

Lessons with Soulima Stravinsky

BY STEPHEN HUSARIK

In 1968 the University of Illinois at Urbana celebrated its 100th anniversary with festivities and concerts, awarding honorary degrees to such artists as Josef Albers and Eugene Ormandy as well as guest pianists Vladimir Ashkenazy, Eugene List, and Nicolai Petrov. These were the Golden Years at Illinois, with the school of music ranked high among music schools in America. Amid all of this, Soulima Stravinsky brought a special European flavor to the piano department. Joining the faculty in 1950 he was the only person in the music school offered tenure after one year and attracted some of the best students from throughout the country.

Stravinsky's talents and experience were formidable. In Paris he had studied piano with Isidor Philipp and played for Vladimir Horowitz. Studying composition with Nadia Boulanger, dean of 20th-century composition teachers, Stravinsky maintained a large portion of the standard repertoire and became an expert on the piano music of his father, Igor. Stravinsky's enormous hands – he could stretch to an eleventh – instantly solved many technical problems. Yet such a reach was a problem because he could hardly get his large fingers between the black keys to play the white keys.

Stravinsky's photographic memory not only helped him to speak Russian, French, and English fluently, but he easily maneuvered through a wide range of keyboard literature, including Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*; the Beethoven piano sonatas; and the Chopin ballades, scherzos, nocturnes, and many mazurkas. When asked about being able to play the complete *Well-Tempered Clavier*, he confided that he sometimes reread the fugues to keep them fresh in his mind.

At our first meeting Stravinsky explained that I should memorize every piece before bringing it to the lesson. He would open his office door to ask, "What did you bring memorized this week?" It was wonderful training. After consulting with top psychologists, he concluded that the only way to improve a musical memory was to exercise it. "Memory is like a muscle,

when you use it, it gets better; when you stop using it, it weakens," he said. Memorizing pieces speeded up the learning process because students did not focus on expression or unnecessary alterations until they could play the musical patterns, and it removed many technical problems.

Though he never said so, Stravinsky's method was similar to the one Carl Czerny used with Liszt. Czerny once announced that this was why Liszt developed such an incredible memory in later years. All of Stravinsky's students were reliable pianists who didn't have memory problems in concert, which was a virtue compared to other pianists who played with emotion, but could not get through their pieces without stuttering or stopping.

At the first lesson Stravinsky tested my sight-reading and memory skills by asking me to sight-read the first few measures of Beethoven's Sonata in F Minor, Op. 2, #1, then play these measures from memory. When I played them correctly he moved on to the next few measures, asking me to add music, phrase by phrase. When I reached the end of my period of concentration, he said it was time to do something else: "If you are at home, go get a glass of milk. Do anything to get your mind off the music." After resting, I was to add more, continuing until I could no longer add anything without making mistakes. "The next day will bring back the music anew," he said, "and you will be ready to continue in the same manner." This was his formula for success.

Stravinsky said I had a relatively short period of concentration that could be lengthened, whereas some students could memorize without interruption for extremely long periods. I learned to organize my time, dedicating a portion of it to memorizing. I played all notes exactly as written on the score, a route that led to a detailed understanding of musical structure, notes, expression marks, patterns, harmony, and rhythm.

Because Stravinsky's students had to learn each piece quickly, there was no time to practice incorrect fingerings or get caught up in musical expression.

The method was revolutionary compared to the lessons of my previous teachers: in earlier years I would continue playing wrong notes with sloppy technique for the sake of musical expression. Stravinsky's approach saved hours of unnecessary drill and practice. One former Stravinsky student told me: "You never forget a piece of music when you learn it like that."

