A portrait of Franz Joseph Haydn, an 18th-century composer, wearing a powdered wig and a dark coat with a white cravat. He is holding a quill pen in his right hand.

# piano

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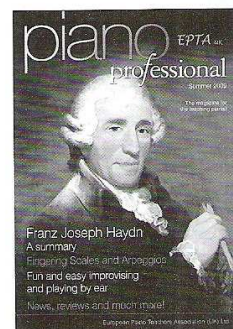
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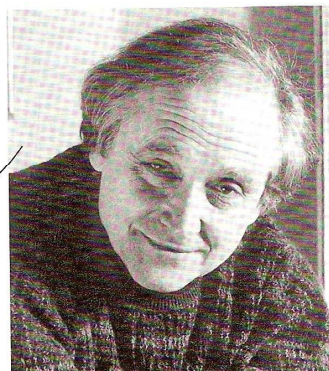
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# A tribute to *Yonty Solomon*

by Diana Dumlawwalla



Yonty Solomon was a brilliant pianist. The natural ease and remarkable musical artistry he brought to his performances was unmistakably unique. However, it was his eagerness to selflessly give of himself to his students that made him truly special. His passing on 26 September 2008 caused many of his students and colleagues to reflect and evaluate what characteristics made him so special. A teacher at the Royal College of Music (RCM) from 1977 to 2008 and also at Trinity College in London, his influence touched several generations of musicians.

I was fortunate to study with Yonty at the Royal College of Music while completing my Masters degree. As an international student from Canada, I learned of his stellar reputation through various contacts. Every one of these individuals provided me with a glowing report of his teaching style. I quickly realized that Yonty had an incredible reputation as a teacher in the U.K. Moreover, I soon discovered that his status as a teacher was matched by an equally radiant and warm personality.

After his passing, the significance of Yonty's presence in the classical music world was confirmed by obituary articles written in four of the U.K.'s national newspapers. Being so far away in Canada, I did not have the opportunity to attend Yonty's funeral. This article allows me to pay my respect to an exceptional teacher and a dear person.

## A Unique Path

Yonty's musical upbringing was not typical of a conventional classical musician. Born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1937, he demonstrated a natural talent for jazz piano at a very young age. By the age of four, he was known as the "boogie-woogie king of South Africa" and at the relatively late age of sixteen, he began to study classical piano and learn music notation. His progress was exceptional and he learned repertoire at a rapid pace. He continued his music studies at the University of Cape Town and subsequently moved to London where he studied with Dame Myra Hess, Charles Rosen and Guido Agosti.

## A Special Musical Influence: Dame Myra Hess

It is without a doubt that Myra Hess, the pianist who lifted the spirits of so many Londoners during the bombings in World War Two, made a distinctive impact on Yonty's musical training. He spoke about her very often in the lessons he gave to his own students. In my opinion, for one to fully appreciate Yonty's teaching style and musical ideas, it is necessary to look back at the teaching and musical approaches of Hess and her mentor, Tobias Matthay. Myra Hess was known for the intimate and spiritual qualities

of her playing. There was "no hint of exhibitionism" in her performances and although she possessed a strong technical command of the piano, she did not express it in a virtuosic manner that was so prevalent with many other pianists. Instead, she focused her attention on imparting the composer's message in a way that did not attract attention to her. Following performances, she would often ask, "Was it a little nearer the truth?"<sup>1</sup> Her body movements never contradicted, they only reflected the inherent shape of the music. Hess' teaching also espoused these musical values. She focused her students' attention on sound production, regarding it as a technical problem and an "exercise for the imagination". With comments like "just breathe into the keyboard," she approached piano playing with a natural and organic way of thinking.

