

WILLIAM KAPELL

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The finest conductor that the USA imported from Europe was Fritz Reiner who was sometimes called a martinet. Yet his relationship with the brilliant American pianist William Kapell was noticeably warm as Reiner was later with Van Cliburn.

Reiner worked with many fine soloists but he found Horowitz difficult to accompany and Rubinstein was sometimes all over the place. Some pianists gain fame and then feel they had license to alter or vary the music they play.

“Kapell was as accurate and reliable a soloist as you would ever meet”, said Reiner. And he was right. His first recording was with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Koussevitzky who said that Kapell was awe inspiring.



In 1941 at the age of 19 Kapell was given a contract by the conductor Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra such was his admiration for him. In 1942 the conductor Efrem Kurtz fell under his spell as they performed the Khachaturian Concerto. Therefore people used to refer to Kapell's Khachaturian. Such expressions are odious as they may suggest the pianist only played this work.

It is important to emphasise that Kapell was the favourite pianist of Ormandy, Stokowski, Reiner, Bernstein. Monteux, Rodzinski. Steinberg and Dorati.

One American conductor said, “He is the best we have got!”. Another said, “He is the best the world has got!”.

Kapell was also labelled as the pianist who only played the virtuosic works. He was the performer of flashy repertoire. People do say the most inane things. He played Prokofiev's Piano Concerto no 3, an absolute brute to play, and I have heard concert pianists malign this concerto whereas the facts are they cannot play it. He also played Rachmaninov Piano Concerto no 3 a truly glorious work which calls for a very fine pianist. He was a bravura pianist and yet was gentle and lyrical in small pieces by such composers as Chopin. He was magnificent in the intimate concertos of Mozart. He had an enviable warmth and lyrical in Beethoven. He was once persuaded to play Falla's Nights in the Gardens of Spain.

He was intensely self-critical about his playing which may explain why his repertoire was not wider. He did not always like studio recordings and was critical of his commercial recordings yet they were masterful. He wanted perfection.

That he died in an air crash in 1953 was a dreadful tragedy. He was just 31. What is also sad is that there are people who have never heard or heard of him and he is largely forgotten by the wider public.

He was born in New York City on 20 September 1922. His father was of Spanish-Russian Jewish ancestry and his mother was Polish. They owned a bookshop in Manhattan William studied in New York with Dorothea Anderson La Follette, then with Olga Samaroff in Philadelphia and at the Julliard School.

When he won his first competition and the prize as a turkey dinner with Jose Iturbi. He won the Philadelphia Orchestra's youth competitor with Saint Saens Piano Concerto no 2. He also won the W. Naumbeg Award. This foundation sponsored the nineteen-year-old's New York debut which won him the Town Hall Award for the most outstanding concert given by a musician under the age of thirty.

There is no doubt that his technique was exceptional. His playing could be exciting and breathtaking. RCA signed him to an exclusive recording contract. His recording of the Khachaturian concerto was the world premiere recording and it was an enormous hit. But being called Khachaturian Kapell was a hindrance and a stupid remark. There were people who admired him for his good looks and black hair. Today we live in a society where soloists are admired and promoted for their good looks and their musical ability takes second place.

He toured the USA, Canada, Europe and Australia and wherever he went there was unsullied acclaim. He was regarded as the most brilliant of American pianists.

He married Rebecca Anna Lou Melson on 18 May 1948 and they had two children. He was methodical in all things and practised for eight hours a day recording in a note book all that he played every day and the time he spent on each matter.

Once he approached a neighbour, Vladimir Horowitz, for lessons but Horowitz said that there was nothing he could teach him.

He was also very fine in chamber music. He played Rachmaninov's Cello Sonata with Edmund Kurtz, Brahms first viola sonata with William Primrose and Brahms D minor violin sonata with Heifetz.

From August to October 1953 he toured Australia playing 37 concerts in 14 weeks.

In his flight back to the USA, his plane hit Kings Mountain near San Francisco on the morning of 23 October killing all eleven passengers and eight crew.

In 1964 Kapell's widow sued the airplane company and was awarded \$924,396 in damages but this decision was overturned a year later by the Court of Appeal. His widow, now Anna Lou Dehaveon, is a social anthropologist in New York and has worked hard to keep her husband's name alive.

Plane crashes have robbed us of many fine young musicians among whom we must mention the finest violinist of her generation, Ginette Neveu. The brilliant and vigorous conductor Guido Cantelli was also killed in an air crash.

[\(See separate article on Ginette Neveu\)](#)

The violinist Isaac Stern set up the William Kapell Memorial Foundation to bring musicians to the USA for tuition and experience.

There are many pianists who have been influenced by Kapell's playing such as Gary Graffman, Leon Fleisher, Eugene Istomin and Van Cliburn.

Over the last few years recordings of Kapell have been released including Shostakovich's Concerto no 1, Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition, Debussy's Suite Bergamasque, Chopin's Barcarolle and Scherzo in B minor and Prokofiev's Sonata no 7.

A nine CD set released in 1998 by RCA included Chopin sonatas and mazurkas, Shostakovich preludes, Scarlatti sonatas and the Piano Sonata of Aaron Copland as well as concertos by Rachmaninov, Prokofiev and Khachaturian. On a Dutton CD we have the Khachaturian and Beethoven's Piano Concerto no 2.



There is also a recording of Brahms Piano Concerto no 1. In the Rachmaninov 3, there is a cut of about three pages which cannot be explained, but his cadenza is electrifying. You should also contact Naxos Historical recordings.

In 1986, the University of Maryland's piano competition was renamed the William Kapell International Piano Competition.

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