

Bringing the essence of the Taubman approach to the foreground.

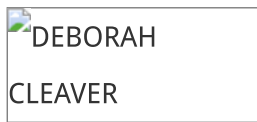
CRAFTING THE WELL-TEMPERED PIANIST: TESTIMONIALS ABOUT THE TAUBMAN APPROACH

👤 Ilona Oltuski 🕒 December 31, 2009 👁 53 Views

After introducing the first article in my series about the Taubman approach, I received very varied responses. They were not only sent to this site, but also to a friend's Facebook pages, and to some general websites that attract musicians, where I had posted the link to my series as well. The reactions ran the whole gamut, ranging from interested to enthusiastic to doubtful and even hostile.

At first glance, it may appear hard to comprehend some of the highly emotional reactions over something usually regarded as dry and unemotional as piano technique, but then this may very well indicate that there is more to the Taubman concept than meets the eye.

In this second article in the series I will therefore concentrate on bringing the essence of the Taubman approach to the foreground, and I will do so through quoting a range of testimonials by pianists of all calibers. They will speak out about the method and describe their personal experiences. For those who fully investigate it, there is no turning back after experiencing the benefits.



DEBORAH
CLEAVER

Deborah Cleaver, Golandsky Institute faculty member, has much to say about the Taubman approach. Following ten years of teaching and performing in Berlin, Germany, American pianist Cleaver was first a student and then a teaching assistant of famed pianist and pedagogue Leonard Shure at the New England Conservatory. She later moved to Portland, Oregon, and is now teaching piano at Reed College.

Deborah describes her experiences as follows: "As a pianist with small hands, I came to the Taubman studies to get help with octave and chord playing. However, I was immediately impressed and convinced by the logic and ease of the total approach, and decided to retrain. It has been a miracle to me to see my speed, accuracy, and facility improve exponentially, while, at the same time, my control of tone, phrasing, shaping, and expression was set free as never before... it even helps with memory. And all with no strain or fatigue."

My friend Howard Schreiber is a passionate amateur pianist who had studied piano at the Manhattan School of Music. He remembers Seymour Lipkin, his rather well known teacher and musician, as a very nice and musical man, who most certainly had the best intentions in helping Howard overcome his feelings of inadequacy as a pianist — yet to no avail.

Explaining his feelings at the time, he says: "There was no sense of connection. I was tense at the piano; it was all up in the air and I was not allowing the natural free falling weight of my hands to be released into _____ the keys. I recall being very natural as a child. It was later on that I imposed restrictions on my own technique. We need language to convey technique," he states. "But in the end, it should trigger some physical response that makes it feel right. My teachers taught me to isolate fingers; my arm was frozen and not giving support behind each finger. I was pounding away, thinking that I was building muscles when really, I was just increasing tension and reinforcing bad habits, bringing me further away from a natural approach to the instrument, resulting in quitting."

Today he wishes that he had been made aware of the Taubman method back then. "I should not have been in any discomfort. [Knowing] that there are ways to identify these problems ... maybe it would have led to a different outcome," Howard says. He firmly believes that music students should never have to experience pain at the piano, or have the feeling they need to shamefully hide their pain in their competitive environment.

It was his West Coast-based teacher, Marc Steiner, now a Golandsky Institute faculty member, who first introduced Schreiber to the "Taubman tapes."

"The first time I saw Edna's demonstrations... they were so convincing and persuasive. At that point I was prepared to dig in." And so he did. He has studied with Edna Golandsky for a number of years now, enjoying every lesson and their deeper revelations. "What [Taubman's] work has given me is a way to communicate and express myself fluidly at the instrument. I have a sense of how this becomes possible, with all the subtleties and colors I have never had access to prior to this work," he concludes.

_____ Another pianist convinced of the value of the Taubman method is Mike Brofman. He started to work with one of the Golandsky Institute's founding members and master teachers, Robert Durso, a bit more than a year ago.

Considered to be extremely talented in early childhood, he had studied with the legendary pianist and technique theoretician, Gyorgy Sandor. Whilst still in high school, he had already performed at notable New York City venues. Shortly after beginning his undergraduate studies under James Gilels at North Western University in 2004, he noticed symptoms of fatigue and pain in his hands.

