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For the Piano Enthusiast, a Week in Piano Heaven

Returning to the Princeton campus for a third visit, the Golandsky Institute peppers its mission of promoting master musicality at the piano with a full program of lectures, master classes, and discussions, as well as a set of six evening concerts that display the dividends of moving well at the piano. Taking place from Saturday, July 15, to Sunday, July 23, the institute carries on the work of Dorothy Taubman, who lives in Brooklyn and is approaching 90.

Taubman developed her approach to the keyboard in the 1940s. It is based on coordinated movements at the piano that reduce the danger of injury and free the pianist to produce an unusual depth of sound with minimal effort.

Edna Golandsky, who founded the institute that bears her name in 2003, studied with Taubman in the 1970s, when she was a Juilliard student. She was part of a triumvirate that in 1977 established a summer school to disseminate Taubman's teachings. The school met successively at Rensselaerville, New York; Amherst, Massachusetts; and Williamstown, Massachusetts. Taubman chose Golandsky to deliver the daily summer lectures, which systematically presented her thinking.

A similar history was endemic among the young artists who typically turned to Taubman or Golandsky for help. They tended to be talented, disciplined, and zealous. Recent graduates of leading conservatories, they worked hard in pursuit of major careers, practicing for long periods to prepare solo recitals and appearances with orchestras. Within sight of their professional goals, they began to notice a weakness in a particular finger, or an unexplained stiffness, or a nagging neck ache. In some cases, their physical problems became so severe that they could not even place their hands on the keyboard without excruciating pain.

Using the Taubman method, they relearned how to play the piano and weaned themselves from physically damaging habits. They ended up able to play with more virtuosity and musicality than ever before. Their re-education saved their careers.

Yet, it is not necessary to be young or injured in order to benefit from Taubman's insights, as evidenced by Yehudi Wyner, winner of this year's Pulitzer Prize in music for his 2005 piano concerto. Wyner appears at Princeton's Golandsky Institute in two separate events. On Thursday, July 20, the Brandeis emeritus professor joins Harvard's Christopher Hasty, Juilliard's Edward Bilous, and Princeton's Barbara White in McCormick Hall at 4:30 p.m. for a discussion of contemporary music. On Friday, July 21, he accompanies soprano Dominique Labelle in Taplin Auditorium in Fine Hall for a program that includes selections from his composition "The Second Madrigal." He also gives the pre-concert lecture at 7p.m.

Wyner was a well-established composer and an uninjured performing pianist in his 50s when he began piano lessons with Golandsky. Interviewed by telephone from Arezzo, Italy, Wyner says, "I knew nothing about Taubman until I met Sylvia Kahan in the mid 1980s. She was an accomplished pianist and a student at Tanglewood, where I was on the chamber music faculty from 1975 to 1997. She made me aware of her work with Dorothy Taubman. There seemed to be something interesting in it. I could do whatever I wanted on the piano, but I was struck by its very natural, very unstrained approach."

After attending Taubman master classes at New York's 92nd Street Y Wyner was captivated. "Above all, I was intrigued by her idea that the hand had a natural position. In a lot of training, the hand is subjected to a lot of unnecessary strain. Why and how a child of eight or nine with a talent for music can play technical war horses by Liszt and Chopin was a paradox that Dorothy Taubman addressed. A child that age is not strong. So the idea of developing strength and agility is erroneous. I thought that was a good observation."

An added impetus for Wyner came because he was letting his piano practice slip, and Taubman's ideas promised a panacea. "As a composer and teacher, I didn't have the discipline to maintain a constant level of piano playing," he says. "Every time I gave a concert, I had to go through the same drill of taxing calisthenics. I was in my 50s, and I thought, 'As I get older this is going to get harder to do. With the Taubman approach I can sit down at the piano and play effortlessly.'"

"When I approached Edna (Golandsky), she told me I would have to wait. Perhaps she was reluctant to take on a person with my reputation. There was the question of how much can you learn, and how much can you unlearn. I gave up performance dates in order to work with her. I was determined to absorb what was there."

Wyner says his progress was slow because he didn't practice much. "When I composed, I was constantly reinforcing bad habits. Still, almost from the beginning, my wife, who has the ears of an eagle, sensed a transformation of my sound. There was a new roundness, an unforcedness, a poise, eloquence, and warmth. There was an effortless evenness." Wyner's wife is soprano Susan Davenny Wyner, for whom Wyner has written many compositions. Their three children are now in their 40s.

"One of the things that I loved was this: Here I was, a really significant teacher, having to go back and accept the authority and

genuineness of another teacher. I just kept my mouth shut and did what I was told. It was helpful to me as a teacher because it put me in touch with all those negative reflexes that students have when their teacher tells them what to do."

Savoring the economy of movement that he learned, Wyner says, "Increasing the physical efficiency leads to increased flexibility and variety in your sound. Solving technical problems liberates the sonic imagination. So there's an interpretive payoff."

Born in Canada in 1929, Wyner grew up in New York City. His father, Lazar Wiener, was a composer of Yiddish art song and liturgical music. Before graduating from both the Juilliard Institute and New York's Professional Children's School in 1946 Wyner had performed a Beethoven piano concerto with the Juilliard orchestra.

