal's New York debut followed shortly afterwards.

But his career came to a sudden halt in 1953 when he was attacked in Central Park, New York and his hands and arms were broken. The fact of these injuries might suggest that his attackers knew he was a concert pianist. Posters of him in his usual top hat cloak and cane were seen in the city.

He had to recover not only physically but emotionally and it must be recorded here that Cortot was magnificent in helping him in retraining his hands and giving him confidence.

While recovering, Lewenthal studied the works of Alkan and intended to write a book about this composer. He performed in New York in 1964 twelve years after his last appearance there, playing Alkan. This led to RCA recording his performances not only of Alkan but other composers such as Dussek, Goetz, Czerny, Hummel, Herz, Henselt, Schwarwenka, Rubinstein, Moscheles and Thalberg and he became known as the Romantic Revivalist. He took part in major music festivals, taught at the Manhattan School from the mid-1970s, and at the famous Tanglewood Summer Festival.

His technique was amazing so much so that one could be forgiven for doubting that he was a mere mortal. But he had his critics. Other pianists, clearly jealous of him, complained that he only played the rare stuff, that he championed lost causes, and played everything too loud. The fact of the matter is that these other pianists were unequal to the music that Lewenthal played and felt diminished by him.

Lewenthal was truly sensational and we are glad that we have recordings of his playing Alkan, Henselt and Liszt. He was a workaholic and this contributed to his heart condition. He died in Hudson, New York on 21 November 1988 aged 65.

A pianist of exceptional skill was Mindru Katz, a Romanian born Israeli. He was a master and those who know their piano music agree that he was very special. He recorded the Khachaturian Concerto with Sir Adrian Boult and after that thrilling performance he sat at the piano and played a Bach Prelude and Fugue and the orchestra were truly spell bound. He always had supreme control over the instrument and could produce brilliance when called for with tremendous verve. Someone wrote that his playing had both steel and velvet. Enescu recognised him as a child prodigy and sent him to Lipatti's teacher, Florica Musicescu. He graduated from the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest in 1947. He toured Europe and, in 1959, emigrated to Israel.

His playing continued to gain attention. The Gramophone said that his playing compels attention; it is full of poetry and technically brilliant. He worked and recorded with the violinist Henryk Szeryng and set a high standard of piano playing in Israel. He joined the Rubin Academy in Tel Aviv becoming professor of piano there in 1972. He was a member of the jury at the first Arthur Rubinstein piano Competition in Tel Aviv in 1974 with Rubinstein himself, Istomin and Michelangli. His performances of Bach and Chopin were ahead of their time and his recording of Prokofiev's First Concerto shows technical prowess and bravura. His Beethoven was nothing short of miraculous.

He died on stage in Istanbul on 30 January 1978 while playing Beethoven's Tempest Sonata.

Everyone who loves piano music must obtain at least one of his recordings.

Stephanie McCallum is an amazing pianist who also champions rare or less familiar music. She excels in Alkan, Liszt, Xenakis and her Boulez is completely convincing. She was born in Sydney on 3 March 1956 and studied with Alexander Sverjensky and the awesome Gordon Watson who premiered Humphreys Searle's Piano Sonata in 1951 and recorded it. Then she studied in the UK with Ronald Smith and gave a concert at the Wigmore Hall. She returned to Australia in 1985 and helped to establish contemporary music ensembles. Just before she left London and at a Wigmore hall recital she gave what is considered the first complete performance of Alkan's Three Studies Op 76 (one for the left hand, one for the right hand and the final study for both hands).

Like Margaret Kitchin, she has studied many of the difficult modern works and her performances have won worthy acclaim. Such works include Brian Ferneyhough's Lemma Icon Epigram and Xenakis's Herma. She also enjoys the French repertoire and has played works by Satie, Magnard, D'Indy, Ravel, Ropartz and her Boulez is nothing sort of sensational. But she is not confined to these modern masters and has played Beethoven and the complete piano works of Weber.

