

## Monday, October 26, 2015, Nepta Presentation by Phillip Kawin

### “Playing With the Piano: Essentials of Tone Production and Pianism”

Summary presented by Natacha Rist. (You'll find P. Kawin's Bio at the end of the summary.)

• **I) Introduction:** Phillip Kawin has had an eclectic training and lays claim to the pianistic lineages of: Theodor Leschetizky, Alfred Cortot, Harold Bauer, Rosina Lhévinne, through his own principal teachers: Jules Gentil, Adele Marcus, Dora Zaslavsky, John Perry.

Prof. Kawin described his rigorous training for one year, at the age of seventeen, with A. Cortot's associate at the Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris, **Jules Gentil**, who dramatically changed his approach to technique, focusing on flexibility and precision. He took two lessons and participated in one masterclass every week. At one class, Phillip played the Chopin's b minor Scherzo to the satisfaction of his teacher at Christmas time, earning the comment: "Il est le seul qui projette", ("He's the only one that projects"), and succeeded at the final exam the following spring.

Back in New York, he followed earlier advice from renowned pianist Ruth Slenczynska and studied briefly with **Adele Marcus**, who had a very different idea of technique from Gentil's training, disagreed with many aspects of French piano technique, and proceeded to reshape and rebuild Phillip's technique once again. She talked about "drawing the sound from the piano" and said "don't push the piano, it is not going anywhere". The lesson when she asked him to "play from the stomach" was a revelation (Byron Janis also quotes Vladimir Horowitz's advice: "you must play from the stomach", in his book "Chopin and Beyond").

Prof. Kawin then studied for many years with **Dora Zaslavsky**, who had been Harold Bauer's assistant, a student of Wilhelm Backhaus, and a long time faculty member at the Manhattan School of Music. Some of her practice tips included: repetitions of each note four times for faster passages, focusing on the tips of fingers; practicing passages in the pieces in trills back and forth. These were from the Leschetizky training.

In 1989, Phillip then began teaching in the college division at the Manhattan School of Music. One of his most important artistic influences, John Perry was instrumental in sending him many students.

Subsequently, he had the privilege of participating in the **World Piano Pedagogy Conference** from 2004 to 2009. Phillip Kawin's lectures and masterclasses were recorded and released on five DVDs for the WPPC. The titles are all original, and include: "Sound Principles & Principles of Sound", "Cultivating Pianistic Command", "Assimilation: the Key to Unleashing a Student's Potential" and "Flexibility of Mind, Body and Hands".

## • II) Pianistic topics that he holds dear:

### – Defining and codifying a specific language of piano technique for pianists:

When Phillip was a student, he hung out mostly with string players (staying away from pianists), and noticed they had more of a common vocabulary for basic technique than pianists seem to. They would readily and constantly discuss fingerings, bowing and bow strokes, vibrato, whereas pianists would only discuss quantifiable aspects such as metronomic tempos for a specific piece, and quantity of hours of practicing. Phillip arrived at the conclusion that pianistic vocabulary needed to be much more codified to help pianists in approaching and conquering the pianistic and musical obstacles they encountered in their repertoire.

– **"Sound Principles & Principles of Sound"** is the title of one of his lectures, drawing on the two meanings of "sound" as an adjective: healthy, sensible, honest, upright, thorough, and "sound" as a noun: "that which is heard"; also his concept of **"Advanced Tone Production"** owes much to his studies with Adele Marcus, Dora Zaslavsky, the Leschetizky, Cortot legacies, in addition to his own numerous innovations.

– **"Playing WITH the Piano, not AT the Piano"** as R. Schumann says in his "Rules and Maxims for Young Musicians": **"The playing of an instrument must be one with itself; he or she who cannot play with it, cannot play it at all"**. Contrary to singers, string and wind players, pianists do not hold their instrument. In spite of this, we as pianists need to create a sense of intimacy with the piano, even though we are not as close to it physically as other instrumentalists are to their instruments. The piano must become an extension of ourselves. Therefore, achieving direct and convincing projection is a great challenge. As Robert Schumann said, a pianist's relationship with the instrument (playing WITH, versus AT the piano) significantly affects the means of producing the sound. Ideally, there should be no barrier between the pianist and the instrument. The "aural" leads the "kinesthetic", in other words the inside leads the outside.