Attracted to Yale by the presence of composer Paul Hindemith, Wyner discovered that Hindemith did not take undergraduates. After earning a Yale bachelor of arts degree in 1950 Wyner worked with Hindemith as a graduate student for a year and earned a bachelor of music degree. When Hindemith began alternately spending a year in Switzerland and a year at Yale, Wyner took himself to Harvard for a year and collected a master of arts degree. He returned to Yale when Hindemith did, earning a master of music degree in 1953 after working with Hindemith.

The Rome Prize in Composition in 1953 enabled Wyner to spend three years at the American Academy in Rome, composing, playing, and traveling. "Those were years of profound change," he says. "One of the things that made a deep impression on me was the jumble of Rome. At first I thought Rome was unacceptable as an urban center because it had no stylistic unity. It took a while before I could reconcile myself to the fact that Rome had a different idea of how to put things together. I realized that there was a richness in putting a baroque facade on a Romanesque church. I learned to accept mixtures and chaos." While at the Academy, Wyner wrote his Concert Duo for Violin and Piano, the piece that established his reputation.

Upon returning to America Wyner embarked on a professional trajectory that included performance, composition, teaching, directing two opera companies, and serving as an academic dean. Asked how he prioritized the various aspects of his career, Wyner says, "I didn't prioritize. Some people said, 'You'll have no reputation unless you concentrate on one thing.' But I wanted to see all aspects and never could concentrate on just one. My most difficult years were when I was dean of music at Purchase [part of the State University of New York system.] I was temperamentally unsuited to the job. I wasn't born to be the boss of others. I undertook it in good faith but I never mastered it." In his resistance to setting priorities Wyner was applying his love for Italy.

"The three years in Rome established a passion about Italy that has never waned," Wyner says. "I go every year and stay from two weeks to a couple of months. In Italy there is a generosity, a living spirit, and an acceptance of life in its many guises. It's different from the American attitude that declares 'You shall do this; you shall not do that.' There are similar strictures in music.

"Those years brought a personal change about what is acceptable about life and art in every way. It was as if I was changing from a northern Puritan mentality to a Mediterranean mentality. In Italy there is a strong, unapologetic connection to the past. The past is seen as something to be treasured and built on, not obliterated and negated."

Wyner's Pulitzer prize piano concerto, "Chiavi in Mano" was largely written in Italy, while he spent two months in a residency at the American Academy of Rome. The 20-minute work was commissioned by the Boston Symphony for performance by Robert Levin. "What emerged was something odd," Wyner says. "I was writing in Italy but I never wrote a piece so characteristically American. It was full of things suggested by rock and roll, or boogie woogie. These musics are part of my background. I used them for their exuberance. In essence, the piece is very joyous, positive, and physically playful. Sometimes it's frivolous. There's a lot of variety - from being very pensive to being agitated and passionate and dreamy and thoughtful and aggressive and eloquent.

"Something that occurred to me after I wrote the piece was that the reason I included rock and roll and boogie was because I felt the necessity for affirmative musical expression. There is an intrinsic affirmative aesthetic statement to jazz, and by extension, to other pop music. That's one of the reasons they are so universally appealing."

Wyner continues: "Much American affirmative music is primarily triumphal, aggressive, and characteristic of Hollywood. I find that repellent. Most of that desire to be affirmative rings hollow to me. It was possible for Beethoven and Brahms to be affirmative, to be bold without being vulgar, or suggesting a bloated power structure. I intended to make an esthetic statement with 'Chiavi in Mano.' I didn't intend to make a political statement. But, on reflection, I see that a political implication can be inferred."

In "Chiavi in Mano" Wyner also makes a statement about piano technique and the application of Taubman's principles. "It would lie easily under anybody's hand," he says. "It's manageable, and, playable for any really accomplished pianist. If you can play late Beethoven sonatas you can play this piece. And if you play piano using the physically effective techniques that the Golandsky Institute explores, you have an added interpretive edge and an increased level of comfort."

Summer Piano Festival, Sunday to Saturday, July 16 to 22, Golandsky Institute, on the Princeton University campus. 877-343-3434, www.golandskyinstitute.org. \$20; \$100 for festival pass (six concerts for the price of five).

All concerts take place at Taplin Auditorium in Fine Hall.

Kuok-Wai Lio. Register. Sunday, July 16, 8 p.m.

Ilya Itin. Register. Monday, July 17, 8 p.m.

Chamber music concert. Meagan Miller, soprano; Alex Richardson, tenor; and Thomas Bagwell, piano, comprise the group "Art Song Now." Register. Tuesday, July 18, 8 p.m.

Janice Weber. Register. Thursday, July 20, 8 p.m.

Dominique Labelle, soprano; and Yehudi Wyner, piano. Pre-concert talk at 7:00 p.m. Register. Friday, July 21, 8 p.m.

Festival finale. Presented by the Herskowitz Rozenblatt Project, a collaboration between jazz pianist Matt Herskovitz and drummer David Rozenblatt. Register. Saturday, July 22, 8 p.m.

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