At my second lesson I brought in the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata in F Minor, Op. 2, #1, a Czerny Etude in C Major, (Op. 740, #1), and the Bach Prelude and Fugue in B^b Major from Book I of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, with everything memorized except the second half of the fugue. When I reminded Stravinsky that he said I could sight-read unlearned pieces at the lesson, he said, "Oh, you can never train your memory enough," and took the score of the fugue away from the piano. I began to play, and got through the first two pages, but disaster broke loose at the third page. After stopping and discussing the polyphonic contents of each measure, he asked me to explain the design. Then, without allowing me to look at the score, he asked that I play the parts separately and then put them together. This exercise lasted for 20 minutes until my lesson was over. I was drained but exhilarated at the accomplishment.

Stravinsky was the first person to make me aware of the polyphonic basis of 19th-century piano music, because, as with so many pianists, I was wrapped up in the sonorities of the music and ignored musical counterpoint altogether. To clarify examples, he used colored pencils to separate the parts in a composition or circle a long-held note, which helped me to realize that striking long-held notes slightly louder than others would bring out the orchestral flavor of a passage.

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Just before their recitals, Stravinsky expected students to completely memorize their pieces and work out all the difficult technical passages with flair. At this point he talked about elements of style, taste, and details of artistry. When selecting music Stravinsky considered students' talents, musical instincts, and dedication, giving certain ones only the grandest and most difficult pieces of the piano literature, while others played more restrained historical repertoire. It is safe to say, however, that listeners could usually identify Stravinsky's students by their detailed performances. His students often surprised listeners who had never heard familiar pieces performed as they were actually notated in the score. While some musicians like this quality

and others do not, it was Josef Hofmann who said that "details are the very steps which – one by one – lead to Parnassus." Unlike teachers who went to Smith Recital Hall with their students for pre-recital auditions, Stravinsky, to my knowledge, never listened to his students in the auditorium except during final exams. He took care of all preparations in his studio.

Stravinsky had a composer's attitude toward music, always looking for a professional result by performing a piece in correct style and playing it with the proper taste. He copied his father's musical manuscripts at age 12 to learn their structure. This may explain his flair for his father's music. After Igor Stravinsky's death in 1971, Soulima

Stravinsky performed a memorial recital to honor his father, playing the music of Igor and his own arrangement of *The Firebird Ballet* (Centaur). His performance was brilliant, precise, slightly percussive, and full of abandon; for a moment it seemed as if one of the great Russian pianists was miraculously reincarnated on stage. When I remarked that Stravinsky must be happy with such a successful performance, he modestly responded that "sometimes it goes well."

In 1974 Soulima Stravinsky received the *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres* award from the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs, then four years later retired from the University of Illinois, moving to Sarasota, Florida with his wife where he continued composing until his death in 1994.

From Stravinsky I retained a sense of historical style and developed an appreciation for a composer's attitude toward performance, firmly believing that my continued academic success and improved performances came from the discipline I gained from him. Stravinsky left a legacy of recorded performances and publications, including a solo piano album of his father's music with performances of *Petrouchka*, *Firebird*, *Four Etudes Op. 7*, *Serenade in A*, *The Five Fingers*, two waltzes, a polka, *Piano Rag Music*, *Tango*, two excerpts from *Pulcharella*, two excerpts from *L'Histoire du Soldat*, and the *Sonata*. While preparing his Peters editions of the Mozart piano concertos, Stravinsky sent newly composed solo cadenzas to his father, who responded: "Mozart would be proud." □

Discography

Soulima Stravinsky Plays Igor Stravinsky, 1960 and 1975, Centaur C.D. CRC 2188.

Soulima Stravinsky, Ballet Encounters for Piano, 1992; *Piano Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano*, 1985; *Three Pieces for Violin and Piano*, 1983; *Three Etudes for Violin and Piano*, 1981; Elisha Gilgore, piano; Thomas Moore, violin; Christopher Pegis, cello; Centaur C.D. CRC 2176.

Soulima Stravinsky: Three String Quartets, Cello Sonata, 1972; Florida String Quartet (Paul Wolke and Anita Brooker, violins; Yuri Vasilaki, viola; Christopher Pegis, cello); Elisha Gilgore, piano; Centaur C.D. CRC 2141.