Of course, there are pianists that do appeal to everybody and there are some that do not appeal to me for musical reasons.

Eugeny Kissin was born in Moscow in October 1971. He is clearly a gifted musician in some respects. The Times of May 10, 1999 called him a genius. He has received numerous awards and accolades and a Grammy Award. When it comes to the less technical music such as Mozart, Schubert and some Chopin he is good but it is when he tackles the more difficult works such as Rachmaninov, Brahms and Prokofiev the problems become apparent.

It must be stressed that interpretation in music means 'to realise as far as possible what the composer wrote'. It is not licence or taking liberties with music or changing the composer's directions. I watched Kissin's performance of Brahms' Piano Concerto no. 2, a work I know well, and with the score in front of me. In the first four minutes Kissin varied the composer's clear instructions some 17 times! His Rachmaninov was wayward and, before someone says that everybody has bad days, I have heard so many Kissin performances that are wayward.

Kathryn Stott was a prize winner at the Leeds International Piano Competition in 1970 and studied with the great Kendall Taylor. She is to be commended for her service to contemporary music such as concertos by Peter Maxwell Davies and Michael Nyman. She has recorded music by John Foulds, Erwin Schulhoff, Emil Sjorgen, George Lloyd, Charles Koechlin, Lennox Berkeley and Herbert Howells and some of this music is certainly not top drawer. The Times referred to her technical prowess in Faure and she has also received many awards. She is an able accompanist and has taken an interest in the music of the tango.

She has made several musical festivals in the north of England highly successful. She raised money for Cancer Research by walking the Great Wall of China.

But her playing is often wayward. Much as I am not an admirer of Chopin, I feel her performances of Chopin to be self-indulgent and uninspiring and her tempi in Smetana's On the Seashore is all over the place. Others find her playing cold. Her playing of Rachmaninov's Concerto no. 2 is flamboyant, unnecessarily theatrical and elaborate. Listen to William Kappell on Naxos Historical CD and see how it should be played.

By contrast, John Lill is a very fine pianist. He was born in London on 17 March 1944 and gave his first recital at the age of nine and, in 1970, won the coveted Moscow International Piano Competition. He studied at RCM and with Wilhelm Kempff.

He is an intellectual player and a magnificent craftsman and there are no adequate words to describe his amazing skill and reliability. At the age of eighteen he played Rachmaninov 3 under Boult in a stunning performance compared with the superlative performance that Peter Katin gave in a 1953 Prom.

He is so unlike Kissin. I recall Lill's performance of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto no. 2 with the great Bryden (Jack) Thomson. It was nothing short of sensational and Jack Thomson told me that he had conducted many performances of this very difficult work but none came near to John Lill's performance. His Beethoven is unsurpassed as is his Prokofiev sonatas, all available on CD.

He has about 70 concertos to his name and one can be forgiven for doubting that he is mortal.

He was mugged in a burglary and his hands were injured but he is still playing, thank goodness.

The other attribute about John Lill that I feel I must mention is that he is a sincerely congenial person. I have also seen some of the letters he has written to several people which are kind, generous and courteous.

Justine Verdier is a French pianist who was born in 1985. At the age of nine she played Mozart's Concerto K449 and a little while later won an Award winner of the Cziffra Foundation. In her early career she won twelve national and international awards. She studied at the Institut Musical de Paris. In 1996-7 she gave illustrated talks on Haydn whose piano sonatas should be better known. Marc-Andre Hamelin's performances on Hyperion are best sellers!

In June 1998 she was playing Chopin's Fantasia in F minor at the Polish Institute in Paris when she met the Polish composer Milosz Magin who taught her how to understand Chopin's music and de-feminize it. This can be observed on You Tube in her playing of the finale of Chopin's B minor sonata.

To date she has only made one CD, that of the Piano Concerto no. 2 by Magin, beautifully executed and one hopes that this will introduce many to the fine piano works of this composer.

