

# The Piano Magazine Clavier Companion

## Transforming Lives, One Student at a Time: The Golandsky Institute's Innovative Approach



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Rebecca de Almeida arrived to the United States from Brazil with a future that was bright, at least on paper: She was completing her Master's degree at the University of Hartford, studying piano. The world was literally at her fingertips, or so she thought. "I started feeling a lot of discomfort," she recalled. "I was playing a really difficult repertoire, and my teacher would say, 'Oh, this pain is just normal.'" That "discomfort" ended up being a huge cyst that formed in de Almeida's right hand. It got so large that she could not brush her teeth, cook, or even open the door, never mind play the piano. She went to a number of doctors who tried injections, which didn't work. The only alternative, at least according to her medical professionals, was surgery.

But that answer didn't sit well with de Almeida, who noted that many of her fellow students also suffered from pain but refused to acknowledge it. She reached out for help outside of her conservatory's walls and was introduced to Edna Golandsky, famed pedagogue and founder of the Golandsky Institute, through a fellow Brazilian pianist. She started working with Ms. Golandsky and within several months, de Almeida was recovered.

"It's funny that the doctors said I needed surgery because it would have never worked.



The real issue was how I was using my hand with the piano and in every other aspect of my life,” de Almeida said. “I’m out of pain and the cyst is gone. I have my career back on track. I did not have to give up. My technique is so much better, and I’m playing with so much more ease. It’s almost magical.”

That “magic” that de Almeida describes is better known as the Taubman Approach, a technique for pianists to transform their physical health and musical fluency, and the Golandsky Institute is, by far, the de facto consortium to learn and investigate the body of knowledge. Much of that has to do with the fact that the Institute’s co-founders, a group of dedicated pedagogues and teachers, studied under the mother of the approach, Dorothy Taubman, followed by many years of study with Ms. Golandsky, and have become the living disciples of her work.

In fact, the reputation that the Institute has received to assist pianists in playing more fluidly and naturally caught the attention of Vivien Schweitzer of The New York Times in 2012, who claimed that there was “a reassuring logic” to the practical teachings of Ms. Golandsky. Indeed, there is clear reasoning behind the Taubman Approach, which not only helps musicians who have accrued injuries from bad physical playing habits, but also allows pianists from all walks of life play with greater security and fluidity, while developing skills that were previously deemed too difficult. “Instrumentalists are often told that the pain is in their heads,” Ms. Golandsky stated. “It’s not in your head; it’s in your hands. I wish more people knew that they didn’t have to suffer.”

There is a common narrative that runs amongst many of the Institute’s most devoted followers: The approach helped them overcome seemingly insuperable physical and mental barriers. Take, for example, one of the Institute’s co-founders, Robert Durso, who took his first lesson with Dorothy Taubman back in 1983. Prior to meeting Ms. Taubman, Mr. Durso “wasn’t thinking too fondly” of himself, to use his words. However, his introduction to the approach ultimately changed his life.



“The experience was immediate,” he recalled. “It taught me how to analyze solutions instead of just repeating. At a conservatory, no one says anything about how to improve. They only tell you that you miss.”

Durso's experience is echoed by a number of musicians who have studied with the Golandsky Institute: Jarred Dunn, who takes lessons with Ms. Golandsky regularly from Poland via Skype, credits the work with perpetuating his professional career and redeeming his mental well-being, calling it a "a literal life saver." He compared his musical life before the Institute akin to being stuck in a bog with no drain, but that finding the Institute made him realize that "playing the piano was natural."

However, since the students of the Golandsky Institute are located around the globe, there are few opportunities for the learners of the Taubman Approach to cohesively discuss insights into their own playing and pedagogy. That's why the Institute's annual Summer Symposium, located on the campus of Princeton University, is such a critical cumulative program for the organization. The weeklong conference features an intensive study of the approach, including private lessons, supervised practice times (for first year participants), interactive technique clinics, breakout groups, and master classes, as well as presentations and lectures. More importantly, it creates a true dialogue and sense of community amongst Taubman scholars, according to Mary Moran, one of the Institute's co-founders.