Tobias Matthay, a leading figure of the English piano school, was the principal mentor of Myra Hess. They shared a special and warm teacher-student bond. The pianistic ideals he wrote about in his treatises form a strong link with the principles Hess advocated during her career. In *The Visible and Invisible in Pianoforte Technique*, Matthay wrote that "piano technique is an act of aiming or timing the right activities of the limb at the musically right moment." In this quotation, he highlights the fact that technique is at the service of music. It is not meant to supersede artistic and musical ideas. He also insisted on an association between the spiritual and physical features of piano playing. With regards to playing from memory, Matthay wrote, "allow your consciousness to flow in the channels which you previously made for it." As a student, I know that this would be a very freeing statement in a lesson, particularly when one is concerned about replicating what was accomplished in the practice room!

Yonty championed all these musical values of Hess and Matthay. As was the case with Hess, he insisted on being faithful to the score – Hess herself abided by this tenet long before it became the general norm. Yonty also aimed for a beautiful and clear sound both for himself and his students. Finally, he carried the spiritual quality that dominated Hess' Beethoven throughout all of his playing. He could find sacred beauty in every piece he encountered.<sup>2</sup>

Upon familiarising oneself with the teaching styles of Matthay and Hess, it is no wonder that Mr. Solomon was such a warm and encouraging professor. Clearly, he was influenced by his "musical ancestors." His ability to boost a student's confidence is a trait hailed by so many of his pupils. Yonty expected his students to commit to the intense

<sup>1</sup> D. Lassimone, Myra Hess, Ed. Howard Ferguson, New York: Vanguard Press, 1966, p 11

<sup>2</sup> B. Millington Obituary Yonty Solomon: Classical pianist at home in music from Bach to Sorabji The Guardian Wednesday 19 November 2008



study of piano playing. Very often, his students would find themselves studying some of the most difficult repertoire from the piano literature. However, if our self-confidence would falter, he would insist that our performance, "will be divine!" He truly believed in the psychological effect of his compliments.

## The Consummate Musician

Frequently, pianists identify themselves with the role that defines the majority of their career – teacher or performer. In my eyes, Yonty viewed both as one in the same – most important to him was that he was a musician. His repertoire choices spanned a wide gamut from Bach's Goldberg Variations to the music of the contemporary composer, Kaikhosru Sorabji. He encouraged his students to follow his lead and explore music from all eras.

In Mr. Solomon's music-making world, sound was of the utmost importance. Whilst teaching, he would devise unique metaphors for describing the type of sound he wanted his students to explore. To help us create a particular tone quality he employed two techniques. In the first approach, he would illustrate an image that would invariably elicit the type of sound he wanted. For example, he would utilize phrases such as "a big cathedral" or "a peaceful valley." Alternatively, he would use a metaphor describing how the mechanism would produce the sound – the mechanism being either the student or the piano. I find this latter approach to be most unique. I recall him telling me on more than one occasion,

"Diana, let the hammers caress the strings!" With his voice stating those words I would find that delicate sound he was looking for. On other occasions he would also exclaim, "Long arms, Diana! Think long arms...they should reach out to the window behind you." He used this image when I had to execute long and difficult passages at a forte or fortissimo level. Yonty wanted to make sure that I maintained a large open sound. The tendency (at least for me) when playing tricky passages is to crouch down and really concentrate! Thinking of "long arms" helps me to sit taller and let the music sing throughout my entire being. I try to think of these words when I play and I am always taken back to the room with that window where I had my lessons.

Yonty encapsulated the essence of a complete teacher. A marvellous musician, he passed on his artistry to his students in such a unique way. His influence will stay with us for a lifetime. I am certain that I can speak for all his students in the sense that we all feel very blessed to have had the opportunity to study with Yonty. His warm and gentle approach continues to inspire us to no end.

A month after his death, I gave a recital in Toronto. The date of the performance was booked well in advance but as it turned out, it was the one month anniversary of Yonty's passing. I dedicated my performance to his memory. His spirit was most definitely in the hall as I played. It was almost as if he was right there playing with me, just as he would during those wonderful lessons. He continues to teach through the values he passed on to his students. Thank you, Yonty. We shall never forget you. ■

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