The pianist has three contact points with the instrument: the pedal, the bench and the keyboard. Prof. Kavin suggests to put your weight on the hands and feet, and not to let the weight sit on the chair. Many pianists sit on their lower back too much and the weight stays on the chair, consequently, they do not feel the support in the best way. Phillip recommends sitting forward on the bench, and feeling the center of gravity going forward. Sometimes it even helps to play standing up to feel the underlying dome in the palm of the hand as the center of support.

Other technical aspects that were discussed are: structure of the hands, the use of shorter and longer fingers and their corresponding hand and wrist

motions, arm alignment, choreography of various gestures, including opposing motions, and five different approaches to playing melodies, as well as creating tones and inflections within a wide coloristic palette.

### • III) Various aspects of technique that illustrate the topics mentioned above:

– **Importance of morning practice:** the way one begins the day at the piano is of utmost importance. Liszt said: "We rediscover the basis of our technique each day". Music is an elusive art, it is important to start playing from a state of repose, and then to heed muscles' resilience. Chopin emphasized **suppleness** above everything else: "la souplesse avant tout". Nikolai Rubinstein (Anton Rubinstein's brother, and director of the Moscow Conservatory 1866 – 1881) warned that pianists generally practice well for the first three hours, and then proceed to undo all the good work in the fourth hour. Conscious practice that is done with a state of awareness is very productive. Phillip famously said that "**Practice makes permanent, not necessarily perfect**".

– **Brahms 51 Exercises for Piano:** Prof. Kavin recommends practicing them for 20–30 minutes a day, first of all to establish a sense of freedom and ease with arm and wrist, then to strive for developing perfect balance and control of each finger. The advantage of these exercises is that they are musical exercises as well as effective in developing pianistic strength and control. They are originally written one octave apart, however Phillip Kavin recommends practicing them two octaves apart as well to be able to hear them more carefully. Certain ones such as Nos. 8a and 8b should be practiced two octaves apart ascending and descending up to three and four octaves. He also recommends to expand them in other ways and to tailor them to one's particular needs. He demonstrated some of the exercises: #8a and 8b, #24a and 24b (double 3rds), #40a and 40b (disjunct intervals in contrary motion). Phillip also suggested practicing #40a F legato and p leggiero as Brahms indicated, alternating both approaches while playing this exercise.

– **Five approaches to playing melodies:** seeks to establish some guiding principles as to "how to sing" at the piano:

1) "**Standing**": balancing (rather vertical) fingers, with natural weight, resting in piano, for a "speaking" voice, is the most direct in terms of expression.

2) "**Hanging**": for deeper tone. In Moscow Conservatory, the image was described as if hanging with both hands on the top of a door and feet off the ground.

3) "**Caressing**": using more extended fingers and playing on the cushions of the fingers, playing towards the body. For certain melodies, one uses a boneless hand. This is very useful for cantabile playing.

4) "**Clinging**": extreme version of "hanging", but more *legatissimo*.

5) "**Floating**": arm higher than with "caressing" keys, to create a more atmospheric and ethereal effect. This is the lightest of the five approaches, and uses a boneless hand.

Prof. Kawin demonstrated from the five various approaches to melodies: "Widmung" (Schumann–Liszt), "Des Abends" from the Fantasy Pieces Op. 12 (Schumann), Chopin A-flat Major Ballade (in the opening: standing (Pt 1), hanging or clinging (Pt 2&4), caressing (Pt 3), etc...). Many phrases require combining several approaches. The idea is to know the possibilities, imagine the sound and to incorporate them accordingly.

In response to a question about a shoulder injury, Prof. Kawin remarks that pianists tend to isolate and focus on fingers too much, they need to **support fingers more with the arm**, to avoid overuse of smaller muscles. Pianists need to learn **how to fall into the piano**. Careful attention also needs to be paid to the alignment of the arm and rotational aspects. He remembers a pianist from France comparing the movements of the arm in playing piano to bowing on the violin.

