

Godowsky Advocates Class Instruction for Pianists

"More Beneficial Than Private Teaching," He Declares—Pupils Gain Confidence and Independence Through Friendly Competition—Advantages in Acquiring Répertoire Afforded by Attending Classes—Difference Between Mechanics and Technique—How Fingering Method Affects Phrasing—Broad General Culture Necessary to the Artist

By HAZEL GERTRUDE KINSELLA

JUST what is the ideal of the Godowsky teaching? To build an art which, though it will never know completion, will advance continually to meet advancing conditions; to develop technique and interpretation to a notable degree; and to co-ordinate and blend the physical and aesthetic attributes of pianistic efforts into a pleasing whole—all this is being accomplished by a little gentleman renowned on two sides of the water for his big broad viewpoints and his generous and friendly personality!

When in California I had the privilege of calling upon Mr. Godowsky at his Los Angeles home, and of hearing from him some of his ideas along educational lines.

Entering the hallway of the house, one is subjected at once to the cheery influence of a great jar filled with gorgeous yellow marigolds. Mr. Godowsky is a very serious artist, but also a very cheery (and witty!) host, and, doubtless, inspired by the emblematic yellow of the flowers, began at once an animated and ardent (?) discussion of woman's suffrage. "What do you think of suffrage, anyhow?" he asked, merrily, adding,—"Now I make an interview with you!" Just then another caller declared to the artist that he had not grown a day older in twenty years. "Such nonsense!" answered Godowsky, "you must be using Christian Science or else you need glasses already."

Sees Advantage in Class Instruction

"But, to be serious," he continued, "you may say for me that I believe entirely in collective or class instruction. It is, in my opinion, much more beneficial than private teaching, as it saves time to be able to explain collectively rather than individually. Think what it is possible for one to accomplish in this way, as in my Kansas City class, where I gave the master class sixty hours in five weeks. Also in explaining a problem in such a class, the members have the advantage of hearing it discussed from all, or at least many, angles, as I encourage the asking of questions. Thus there is no reiteration of effort, and every subject taken up is fully covered. It results in a tremendous economy of time.

"There enters, also, into the master class, the element of friendly competi-



Photo by Stagg

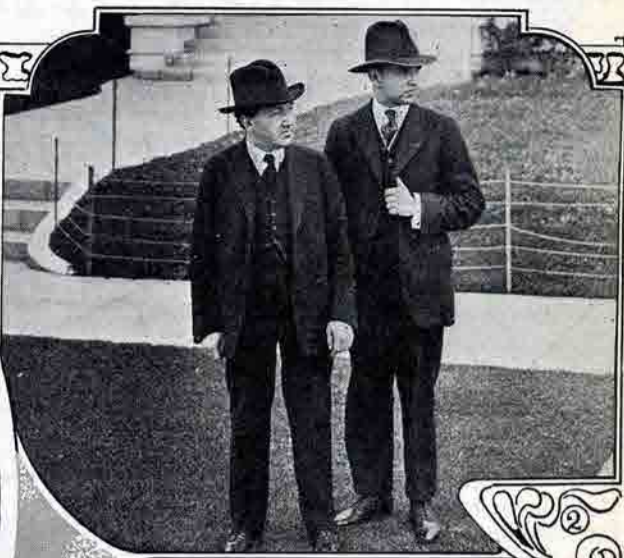


Photo by Ralph Stackpole

Leopold Godowsky in Los Angeles. (1) The Composer-Pianist Walks in His Garden; (2) Godowsky and His Eldest Son, Leo, in Front of the Musician's Home; (3) A Bust in Clay by Ralph Stackpole

tion, and the great gain in confidence and independence on the part of the playing pupils. It is, certainly, much harder for them to play here before the other critical students than in public concert, where they would only be subject to the criticism of a miscellaneous audience. It is also a tremendous advantage in learning repertoire. In private lessons one learns only one repertoire—the things one studies personally. In the class the student learns, also, how to do things the other players are studying—probably fifteen or sixteen repertoires in a single master class session. It is much more inspiring for me to teach in class, too, than in private, as I am under a certain nervous tension which inspires, just as one usually plays better in a concert, than when playing for one person, at home. Yes, I should advise that all teaching be done in classes. But, it is sometimes very difficult for the victim, to be dissected thus, publicly.

