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Sound Approach

In its fifth season, the Golandsky International Piano Festival offers a week of music by masters of the keyboard.
Friday, July 11, 2008 2:21 PM EDT
By Susan Van Dongen



Father Sean Duggan will perform with cellist Natasha Farny as part of the Golandsky Institute International Piano Festival.

It's surprising to realize that five years have passed since legendary teacher Edna Golandsky launched the Golandsky Institute's Summer Symposium in Princeton, a weeklong immersion in the technique, pedagogy and artistry of the Taubman Approach to playing the piano.

Along with master classes, lectures and workshops offered during the day, nights are filled with an extraordinary array of pianists from around the world, performing as part of the Golandsky Institute International Piano Festival. Since 2004, a long list of national and international piano talent has graced the stage of Princeton University's Taplin Auditorium.

Bill Charlap, one of the finest pianists interpreting jazz and standards, is on that list and, in fact, performed at the very first festival. He has an interesting musical pedigree, growing up in New York City as the son of Moose Charlap, a Broadway composer and songwriter whose credits include the score to the original production of *Peter Pan*. Mr. Charlap's mother is Sandy Stewart, who toured with Benny Goodman, appeared on numerous television variety shows and was nominated for a Grammy, for her hit recording of "My Coloring Book."

Mr. Charlap himself has played with such jazz greats as Gerry Mulligan and Phil Woods, as well as his own trio. He and his mother also perform together, with an annual engagement at the Algonquin Hotel's Oak Room. He has nothing but praise for Ms. Golandsky and her teachings, based on the work of piano pedagogue Dorothy Taubman, who discovered the Taubman Approach.

This is a method of tuning into the body's natural sense of alignment, a technique that helps musicians add strength as well as agility to their playing. More importantly, it allows pianists to play pain-free.

Charlap says the Taubman Approach is a strong part of his technical as well as musical foundation.

"It's a way of using the entire mechanism of the piano, not just isolation of the fingers," he says. "That opens the door for technical freedom, and that leads to musical freedom — you can't have one without the other. If you're playing correctly, you're not overusing any one segment of your physiological make-up.

"Once you can do this correctly, there's no danger of straining, but it takes a long time, study and real awareness to embrace these concepts," Mr. Charlap adds. "But just like learning how to ride a bike, (the knowledge) can't go away, it feels so right. It's the same thing. Once you learn, you'll never get up on a bike and fall over."

Mr. Charlap's July 19 performance will cap the piano festival, which begins July



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13 with Cuban pianist Jorge Luis Prats. Misha Dacic — known as “the keyboard wizard” — will take the stage July 14, dazzling the audience with music by Rachmaninoff and Liszt. The next night will host an evening of chamber music with pianist Father Sean Duggan, cellist Natasha Farny, pianist Thomas Bagwell and soprano Adrienne Danrich. On July 17, the festival will welcome pianist and composer Sylvie Courvoisier and pianist Vicky Chow for an evening of contemporary music. Then July 18, pianist Ilya Itin will return to Princeton, performing Haydn, Prokofiev and Beethoven. All festival concerts will take place in Taplin Auditorium in Fine Hall.

Mr. Duggan is also returning to the Piano Festival. He is on the faculty of the Golandsky Institute, as well as the piano faculty of SUNY Fredonia, and has studied privately with Ms. Golandsky since 2001. He swears by her teaching methods and the Taubman Approach.

“Fortunately I’ve never been injured (playing the piano), but I always wanted to improve my technique and sound,” he says. “Also, since I was getting into the college level of piano teaching, I wanted to know about it from a teacher’s perspective — how to safeguard students from becoming injured themselves. It’s a big responsibility to pass on correct information to the students and I feel the Taubman work is right on target. Everything about it is correct.

“The whole approach is very sound, from a technical and musical (point of view),” Mr. Duggan continues. “It’s a holistic approach to playing the piano freely and without effort and it’s all based on the physiology of how the body works — specifically the arms and hands — and how the piano works. It’s about making sure that both of these things are taken into consideration. The approach respects both the physiology of the player and the physical makeup of the piano.”

What is most exciting for Mr. Duggan is the way the Taubman Approach allows him to continue growing as an artist, becoming stronger and more nimble even as the years pass.

“I’m still on a journey with (the approach),” he says. “I still study with Edna and it seems like I’m always about ready to turn a new corner. It goes to show that you can never stop learning, no matter how old you are.”

The Golandsky Institute International Piano Festival *will run July 13-19 (no concert July 16) as part of the Golandsky Institute’s Summer Symposium at Princeton University. All concerts will take place in Taplin Auditorium in Fine Hall, Ivy Lane and Washington Road, Princeton. Tickets cost \$25; \$125 for a six-concert festival pass. (877) 343-3434; www.golandskyinstitute.org. Tickets may also be purchased at the Festival Box Office at the entrance to Fine Hall, 7:30-8 p.m. nightly.*

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