



Ebony and Ivory—and Longevity

A MASTER'S INFLUENCE REVERBERATES OVER SEVENTY-THREE YEARS AT CURTIS

BY PETER DOBRIN

Perched on the edge of a rocking chair with a score opened before her, Eleanor Sokoloff looks up into the air and shakes her head in time to the music.

“That’s a girl,” she says, her forceful alto overpowering the Beethoven. “I could use a little more top. Ah. That makes all the difference in a phrase.”

The French cuffs of Mrs. Sokoloff’s fifteen-year-old student glide over the Bösendorfer keyboard. And then Sokoloff stops her.

“Well ...,” she says with distaste and suspicion in her voice. “Why is that note so soft?”

Yen Yu “Jenny” Chen tries it a different way.

“No, that’s ugly. You know why? It breaks the line.”

Chen takes yet another stab at it.

“Much better,” says Mrs. Sokoloff.

This drill, the transfer of accumulated knowledge from master to student, is basically the one you hear in every studio at the Curtis Institute of Music. Except that this master has been doing it longer than anyone else.

Much longer. Eleanor Sokoloff has held essentially the same job at the world-renowned music conservatory for seventy-three years.

If you count back to the first time she walked through the doors as a frightened seventeen-year-old student, Sokoloff, 95, has been a presence at the school for nearly eight decades.

“She was always here,” said former Curtis president Gary Graffman.

“She’s kind of a colossal figure at Curtis,” said Heather Connor, a student from 1992 to 1997.



Eleanor Sokoloff, the piano, and Curtis have been inseparable for more than seventy years, whether she was performing with Vladimir “Billy” Sokoloff—her husband and fellow faculty member and classmate (pictured on facing page)—or teaching generations of students, such as Yen Yu “Jenny” Chen (this page, shown at a recent lesson in Mrs. Sokoloff’s apartment). PHOTOS: CURTIS ARCHIVES AND (THIS PAGE) APRIL SAUL/INQUIRER STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

And so, to get the full measure of the pedagogue, as peppery in her opinions as she is perpetually sunny and curious about life, you’d really need nothing less than a centenarian eyewitness.

Curtis being Curtis, the school has one.

“She stresses the fundamentals of piano playing and builds on top of that, as good teachers should,” says Orlando Cole, 101, the cellist who matriculated at the school at its founding in 1924 and became an emeritus faculty member in [2005]. “She’s had innumerable fine players—I mean really world-class pianists—and they start with her and go on to other teachers who get credit for it. You know. That’s the way.” [Editor’s note: Mr. Cole passed away in January, two months after this article was originally published.]

Not always. Among those eager to give credit where credit is due are Leon McCawley, Charles Abramovic, Randall Hodgkinson, Craig Sheppard, Lambert Orkis, and Susan Starr—pianists of varying vintage, but all holders of big careers.

As piano teacher to non-piano majors, she also taught musicians famous for doing other things: former Philadelphia Orchestra

concertmaster Norman Carol, violinists Aaron Rosand and Jaime Laredo, and violist Michael Tree.

How many students has she had? No one at the Rittenhouse Square school knows, and she’s lost count.

“I can tell you this: More than seventy-five have played with the Philadelphia Orchestra,” she said.

Sokoloff’ alumni have carried her reputation far.

“Over the past few years, I’ve played in Japan, China, New Zealand, and Europe, in addition to this country. Every place I go, Mrs. Sokoloff’s name is venerated,” said Sheppard, who studied with her from 1965 to ’68. “I don’t know if people in Philadelphia, including perhaps even her present students, realize this.”

Despite being a great oak among the saplings, Mrs. Sokoloff doesn’t romanticize the past. “What has amazed me about her is that someone with that much history might be talking about the good old days, but Eleanor is one of the most forward-looking faculty members we have,” said Curtis president Roberto Díaz.

(When her former house at 1415 Delancey Street—the Sokoloff home for 35 years—was being demolished to make way for the Kimmel Center, she stopped by for one last look and said: “This is going to be a big improvement.”)

Mr. Díaz talks to her about Curtis’s dorm building under construction or the new program sending student ensembles to Berlin and Copenhagen, and “she gets more excited than anyone else.”

It’s a remarkable run that shows no signs of a diminuendo. And no one seems more surprised than Sokoloff herself.

She never thought she would get into Curtis in the first place—this stylish Rittenhouse Square doyenne whose distinctive hats and dark arched eyebrows announce her arrival—much less live to become its most enduring personification.

“I don’t know how I got in. They tested my ear, and I was way off. I only had three years of training. I had no theory. Technically, I had nothing.”

It was, she thinks, the fact that pianist and Curtis Director Josef Hofmann took a shine to her that won her a place at the elite school.

Born in Cleveland as Eleanor Blum, the daughter of a barber and a “singing housewife,” Sokoloff started at the Cleveland Institute of Music at age eight. She was sickly as a child, and her family decamped to Miami to restore her health. After a few years, they moved to Washington, where a radio show proved pivotal.

“Curtis used to have weekly national radio broadcasts [on CBS] every Friday, and this is how my mother became aware of Curtis. My father was against my coming here. There was a scandal: Hofmann had a child with a pupil [thirty-one years his junior], and it was in the papers. He read that. I was sixteen, and he was against my coming here. But my mother got her way.”

She enrolled at Curtis during the Depression. Her parents found her room and board for \$8 a week at the Rebecca Gratz Club on Spruce Street near Sixth, where she lived with two other girls. “I had a spinet—there was no room for a grand piano—and I hated that thing.”