"I always distinguish very clearly between the purely mechanical part of training, and technique. The mechanical side includes speed, endurance, accuracy, strength, evenness, clearness, the action of the fingers and wrists, and so on. Technique, on the other hand, to me, includes dynamics, aesthetics, phrasing, fingering, and so on,—any of the details in which the mental faculties participate in a direct way. Many of these divisions overlap, as, to phrase artistically, one must think, know, and employ fingering, both for physical convenience and for expression. All the mechanical attributes are included in technique, but not vice versa. One acquires mechanical skill in Czerny, but one may not learn technique there, but in Liszt or Chopin études, or in any other studies which have an aesthetic value, for in such studies one develops artistic discrimination

and logical proportion, and all the fantasy and imagery which are necessary to a complete understanding of a composition and of its writer's message."

Mr. Godowsky has caused both revolution and evolution in many hitherto fixed ideas of fingering. Questioned about this phase of technique, he said, "I finger for expression. I feel that each finger on the hand has a certain mission, and use it accordingly. For example, the middle finger is the most stable and solid; when one uses the fifth finger, one must balance the whole hand on one side, or suspend it. The same is true of the thumb; and the second and fourth fingers share about the same difficulties—all this, no matter how much equalizing of fingers one may be able to accomplish.

Method in Fingering

"Fingering is largely responsible for the most individualistic phrasing. Buelow's idea of phrasing was to so arrange the fingering that it was actually impossible to connect phrases with one another. Tausig's principle was to use one certain fingering for each design, wherever or under what changed circumstances it might appear. No matter how queer a hand position this brought about, he stuck to his principle, that the design might remain intact, as he felt that with a change of fingering, the 'pattern' would not have the same plastic outline. My idea is to change the position of the hand as little as possible, but, as the hand is flexible and the keyboard is not, I feel that the hand should give to the inflexible keyboard, eliminating any unnecessary awkwardness. Certainly fingering, phrasing, and pedaling, are an art, and a science; as is accenting.

"There are many things which an advanced student may do to help himself. He will find it decidedly helpful to occasionally play the player-piano or phonograph piano records made by artists. Care must be taken in using the hand-played rolls to follow the indications of the artist implicitly. It is often good to hear and compare records of some one piece as played by several equally fine artists—each one will interpret it so differently.

"If a student knows how, he may make himself additional material for practice by turning 'topsy-turvy' certain standard études, giving each hand the

additional benefit gained by the overcoming of all difficulties in the étude. But to do this effectively, he should do the whole study. Certain passages are not enough for they are not, as is the whole étude, cumulative in effect.

Broad Culture Makes the Artist

"The real artist or artist-student must read, and then read. The broader the general culture, the bigger the artist, for an artist should have the great imagination, and that understanding of the great questions of the world—as philosophy, history, astronomy, and so on—which react upon the playing.

"So far as real necessary mechanical practice is concerned, if one is not afraid of stiffness, one should practise with high lifted fingers. But one does not play so. The high lifted finger is a necessity in the morning practice to keep the hand in good vitalized condition for the evening playing, when one must usually play with low lifted fingers and relaxation.

"Then comes memorizing. Shall the student memorize at, or away from the instrument? Both! I believe in conscious memory, aided by the subconscious memory. One must actually know how the harmonies dissolve, must know the melodic contour of the composition; really be actively conscious of every branch of piano-playing while he is playing. Subconscious memory is only an accessory after the act. If one has this only, he is safe only until he thinks, then anything is liable to happen. And in program building the artist should, I think, always include a few unknown works, novelties, both to give these works a hearing and to, perhaps, interest a so-called unmusical audience; but one should, equally, include in every concert program, or give as extra numbers when needed, at least one or two classic old favorites for the benefit of the many students who may be present. The students will greatly enjoy these, and will benefit from them directly, as, actually knowing them, they can take home with them a definite remembrance of the tempo, phrasing, and general style which the artist has employed."

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