"I would follow the advice of my teacher and take off a week here and there to rest up. Things would get a bit better, and I would start off my routine again more intensely. My teacher suggested minimizing strong gestures in general, like going very powerfully into the keys. However, within my senior year, I developed a

condition between my fourth and fifth finger that caused shooting pain going all the way into my hand and arm. It was terribly painful and debilitating, to the point that I could not lift up a fork with that hand.”

His doctors had no answers. He had an MRI, cortisone injections, and physical therapy. Nothing made a difference, and he had to cancel his graduation preparations. After breaking off his studies, he started to teach piano at the Brooklyn-Queens Conservatory of Music. There he met fellow teacher Tony Cimino, who brought him to Robert Durso.

“The process is ongoing, of course. It was probably eight or nine months before all the elements came together. Right now, I feel pretty solid that the basic motions (rotation, in and out, shaping etc.) happen more or less automatically. Everything becomes increasingly subconscious. I honestly don't really remember how I played before. It's totally left my system, and I could not reproduce it if you asked me to. Nothing hurts now. I think the work is a tough sell for people who are not injured – it's not that they would not benefit greatly, it's just so hard to convince someone to essentially relearn the piano if the situation isn't dire.”

His advice? “For anyone who feels they are a good pianist, trapped in the body of a bad one, or [anyone who] has pain or fatigue, I would strongly recommend the work [of Taubman] above any other approach.”

This September, I was invited to attend Michael's opening performance of Beethoven's first sonata from his Sonata Op.31 cycle for his students and fans at the Brooklyn Conservatory Concert Hall. He played fluidly and powerfully, with no sign of injury.

Russian-born Ilya Itin, an internationally renowned pianist and Golandsky Institute teacher, also told me about his first encounter with the Taubman method.

In 2000, he had been asked on very short notice to perform a concert at Williamstown College, which was then hosting the original Taubman Institute's summer seminars. Dorothy Taubman was still partaking in the teaching of master classes, with Edna Golandsky conducting lectures and demonstrations on several details of the method. “When Edna observed my playing, she liked it very much. But she observed a slight curling of my pinkie within a passage of double-thirds.”

According to Itin, the passage worked very well after her intervention, making him long for her kind of knowledge and instruction, which he calls “the certainty of phenomenal precision.”

Coming across the Taubman approach has translated into a kind of liberation for Itin, giving him a reliable body of knowledge with exact instructions on how to gain physical freedom – a freedom which allows him to gain the spiritual freedom every musician and artist longs for. He acknowledges however

that the method – although overwhelmingly clear and understandable – entails “... a complex development and ever deepening education altered by the grasp of experience.”

Other great artists have either stated that the method has changed their playing significantly, or – if they didn't need to make changes in their playing – have recognized the validity of the Taubman approach and endorsed the Golandsky faculty.

Gabriela Montero, star pianist at President Obama's Inauguration, recently told me when I met her at the bar of the Charles Hotel in Boston: “In 1995, I was invited to perform at the original Taubman Institute at Amherst College, and became familiar with Edna Golandsky's work. I consider Edna to be a brilliant mind, with the intuition and knowledge to very quickly analyze how she can help a performer.” And she continues: “It's for anybody who wants to find and understand a healthy and organic way of playing the piano.”

She has introduced a former student, Manuel Laufer, to the Taubman method. Laufer had first played for her in Caracas while still in his teens, and later met her again in Montreal to work with her in master classes and also privately. He recalls that Gabriela “... strongly felt that the pedagogical approach of Taubman, Golandsky and their students would be the most efficient route for me to develop my full potential at the instrument. Following her advice, I attended the two-week summer session of the Taubman Institute in 1999, and then, upon arriving in Montreal, embarked on the basic Taubman training, with Jean Pascal-Hamelin and later Nina Scolnik, both of them members of the former Taubman Institute. So began my involvement with the Taubman approach that later led me also to work with Edna Golandsky in New York.”

