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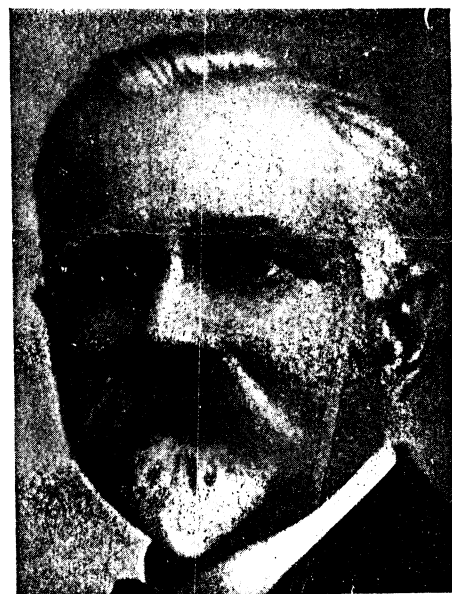
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We Attend GODOWSKY'S Master Class

An Associate of the Eminent Pianist and Teacher Gives Us a Close-Up of What Happens There

By J. G. HINDERER

Editor's Note—Mr. Hinderer is the founder and honorary president of the American Guild of Music Teachers and himself a distinguished pianist and teacher of the Middle West.

HAVING been associated with Leopold Godowsky as his secretary and companion on a number of tours and at various other times during the past fourteen years, and as an active member in several of his Master Classes, I am sure that readers of *THE MUSICIAN* will also be interested to know more about the teaching methods used by this master of modern pianism. Piano students and teachers, especially, will perhaps best enjoy a peep of the Maestro at work in one of his famous classes—piano clinics, he calls them, for the performance of musical operations. I will endeavor, therefore, to offer a faithful, but of necessity very limited, pen-picture of the man and his work, knowing full well how difficult it is in so short an article, to present anything like a detailed analysis even of his more important pedagogical principles.

As a teacher, Godowsky is a subtle alchemist who transforms with magic touch the dead, skeletal inspirations of genius into living musical gold. Familiar compositions under his marvelous fingers seem like new, yet he does nothing to them but reveal hidden beauties already in the music. Though he emphasizes strongly the interpretative side of piano playing in his teaching, one must not infer that the mechanics are at all neglected. Like Tobias Matthay and Rudolph Breithaupt, with whom it was also my good fortune to have studied, he uses the difficult portions of beautiful compositions in training the playing mechanism, efficiently eliminating in this way, much of the customary drudgery of the practice hour as well as developing the student's sense of musical appreciation. He, of course, bases his mechanics on relaxation and uses the free fall of the weight of the whole arm from the shoulder, balancing and rolling it about on the finger tips (as one would roll a rimless wheel on its spokes), thus greatly diminishing the difficulties of finger manipulation, especially in the equalization of their differences. Lost motion, time and effort are everywhere reduced to a minimum, resulting in greater speed, accuracy and endurance, thereby freeing to the utmost all the mechanical and technical resources of the player.

The mechanical side in Godowsky's teaching and playing is, therefore so intimately interwoven with the interpretative or technical phases that one could almost say that mechanical perfection is the result of an intense and beautiful musical ideal externalized or materialized in the playing. Mechanism,

to this wizard of the keyboard, is what Liszt once said it was—"Only the artist's troublesome duty,"—a means to an end in bringing out the beauties of the music. He uses the mechanics of piano playing as a sensible person does money, to good purpose and not for mere vulgar display (a technician being like a rich philanthropist and a virtuoso like a miser parading his wealth), and conceals the means of production, for music is the thing and the player but a channel for its expression. He continually stresses what a machine cannot do, namely, think and feel.

Godowsky thus makes a sharp distinction between mere virtuosity, for which he has the utmost contempt, and technique or interpretation. "Technique," he says, "is something entirely different from virtuosity. It embraces everything that makes for ar-



Leopold Godowsky

tistic piano playing—good fingering, phrasing, pedaling, dynamics, agogics, time and rhythm—in a word, the art of musical expression distinct from the mechanics. Some critics think they are abusing me when they call me a technician but they don't know that they couldn't pay me a higher compliment. I consider it an insult to be called a virtuoso. Any fool can learn the mechanics of piano playing."

Just imagine here, for a moment, that you have tuned in on one of Godowsky's Master Classes and that he is talking to you directly, giving you a class lesson as a member of his playing group before the auditor section, numbering sometimes as many as a hundred and twenty-five.

"Follow truth, not tradition," precludes Godowsky, in opening a class, "and believe what I tell you because it is logical and true and not because I say it. I want you to feel

free to ask as many questions as you like, so please don't hesitate. If you don't understand what I tell you, I can explain it to you in many ways, for music, you must always remember, is a science as well as an art.

