

The Times

Golandsky Institute Piano Festival performers attest to effectiveness of diagnostic approach

Ross Amico | The Times of Trenton

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The act of making music should be every bit as pleasurable as the act of listening to it. That could be said to be a simplified paraphrase of the Golandsky Institute's mission.

The Golandsky Institute was founded in 2003 to alleviate suffering in the musical community through repetitive stress injuries. They're more common than you might think.



“I think that the percentage is something like 80 or 85 percent of orchestral players have problems of a serious nature,” Edna Golandsky, co-founder and artistic director of the institute, says. “There’s the fear of losing their jobs, so people don’t often share. But today it’s more acceptable to go to a doctor. You do some exercises, you get some pain killers, but it doesn’t address the causes.

“What’s causing it very often is what we’ve taught, the isolation of the fingers, the stretching, the wrist dropping, the pushing down into the keys, twisting the hands, wrong seat height, just to name a few.”

Golandsky employs the Taubman Approach, conceived by Dorothy Taubman, to analyze and overcome limitations imposed by an unhealthy technique. Practice may make perfect, but if a pianist's methods push the body in unnatural ways, the repetitive stress can lead to pain and even injury.

Performing artists like Leon Fleisher, whose struggle with focal dystonia had hindered his playing for decades, during which he had to restrict himself to repertoire composed exclusively for the left hand, in 2004 made his first recording for two hands since the trouble began to manifest itself in the 1960s. Fleisher has attested to Taubman's remarkable intuition in locating the source of pain and how to get rid of it.

Golandsky was associate director of the Taubman Institute, which she co-founded in 1976. Its success led the founding of her own institute in Princeton nearly a decade ago. The method of the Taubman Approach has been embraced for more than simply its curative properties. The diagnostic process has been successful in allowing breakthroughs in otherwise healthy pianists, pianists who have hit a developmental block, either unable to improve or struggling to maintain their current level of excellence.

Subtle alignments can eliminate the strain and struggle brought about by unnatural contortions of the body and free up the artist to realize his or her potential.

The results are eloquently attested to by the five pianists taking part in this year's Golandsky Piano Festival.

The festival, now in its ninth year, will include six recitals by classical and jazz artists, and an evening of songs featuring soloists from Opera New Jersey.

Prodigy Llewellyn Sanchez-Werner will kick off the series. At 15, Sanchez-Werner is the youngest student ever to have been admitted to the college division of the Juilliard School of Music. Already, he has acquired ample life experience. In 2009, he performed for both Rwandan president Paul Kagame and U.S. President Barack Obama.

In 2010, he became the first American to solo with the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra, performing Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" and the Grieg Piano Concerto in war-torn Baghdad. In addition to bringing a touch of hope and humanity to an area that

has seen so much strife, Sanchez-Werner helped raise funds for the first children's cancer center in Iraq.

His recital, on Sunday, will include works of Beethoven (the "Waldstein" Sonata), Rachmaninoff, Chopin and Liszt, as well as the piano showpiece "Gargoyles," by his composition teacher, Lowell Liebermann.

Sanchez-Werner is a piano student of Ilya Itin, who himself will appear twice during the Golandsky festival.

On Monday, Golandsky favorite Thomas Bagwell will be joined by soloists of Opera New Jersey's upcoming production of "H.M.S. Pinafore." Soprano Sarah Beckham, mezzo-soprano Jennifer Feinstein, tenor Matthew Edwardsen and baritone Sean Anderson will appear in the art song recital, a program of solo works, vocal duets and quartets, including music by Elgar ("From the Bavarian Highlands"), Debussy (Chansons de Bilitis), Poulenc (the song cycle "Tel jour, telle nuit"), Jack Perla, Lee Hoiby and Aaron Copland (a selection of the "Old American Songs").

Bagwell, who has accompanied Marilyn Horne, Renee Fleming, Susan Graham, Denyce Graves and Frederica von Stade, among others, has been on the faculties of Yale University and the Mannes College of Music, where he currently teaches classes on collaborative piano and operatic repertoire for singers.

Opera New Jersey will stage "H.M.S. Pinafore" at McCarter Theatre on July 15, 19 and 21, with additional performances at the Mayo Performing Arts Center in Morristown, on July 18, and the Paramount Theater in Asbury Park, on July 27. More information is available at its website, operanj.org.

The third concert of the Golandsky series will be the first of two to feature Golandsky faculty member Itin.

The pianist will join members of the Jasper Quartet, on Tuesday, for an evening of chamber music, including works of Mozart (the Piano Quartet in g minor, K. 478) and Dvorak (the Piano Quintet in A Major, Op. 81). The Jasper will also appear in the String Quartet No. 2, "Primordial Light," by Russian-born American composer and pianist Lera Auerbach.

Itin is a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory, where he studied with Lev Naumov and emerged with high honors. He was a multi-prize winner (including a gold medal) at the Leeds International Piano Competition. He has gone on to perform with many of the world's top conductors, including Sir Simon Rattle, Neeme Jarvi and Christoph von Dohnanyi. Along the way, he has also picked up awards from the William Kapell, Robert Casadesu and Gina Bachauer competitions.

The musicians of the Jasper Quartet have been playing together since 2006, when its members met at the Oberlin Conservatory. The ensemble is the recipient of the 2012 Cleveland Quartet Award.

The series will resume on Thursday, with an appearance by the young Spanish pianist Josu de Salaun. Salaun will perform music of Schumann (including the "Davidsbundlertanze"), Debussy and Brahms (the Sonata in C Major, Op. 1).

A native of Valencia, Salaun studied at the Manhattan School of Music. He is among Spain's leading keyboard artists, the recipient of first prizes from the European Union and Jose Iturbi piano competitions. Golandsky is among his current teachers. Itin's second concert, a solo recital, will take place July 13, and will include a world premiere by composer Yehudi Wyner.

Wyner, a Pulitzer Prize winner in 2006, for his Piano Concerto, "Chiavi in Mano," is another Goldandsky success story. A pianist himself, he had given up public performance two decades ago, when he began to lose his flexibility. He was impressed by improvement among his own students who had undergone the Taubman treatment, and decided to explore the approach for himself. He has since resumed his career as a performer.

Itin's recital is a demanding program, which will feature Debussy's Preludes, Op. 28, the first performance of Wyner's "Refrain," and three works by Ravel: the neo-classical "Sonatine," the eerie and virtuosic "Gaspard de la Nuit" and the decadent showpiece "La Valse."

The series will conclude July 14 with a 90-minute solo set by international jazz superstar Bill Charlap.

The first four concerts will be held at the Berlind Theatre of the McCarter Theatre Center; Itin's recital and the Charlap concert will take place at Richardson Auditorium.

The piano festival coincides with the annual Golandsky Institute Summer Symposium. Orientation for the symposium will take place tomorrow night, with symposium events beginning on Sunday morning.

Participants attend lectures, master classes, technique clinics, and other presentations, while taking part in private lessons, supervised practice time and interactive technique clinics. Wyner and Itin will be among the featured speakers at the seminar.

A children's string pedagogy clinic will also be held, under the auspices of the institute, on July 12. More information is available at golandskyinstitute.org.

Golandsky Institute International Piano Festival

When: 8 p.m. nightly, tomorrow through July 14

Where: Berlind Theater, McCarter Theater Center and Richardson Auditorium,
Princeton University

Admission: \$15-\$20; (609) 258-2787 or mccarter.org