Justine furthered her studies at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg and formed the Duo Pianissimo with her partner Daniel Diaz with whom she lives in Seville.

It seems that she is only known in France and Spain, which is an injustice. She is a pianist to watch.

Emmanuel Ax was born in the Ukraine on 8 June 1949 to Jewish parents who had survived the Nazi

concentration camps. He studied in Warsaw and Winnipeg, Canada, and, from 1961, at the Julliard School in New York under Mieczyslaw Munz.

He supports established modern composers such as Tippett, Henze and Hindemith. He is a very able accompanist to people like the cellist Yo Yo Ma and these two were joined by Isaac Stern and Jamie Laredo in a piano quartet.

Ax has won many prestigious prizes for his Beethoven, Brahms and Haydn. He is neither a showman nor a show off like Richter or Lang Lang.

He teaches at the Julliard School, is married to the pianist Yoko Nozaki and they have two children.

He is something of a philosopher with his pithy sayings but he is also a big man with a big heart and it is a good heart, too.

Some pianists will be forgotten because they specialised in chamber music. Such a possible casualty is Arthur Balsam born in Warsaw on 8 February 1906 and who died in New York on 1 September 1994. He made his debut at the age of twelve and studied at the Berlin Hochschule for Music. In 1930 he won the Mendelssohn Prize and, in 1932, toured with the violinist Yehudi Menuhin.

Balsam was on the faculty of the Eastman School of Music, Boston University and the Manhattan School of Music. He also accompanied the great soloists of the day such as the brilliant violinist Nathan Milstein who often said that he would only give a recital if Arthur was free.

If his recordings of the Brahms' First Piano Quartet and the gorgeous Schumann Piano Quintet are still available, I recommend them. He recorded a recital of Haydn Sonata 60, Beethoven's Diabelli Variations and pieces by Brahms, Mendelssohn and Chopin. There are also his performances of concertos by Mozart, Hummel and C P E Bach.

I saw him in chamber music and was impressed with his sensitivity. I regret mentioning Richter again, but Balsam did not play chamber music as if they were piano concertos, as did Richter.

Maurizio Pollini is a fine pianist but has been criticised that his playing is cold, conservative and lacking in emotion. He was born in Milan on 5 January 1942. His father was the architect Gino Pollini.

Maurizio's major piano studies were with the great Michelangli but he also studied philosophy and became an excellent chess player. He won the Chopin Competition in Warsaw in 1960 at the age of eighteen and, although Chopin is far from being my favourite composer, I must confess that Pollini's playing could convert me. His performance of the Op 10 and Op 25 studies are first class. He is also superbe at Bach and Beethoven and he has championed modern works such as those by Boulez, Nono, Stockhausen and Maderna. Nono wrote *sofferte onde serena* for him and Giacomo Manzoni the *Masse omaggio a Edgar Varese* and Salvatore Sciarrin his *Piano Sonata no 5*.

It is said that he can sight read anything. His performances of Beethoven's Hammerklavier is highly praised and his recording of Prokofiev's Sonata no. 7 is remarkable. He is at home with all types of music and the fact that he can play the most complex modern works is a further indication of his skill and technique.

He has conducted orchestral works and operas and is an all round musician.

If Pollini could convert me to Chopin then could Klara Wurtz convert me to Schubert?

She was born in Budapest in 1965. As a child she showed exceptional talent having begun to learn the piano from the age of three. In the early 70s she became a member of the Hungarian Children's Choir and, on their tours abroad to places like Greece, Japan, Italy and Romania she played piano interludes as well as being the pianist of the choir. At the age of fourteen, she began to study at the Ferenc Liszt Music Faculty. Her further teachers were Zoltan Kocsis, Ferenc Rados and Gyorgy Kurtag. She received scholarships from Andras Schiff for his master classes at Prussia Cove in England. She won the Ettore Pozzoli piano competition in Milan and was highly praised by the jury.