"Weight, relaxation and economy of motion are the foundation stones of technique or interpretation and mechanism in piano playing. Ninety per cent of my playing is based on the weight principle and I taught it scientifically as early as 1892. The keyboard was made to rest—to lean on, and you must feel that the hands are formed of rubber and adjust them carefully to the keys. But, above all else, you should sacrifice everything for beauty of tone. The great difficulty in piano playing in general lies in giving the listener a complete mental and aural picture or impression of a composition as a whole at one hearing with the many details of nuancing, dynamics, agogics, pedaling, etc., all carefully worked out. The only way I can explain some of the things pianists, who I feel must know better, do, is that they do not listen attentively enough to their own playing or they would hear what they do and correct it. You must emphasize everything clearly, like a good actor so the listener will also get what you are trying to express and not play in a sort of imaginative, subconscious way to yourself.

"In teaching grammar, an instructor does not take away whatever poetic inspiration or imagination his students may have. Neither should we musicians lose our inspiration or individuality by being grammatically exact. I myself am very strict about holding notes and rests for their full value and observing all the other details. Remember especially to give the dotted notes their full value, in fact you can exaggerate here by holding the long notes longer and the short notes shorter and it won't sound at all disproportionate. All marches and similar compositions with dotted notes and short up-beats should be played in this way. It adds strength and zest to the tempo.

"In planning your dynamics, you must adjust them to your strength and play the notes loud in proportion to their length. Never accent the beginning of a crescendo for that kills it. How do you expect to make a good climax when you already begin loud? Ugh! Do you like that accented resolution? It is like pronouncing the word error with an accent on the last syllable and is ugly. Emphasize the syncopations, however, and also the highest notes in a phrase and in Chopin, religiously observe the rests. But forget all the rules when you perform in public and

express the music the way you feel it, doing subconsciously what you previously planned consciously; otherwise your playing will sound mechanical.

"In regard to pedaling, I am in sympathy with Hummel when he said he wanted to listen to a pianist play without the pedals so he could hear what kind of a mechanism he had. You should make your legato with your fingers, and not your feet, but you can pedal more freely over a fortissimo bass, even through melodic changes in the treble because a strong bass absorbs the passing or by-tones as a blotter absorbs ink. An orchestra director likes a good foundation of basses and so should we pianists. If I were directing an orchestra I would have more basses than 'cellos.

"Fingering is an art and a science by itself and is very complicated for you must finger for many different things—sometimes for color, as each finger produces a different dynamic effect; again for convenience and also for characteristic *secco* and other effects. Avoid, as much as possible, changing the hand position and don't use the thumb on a black key if you can help it, though of course there are places where the thumb must be played on a black key. You should, too, always look forward in your fingering and prepare the way—lay the rails as it were. And, let me point out, if you are not already taking advantage of it, that good fingering is an excellent aid in memorizing. Use the third finger instead of the fourth whenever possible and remember, (to a young lady with long, lacquered nails), you can't

raise Chinese fingernails and play the piano too."



When a student asked the Maestro how he could tell what finger a pupil was using when he wasn't looking at either the student's hand or the music, he said: "Oh, that's easy. I can tell by the weak tone that the fourth finger makes and also by the loud thumb tone. Each finger, as I explained, unless it is deliberately controlled, creates a special tone quality, and it is a simple matter to tell by listening intently to the tones an amateur produces, what fingers he is using in between the thumb and fourth finger. If you listen carefully, you will hear this too, if the hand is poorly trained, and it will help you to correct the unevenness. Don't use the thumb on a pianissimo note, if you can help it because you have to hold back the weight and that is more difficult to manage. It is harder, is it not, to pick up a piece of tissue paper than a paper weight."

Rhythm, to Godowsky, is of supreme importance. "I can forgive anything but a bad rhythm," he declares. A tempo rubato that distorts the time and rhythm, is abhorrent to him because it mutilates the phrase lines and contour of the music and is like crushing a lovely flower out of shape. If you think of a beautiful rose, gently swaying in a breeze you will get an idea of his agogics, the most poetic and nicely proportioned thing imaginable—something very different, for example, from that same flower, bruised and swished about in a violent wind.

Beautifully balanced and clean, yet plastic

and rich, Godowsky's art, in all its phases is great, unforgettable. His interpretations, as he explains and demonstrates them, stand out in the mind's eye like a delicately and gracefully wrought bas-relief, the phrase lines being as finely drawn as in a beautiful etching. In fact, his playing is closely akin to great etching, in that it takes a keen sense of the art to appreciate it. His wonderful fingers are like a string orchestra of ten lovely voices, each revealing the hidden beauties of its part independently of the rest, the whole (especially in his own highly contrapuntal works), forming an intricate web of ravishingly beautiful polyphony so transcendental at times only the initiated seem to fully appreciate it.



It may also be of interest to teachers to know that Godowsky uses no particular list of compositions by the great composers in his Master Classes but allows the active students to bring to the performing group any major piano work, including his own, that they have studied and are prepared to play for the auditors. All this type of concert work has, of course, to be performed from memory, but the music for the private lessons need not be memorized though the Maestro naturally prefers this as memorized pieces usually are much better prepared. This arrangement allows a wide personal choice for all members of the playing sections and is the best means of being sure that a varied selection of well prepared compositions will be presented to the listeners.

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