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The Dorothy Taubman Legacy: Myths and Facts

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Dr. Kaplinsky gave us a fascinating presentation about the doctrines and principles of Dorothy Taubman. She told us that Taubman was one of the first to talk about the things she did and thus was regarded with great adulation to great contempt. Kaplinsky thinks both are exaggerations, explaining that she had seen her at her best and at her worst. She also said that she would not be where she is today had it not been for Dorothy Taubman.

When Miss Kaplinsky began teaching she said she was frustrated. She'd had the best teachers and had attended the best schools, but she was at a loss as to what to say to students. Dorothy Taubman put her on the right path. This came about when her roommate announced that she was going to meet Taubman in Brooklyn to resolve some technical issues. Kaplinsky went with her to "save" her from being trapped in the Taubman "cult". She was surprised when they were greeted by such a warm and friendly lady. She knew she wasn't the typical piano teacher. She also knew what her roommate's problems were, having heard her practicing on end. One by one Taubman solved the roommate's problems. So, Kaplinsky asked if she'd hear her. She helped her with a couple of problems instantaneously.

There were reasons Dorothy Taubman didn't become a household name then. She had an inquisitive brain. She had the ability to diagnose pianists' technical problems. She would've been a great doctor, being able to treat the whole patient. This is where myth begins. The world wouldn't swallow everything she said.

Kaplinsky said she had more to offer than anyone. Whatever, she'll take the good with the bad. Then she'll write down what she wanted to remember. As a result she became a better pianist and teacher.

Taubman wouldn't allow anyone to deviate from the path she set for them. When Kaplinsky was appointed to the Juilliard faculty, she told Miss Taubman that it should have been her appointed to that job. Kaplinsky believes it could have been had Taubman not alienated so many people over the years.

One of Taubman's main principles was that there are solutions. Knowledge is a solution. Solve problems, don't just practice blindly. When mistakes are made, students are often told to do it again. Taubman said don't do it again. Don't fall back on tradition. Some traditions need to be respected while some traditions have no basis in reality. The body learns what comes naturally. Think about musical thinking, not piano technique. Technical problems come about when there is a lack of knowledge on how to deal with the hand. Treating these issues as biological, physiological, and/or physics lessons rather than just following orders, leads to understanding. Kaplinsky gave the example of the natural use of the flexors and extensors in the hand: one set opens the hand, one set closes the hand. Also, pain is a sign one

needs to be alert to. Taubman tried to instill in her students that there is no such thing as too much knowledge.

Dorothy Taubman was told her hands were too small. Yet, she heard kids with hands smaller than hers play so well. She concluded that it had nothing to do with strength and had everything to do with natural coordination which may be destroyed by an unaware teacher at the outset. Talent isn't just ear, brain and love of music. This natural coordination is exhibited by prodigies and teachers don't touch these. So don't prescribe a pre-set technique. Look at student first. Don't tell the student to relax, rather create more flexibility. Relaxation and tension are reactions Study the correct motion that will prevent collapsing or tension. Balance on fingers. Kaplinsky advises standing and ask these questions: Where is the weight? Are you pressing on the feet? Are your knees rigid? Can you move your thighs? Compare to arm. She says that her students "get it" once they've done this. The arm walks with you. Turn hands into quick feet. She suggested for a young child to begin with fingers 2 & 3 on two black keys. And, begin scale studies with B Major.

Dorothy Taubman claimed that finger 4 is just as strong as the other fingers. Just move the arm over it. Kaplinsky demonstrated this for us by turning the hand over and by using the flexor this was no problem. Taubman made this point with Kaplinsky by asking her, Is the piano above or below you? Remember that joints are circular. Support finger 4 with the arm. When using finger 4 move elbow slightly forward. This prevents pulling away from finger 3 which makes finger 4 feel weaker. Think of fingers walking forward not sideways.

Kaplinsky recalled a conversation she had with her friend Murray Perahia who had been reading an article about Schumann's ideas. Schumann had outlined all aspects of piano technic starting from Bach to Chopin, Op. 10. They agreed that he had the right ideas but had come to the wrong conclusions. She gave the infamous example of Schumann and his experiment with his fourth finger. But with knowledge, we are now able to address these issues. And, Dorothy Taubman was one who had so much of this knowledge and wanted to dispense it. But she was thwarted by her own doing.

The question of rotation was raised and Kaplinsky discussed this some more reminding us that the joints are circular. So, there is almost always some rotation going on. She advised not to use any motion overdone.

She explained when talking to students, if you can impart knowledge with speed, they'll sense this right away. The trick is how to do this without ruining their self-confidence. She demonstrated how Taubman did this with a simple touch to the arm.

We've all heard that to find the best hand position, one should find the natural position with the arms at one's sides. But, Kaplinsky pointed out that once the hands have been placed on the keyboard, they've already rotated by 50% and then by going the other way, they will have rotated 150%. Again, she emphasized going forward between finger 3 to 4 and the rotation will happen. She also said to find the best position to sit at the piano one should be able to rest the hands on the piano without any effort. Observe the student as they stand up to confirm this.

Every passage has to be choreographed. The B Major Scale is the most natural to begin with because it fits best under the hand and helps created the idea of forward motion. Backward motion is simply falling back. A lack of evenness indicates something is awkward.

According to Kaplinsky, Taubman contributed to and self-perpetuated the myths surrounding her work. Taubman believed she had the axiomatic knowledge of how to play without injury. She wanted to formulize these principles but the book she was preparing was never published. It was hard for her to accept any opposing opinions. If one disagreed with her, it must be justified. She was so paranoid that later in life her teaching deteriorated and she was contradicting herself.

Some of her ideas can be traced to Tobias Matthay, most notably his book *The Visible and Invisible in Pianoforte Technique*. She was afraid she'd be disregarded the way Matthay was in his day.

Dorothy Taubman had the ability to zero in on what works for each student. She was one of the first to say injuries can be avoided.

Part of the tragedy of Dorothy Taubman was the "cult" that developed around her. Some of these people, ones without musical talent, now had the ammunition to do things they probably weren't qualified to do. Taubman misinterpreted dependency for loyalty. These people weren't qualified to represent her. Some are "certified" to use her principles but come nowhere near her. Others are able to give technical advice that is okay but the presentation is nowhere near Taubman's.

After the break, Kaplinsky opened up the discussion to audience questions. Most of this centered on specific technical issues in specific pieces of music.