– **Arm Alignment**: the structure of the hand and the topography of the keyboard provide us with a set of constants and variables: the structure of the hand dictates the basis of all movements. One of the variables is that the fingers are all of different lengths, with shorter and longer fingers, but the structure of the keyboard is a constant, with two levels of flat surfaces: white and black keys. (It is rumored that Martha Argerich does not visualize the keyboard as a flat surface.)

As Chopin and Liszt have pointed out, each finger has a different function: the third finger is the balancing finger, in the middle and at the center of the hand, a longer finger. As such, its motions go more forward, into the key in the direction of the fallboard. The fifth finger is the shortest finger and a good anchor. Due to its structure, it is important not to reach or poke, nor to treat the fifth finger as if it is a long finger. The thumb is a pillar, and serves as a support of the hand. It is often played in a vertical position for maximum support. Phillip thinks of the second and fourth fingers as intermittent, or "between" fingers; **Liszt said that the fingers 1–3–5 are the pivots of the hand**. It's important not to try to make all five fingers work as if they were the same length, a common occurrence... For example, in a D Major 5-finger scale pattern, pronation happens while playing the thumb, supination while playing 5th finger; with fingers 2 and 3 the fingers and arm move forward. Following the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger, the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> are shorter fingers. The 4<sup>th</sup> finger goes to the right in the direction of the 5<sup>th</sup> finger and on the 5<sup>th</sup> finger the hand shifts toward the outside and anchors. Depending on the passage, it is possible to play with arms closer or further from the body, with fingers either bent or more extended. In the German school, fingers are seen as little hammers (*Anschlagen*), in the

Russian school, the emphasis is on fingers touching the keys before playing. In Prokofieff, for example, one straightens the fingers to create a more direct and incisive sound, with arms closer to body.

– **"Cultivating Pianistic Command"**: Prof. Kavin stresses how important it is to reexamine constantly one's pianistic approach. To find the truth and make progress, one must be capable of stripping away preconceptions from the past, and be willing to experiment and try new things, as he found himself forced to do as he faced having to go to the recording studio late at night with an uncompromising engineer, after long teaching days at Manhattan School of Music. It is important to be aware of how the body works, and to observe one's hand/arm/body motions.

Another key principle is the use of **inverse or opposing motions**, which can give more freedom to your playing, and more control in each hand. **The body works in pairs and opposites attract**. As an example of this, try raising both arms at the same time, then alternately raising one arm after the other. The second way creates more balance and buoyancy. It is the same if you turn your hands palms up or down, in parallel or contrary direction; or if you walk with opposing motions of swinging arms and feet. When the right foot goes forward, the left arm swings back and forth, while the left foot goes forward, the right arm swings back and forth. One should not play the piano as if one has two right hands! Contrary motion is easier to coordinate than parallel motion, because one is using the same fingers in both hands and the motions are easier to integrate. For instance, in practicing scales, Phillip Kavin recommends first practicing them in contrary motion before doing them in parallel motion. Also, it is good to play hands separately and discover the gestures the music calls for. Be aware of opposing physical gestures between the two hands, of the need to utilize opposing motions when playing hands together and of to coordinate them as one. The hands must breathe! Two added benefits: your phrasing and balance will become more musical, the hands will gain endurance and not feel conflict (with similar gestures between the two hands, it can feel as if you hit a wall). In some Russian training, students are instructed to lean on the left hand as an anchor in order to free the right hand.

When encountering a difficulty in a passage: listen to your body and try and find the appropriate motions. As Alfred Cortot said: **"La technique c'est l'art des gestes"** (technique is the art of gesture).

– **Chords**: guidelines for playing chords are often the least discussed elements of piano technique.