Throughout these years, Laufer has persistently returned to Taubman's work, finding himself drawn to its rationality, thoroughness, and efficiency. “I feel that it offers resources of unparalleled depth and breadth for the resolution of technical problems at the piano, and for the refinement of tonal control and the expansion of expressive possibilities. I remain extraordinarily grateful to Golandsky, Hamelin and Scolnik, the teachers who have passed this knowledge on to me, and to Gabriela as well, who had the vision to point me into this direction at a crucial time in my development.”

In the same vein, Pulitzer Prize-winning composer and Chicago University professor Shulamith Ran, herself a former pianist, stated in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in 1997: “They [the Taubman Institute] have done fantastic work – really tremendous.” And speaking about the approach itself: “Actually, the word ‘method’ is inadequate because it sounds like somebody's invention. Basically, what Taubman has done is decipher a natural phenomenon.”

Dorothy Taubman herself had been working with a man who might well be the most famous 'injured' pianist, Leon Fleisher. The same *Los Angeles Times* article quotes Fleisher as saying, "Dorothy is absolutely extraordinary in her intuition of when you have pain, where it is you are doing something wrong, and how you can get rid of it. That's very special. She's almost a healer in that sense."

Some might argue that statements like that do not help to de-mystify what really happens when the Taubman method is applied, and that other factors might well play into the healing process. And Taubman has declined to discuss her work with Fleisher, and would only say that she put him on the right track.

But then again there are others, like the Fleischer student Julian Martin, also a Juilliard professor. He was not injured himself but interested in Taubman's work because some of his students were, and he felt the need to deal with that.

He remembers: "I came to Mrs. Taubman in the '80s, while teaching at Oberlin. It was a major setback for me at the time, because essentially I had to start over in order to learn anything from her. ... She had a compulsive and fanatic personality. But that does not dim my gratitude for what I learned from her — some things that I believe I would have never learned from anyone else. Some of it is very much of what I do on a daily basis ... some of it gives me a secure way of installing 'healthy instrumental habits'."

Some music pedagogues do not hesitate to acknowledge and endorse Taubman's groundbreaking discoveries, either. When I visited Dorothy Taubman at her Brooklyn apartment last summer, the frail but still lively 90-something pointed to a letter from among her manuscripts. It was by Robert Shannon, at the time part of the piano faculty at Oberlin. In his letter to Taubman Shannon fully recognizes the validity of her work and states that she had cured his piano-related injuries.

Other pedagogues include Yoheved Kaplinsky, head of Juilliard's piano faculty, who was Taubman's student around the time Edna Golandsky first came to see her. Kaplinsky became known for her ability to undo bad habits and help with injury.

On the Golandsky Institute's website one finds testimony after testimony, from doctors, injured pianists, and musicians of all levels who not only state their remarkable artistic developments through the Taubman approach, but bear witness to the fact that injuries ended up being reversed completely. This goes also for devastating ones, like focal dystonia that occurs through wrong motions at the instrument and usually has devastating results for a musician's career.

Yet, even in the face of numerous statements by highly respected musicians who are trusted throughout the world of music, the doubters remain vigilant. Which makes me think of Goethe who said, "The man with insight enough to admit his limitations, comes nearest to perfection."

That is perhaps why many serious pianists continue to explore the art of music and the craft of piano playing inside the framework of the Taubman approach, like Pulitzer Prize-winning composer, pianist, and conductor Yehudi Wyner, who trained at Juilliard, Yale, and Harvard, and studied with composers Richard Donovan, Walter Piston and Paul Hindemith. He still regularly performs at the Golandsky Institute Symposium in Princeton, and is an enthusiastic supporter and former student of Edna Golandsky. "The Taubman approach," he says, "unlocks a musician's ability to express their innermost feelings. Dorothy Taubman's ideas on interpretation are as penetrating as her approach to technique."

Says Edna Golandsky: "Yes, we're known for treating injuries. We're usually the last stop when nothing else works. But the point that is being missed is that if you know how to move properly, you won't be injured in the first place." This certainly warrants further investigation.

In the third part of the series I will introduce the Golandsky Institute, its faculty members, and the international impact of its work. I will also reach beyond the piano and into the realm of other instruments, as well as beyond the world of classical music and into the world of jazz.