In 1988 she performed the Schubert B flat Sonata at the International Piano Competition in Dublin. In 1991 she signed up with Columbia Artistes Management in New York and has given many concerts in the USA and Canada.

She is somewhat limited in her repertoire. She does not play baroque or contemporary music (one cannot call Bartok or Ravel contemporary now) and she may be in danger of being typecast. She has recorded the sonatas of Mozart and sonatas by Schubert as well as Rachmaninov's Second Concerto and the Schumann concerto. Many of her recordings are with Brilliant Classics including partnering the cellist Timora Rossler. She lives in the Netherlands and teaches in Utrecht..

I have spoken about John Lill's excellent Beethoven but there is another fine Beethoven interpreter in the

American, Richard Goode. He was born on 1 June 1943 in the East Bronx, New York and came to the attention of Rudolf Serkin at the age of ten who recommended him to Claude Frank with whom he studied from 1952 to 1954. Goode also studied with Serkin in Vermont.

Goode won the Clara Haskil Prize in 1973 and, in 1980, the Avery Fisher Prize. He continued to give recitals and concerto performances and from 1983 to 1989 appeared with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Centre.

He was 47 when he made his Carnegie Hall debut.

He has been compared to Artur Schnabel and Karl Ulrich Schnabel in style but it was his Beethoven sonata cycle which established him. In the 2005-6 London season he played all the Beethoven concertos with the Budapest Festival orchestra under Ivan Fischer.

He is co-artistic director with Mitsuko Uchida of the Marlboro Music School and Festival in Vermont.

He is a highly intelligent person with a fondness for literature. He is married to Marcia, who is a violinist, and lives in New York.

Noriko Ogawa is another reliable pianist and has earned deserved acclaim since her success at the 1987 Leeds International Piano competition. She was born in Kawasaki, Japan in 1962 and studied at the Tokyo College of Music from 1977 to 1980 and between 1981 and 1985 at the Juilliard School in New York. She made her New York debut in 1982 and her London debut in 1988.

She studied with Benjamin Kaplan and admits that she learned from him things which she learned from no one else. Kaplan is discussed in my first article of pianists.

When I asked a famous concerto pianist why Ogawa had teamed up with Kathryn Stott in 1981, I was surprised by the reply, "It's a girl thing!"

Ogawa has collaborated with the clarinetist Michael Collins and the violinist Dong-Suk Kang. She is keen to promote the music of Toru Takemitsu.

She has a long association with the Swedish record company BIS and has recorded some unusual repertoire with, for example, the piano concertos of Tchaikovsky, (the Fourth is particularly good), arrangements for piano by Peter Warlock of works by Delius and Beethoven's choral symphony arranged for voices and piano by Wagner and the lyric pieces by Petersen-Berger.

Her recordings of Debussy have received great acclaim and it is her sensitivity and sound that is regularly remarked upon.

She teaches at the Guildhall School of Music in London and lives with her partner Philip.

Jonathan Plowright has devoted much of his time to the repertoire of Polish Romantic composers and we are glad that he has done so. He is an exceptional pianist. He was a gold Medallist at RAM in 1983, a Fulbright Scholar and won the top prize in the European Piano Competition. He is in demand all over the world and yet there are those who may not have heard of him. Had he played the standard repertoire things might have been different. However, his Chopin is highly praised but the real revelation in his playing comes with his performances of the fascinating piano concertos of Sigismund Stojowski and some of his solo piano music. He has also recorded two concertos of Henryk Melcer and the big, dark and technically demanding Piano Sonata in E flat minor by Paderewski.

Polish organisations welcome him understandably and deservedly. He has chosen the path he wants to take but would he be better known and even more admired if he also played standard repertoire? Take the case of Marc-Andre Hamelin who has spent a lot of his time on less well-known repertoire and now has recorded Haydn piano sonatas from Hyperion which are best sellers and he has become better known and even more popular.

One wonders whether we have too many great pianists.

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