"[Students] learn different ways to communicate," she said. "It's really an incredible situation. There's no aspect of a person's musical life that isn't enhanced during our week in Princeton."

Part of the reason why students receive such immense nourishment at the Institute's symposium is the culture that has been carefully established by Ms. Golandsky and her co-founders. There aren't any prima donnas or uncomfortable competitive situations for students. Rather, symposium attendees receive a tremendous amount of emotional support from each other while learning how to diagnose different opportunities with expert teachers. In short, it's an environment that is conducive to learning, a fact that was noted in the February 2015 issue of *International Piano*, which said that attendees of the symposium were "inspired by the warmth, friendliness, and generosity of faculty and participants."

"Everyone comes here searching for answers," suggested John Bloomfield, one of the Institute's co-founders. "[The symposium] is really important for students of the organization and for the larger community. The fact that it binds people together is the most significant aspect."

This year, the symposium will highlight the Institute's co-founders in a series of special presentations that apply the Taubman Approach to a wide spectrum of composers, from Liszt to Franck. Mr. Bloomfield will give a presentation on the methodical challenges and expressive virtues of accompaniment figures, while Ms. Golandsky will present a session titled "The Chopin Preludes," where she will unlock and simplify some of the most common technical and musical challenges in these beloved pieces. She will also present "The Secret of Slow Playing," which will examine the physical and musical challenges of performing leisurely passages; Ms. Golandsky will demonstrate the

reasons for why this music can sound static and uninteresting, and will show how to make these moments flow and sound deeply moving.



Robert Durso and Mary Moran will also present during the symposium. Durso will present Liszt's *Walde rauschen* (Forest Murmurs), discussing the musical, textural and technical challenges of this much loved work. He will demonstrate how the difficult passagework is solved using the Taubman Approach, thereby producing ease in both practice and performance.

Mary Moran continues her analysis from last year's symposium lecture of the Franck Sonata, one of the finest and most challenging pieces in the chamber music repertoire. She presents the technical and interpretive issues in this masterpiece, concentrating on the piano part of the third and fourth movements.

But there are more than just piano studies throughout the week. Ms. Golandsky has been teaching and collaborating for several years with British violinist Sophie Till on how to apply the Taubman Approach to string instruments. Ms. Till, who says that the Institute allows for "a clarity of communication" amongst artists, will present a series of technique lectures that discuss Taubman principles, plus daily workshops, master classes, performance opportunities, and private lessons for string players who wish to experience the approach.

In addition to the daytime program, the evenings feature the Golandsky Institute International Piano Festival, a series of public performances starring some of the world's most in-demand pianists of a variety of styles, ranging from Ilya Itin to Bill Charlap. However, the one thing the majority of these artists have in common is that they are intimately familiar with the Taubman Approach, have studied it, and have greatly benefited.

The nighttime recitals are truly an ideal concept to introduce a larger community to the work of the Institute; Princeton University sits right in the middle of a charming college town, an equidistant journey from New York and Philadelphia, featuring gorgeous winding streets, plenty of boutiques and eateries, and charming architecture. The evening concerts serve as a perfect way to close off a midsummer's afternoon strolling through town. But the recitals also perform another, arguably more important, function: They show the symposium attendees, as well as music lovers from the community, the rich possibility of the Institute's work.

Ms. Golandsky said that she receives a significant number of emails from instrumentalists from around the globe, many of whom claim that the Institute and the Taubman Approach transformed their lives. That's an incredible feat for any teacher, and for Ms. Golandsky, the ability to put a stamp on someone's musical life has made her ongoing inquiry deeply rewarding.

"It is our way to do something wonderful for people," she said. "Many people who have not pursued a career in music due to playing-related injuries have come to us and we have given them skills that transform, not only their playing, but their lives."