Curtis in those days was a formal place. The school still holds a tea for students every Wednesday—a tradition started in Curtis’s first year—and Mrs. Sokoloff frequently pours with an assist from the lustrous samovar that onetime Curtis director Efrem Zimbalist brought over from Russia.

“Of course, Mrs. Bok [Mary Louise Curtis Bok Zimbalist, the conservatory’s founder] was there, and everything was strict. We had to wear skirts or dresses. When she came into the common room, we all stood up. Mrs. Bok was from a different era—I’m one to talk—and when she came to school, it was in her beautiful Bentley, with her chauffeur.”

Curtis formed her development as a serious pianist, but it also set the course for other departments of her life. She met her future husband, pianist Vladimir “Billy” Sokoloff, at the school, and they began a career as a notable two-piano team. She taught supplementary piano first (piano for non-piano majors), from 1936 to 1949, and then became a full member of the piano faculty.

She studied the two-piano repertoire at Curtis with Vera Brodsky and Harold Triggs, a piano team she remembers being brought in especially for the Sokoloffs. Vladimir Sokoloff went on to become the Philadelphia Orchestra’s pianist, from 1938 to 1950, and partner to violinist Zimbalist, soprano Marcella Sembrich, violist William Primrose, and other greats of the twentieth century. He died in 1997.

The couple lived within a few blocks of Curtis for decades, but also set up house in Rockport, Me., where she still spends summers.

Maine is no escape from Curtis. The harbor town was for decades an unofficial summer home for the school. She’s often seen at concerts there—sometimes giving a lift to others to the Rockport Opera House in her 1989 Ford Taurus—and visits with A. Margaret “Stormy” Bok, daughter-in-law of Curtis’s founder.

Curtis and Sokoloff are steadfast companions. She lives near the school and is a constant at student recitals while many other teachers are on the road concertizing



Mrs. Sokoloff serves tea before commencement in 2005. PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON

(she herself no longer plays). For the young talent she specializes in, she emerges as a kind of mother figure. Sometimes in perpetuity.

“I visited her up in Maine a few summers ago,” said Mr. Sheppard, sixty-one. “She put a DVD of mine in her computer, and started complimenting me, when suddenly something that she didn’t like caught her ear. ‘Why do you do that?’ she asked. And so on throughout the hour—both the good, and the bad! Nothing, absolutely nothing, escaped her attention. I was delighted on two accounts. Firstly, that someone in her nineties can still be so sharp. Secondly, what other musician is going to tell a man at my age the truth? What a blessing.”

As she points out, many members of the piano faculty have no children, and being a mother, she says, gives her an advantage in dealing with children who come to Curtis as young as seven. She has two children—Kathy Sokoloff, development director at the Settlement Music School, and Laurie Sokoloff, principal piccolo player with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, who also teaches at the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University.

Being a woman gives her a unique perspective. She is currently the only woman on the piano faculty—“Why?” she asks. (Curtis has had other female piano faculty members over the years, including the legendary Isabelle Vengerova from 1924 to 1956.)

“I really worry about the girls. There’s a glass ceiling.”

But haven’t there been plenty of female pianists with major careers?

“They come one at a time. It’s awful for girls.”

There’s a perpetual debate at top schools about whether the teachers make the students great or whether they just know how to choose the great students. Some personalities—Lang Lang, Yuja Wang—seem to have arrived at the school fully formed.

What’s clear in Mrs. Sokoloff’s two-and-a-half hour lesson with Jenny Chen one recent Saturday morning is the extent to which the Mrs. Sokoloff experience rubs off. Chen, who came to Curtis at age eleven from Taiwan, is enormously talented, Sokoloff crows. But lessons with Sokoloff,

while they touch on basics like fingering and voicing, are about leading the student to ask the right questions about the music—in effect, teaching how to fish rather than providing the fish.

Recalls Mr. Sheppard: “Great importance was given to chord voicings, good rhythm, and agogics”—the idea that a note can be accented through duration rather than how loud it is. “Fingering was especially important, and we were encouraged to find Plan B or Plan C, in case Plan A failed us. Paramount was her insistence on beautiful, and varied, tone production.

“She was a great disciplinarian, and uncompromising in her musical instincts. Naturally, she insisted on basic technical work each week, yet I recall few lessons that did not also include a work of Bach. I’ve been grateful ever since, as this repertoire remains my greatest love.”

Still, there’s no doubt that Mrs. Sokoloff screens potential students to see if certain qualities are in place even before the first lesson.

“Poetry. Phrasing. Also technical ability. They have to have that, but expression is the important thing—the thing you cannot buy, you cannot manufacture. That’s what Jenny has.”

Relationships with her students continue long after they move on. She has been known to tweet. She watches YouTube for glimpses of Kit Armstrong, a wunderkind now being mentored by piano giant Alfred Brendel. She chats with McCawley on the Internet.

“I Skype him, and he Skypes me,” she says.

Her loves have long lives, she makes sure of it, and yet she explains the longest one of her life, the one with Curtis, as a streak of felicity that happens to have lasted nearly four-fifths of a century.

“It’s just luck. My life has been one lucky episode after another. I’ve had some heartache, too. But with my disposition, it doesn’t last.” ♦

Peter Dobrin is a music critic for the Philadelphia Inquirer, where this article first appeared on November 15, 2009.

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– CRAIG SHEPPARD