Examine intervals within the chord: a guiding principle is to lean and to **angle hand towards the wider interval**. This in turn helps to cultivate the tonal balance in the chord and enables the hand to feel more centered and grounded. Consequently, highlighting the top note in the chord does not **necessarily** mean for the hand to lean towards the top note; actually, tension

is created if the hand leans towards the smaller interval. Also with octaves and chords, if you release the thumb, the hand can relax and breathe; you can hold the 5th finger (5th finger is the anchor here), release the other fingers. Angling hand towards the 5th finger will then relax the hand. So depending on the chord, the alignment of the arm changes. When the arm angles towards the thumb, the thumb is more vertical, the arm moves away from the body (**pronation**). When the arm angles towards the 5th finger, the thumb is more bent, and the arm is closer to the body (**supination**).

Vladimir Horowitz recommended for practicing chords: hold one note and release all the others, doing this in all combinations.

It is also important to think of successive chords not only as blocks of sound, but as series of voices.

**Octaves:** avoid playing 8ves with a floppy hand which creates too much mass, the hand must feel streamlined. Horowitz suggested playing with a firm hand, curving the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger to gear the hand towards the 5<sup>th</sup> finger, keeping the 5<sup>th</sup> finger straight, and lightening the thumb. That way the 5<sup>th</sup> finger stays firm and can serve as an anchor. It is also helpful to release the thumb immediately, and have the thumb prepare (touch) toward the next note. Prof. Kavin suggests to practice 8ves raising your hand and closing the fingers in a relaxed way in between to relax the hand, then to let the hand fall into the keyboard. For lighter 8ves, angle hand towards 5th finger, arm angling more towards the body (supination). For some passages with louder 8ves, angle the hand toward the thumb, standing and keeping the thumb vertical, arm further from the body (pronation).

**Double notes:** practice one voice legato, mf–f, the other voice staccato and lighter, pp–p, for balance and control of independence of voices. When playing, stand on one finger, and release the other finger (unless playing "martellato")

**Fast sixteenth notes:** practice various rhythmic groupings, with seams; the last note of the first group becomes the first note of the next group. Adele Marcus said: "make positive that which is negative" (accenting and elongating weaker fingers, and lightening the strong fingers); she said: "neighboring fingers are not friends". (avoid playing 4–3 or 4–5. play 5–3 or 3–5 instead)

PHILLIP KAWIN has developed a highly individual pedagogical approach that has established him as a much sought after artist-teacher. He has created a teaching

methodology that presents the principles of technique and musicianship in a detailed analytical approach, an approach that does not ignore the intuitive aspect of music-making. Mr. Kawin studied with Alfred Cortot's long-time associate Jules Gentil at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris, in New York City with Howard Aibel (Rosina Lhevinne's assistant), with John Perry, and later with Dora Zaslavsky (who had studied with Wilhelm Backhaus and Harold Bauer) at Manhattan School of Music.

In 1989, Mr. Kawin was appointed to the college faculty of Manhattan School of Music. His students have won top honors in the Young Concert Artists Auditions as well as in the Martha Argerich International, Jacob Flier International, World Piano, Kosciuszko, Thelonious Monk International (jazz piano), Melilla in Spain, Heida Hermanns, Soulima Stravinsky International, Josef Hofmann, Mieczyslaw Munz, Leschetizky, and Long-Thibaud Crespin International competitions.

Phillip Kawin is in constant demand at premier international conferences and festivals. For the past 18 years, he has been in residence at the PianoSummer at SUNY as well as appearing regularly at the International Academy of Music in Castelnuovo di Garfagnana (Italy), and the Beijing International Music Festival & Academy (China). Phillip Kawin has been a guest adjudicator for such competitions as the Beethoven International Piano Competition Vienna, Bösendorfer USASU International Piano Competition, Sydney International, and the 6th International Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians (Suwon, Korea). He is featured on five DVDs (master classes and lectures) for Excellence in Music, Inc., recorded live at the annual World Piano Pedagogy Conferences. Mr. Kawin has given master classes at the Moscow Conservatory, Saint Petersburg State Conservatory, Tel-Hai International Piano Masterclasses, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, Seoul National University, Van Cliburn Piano Institute, and most recently, for the Sibelius Academy in Finland.