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Book Review: The Piano Teaching Legacy of Solomon Mikowsky by Kookhee Hong

The Piano Teaching Legacy of Solomon Mikowsky, Kookhee Hong, LAP, Lambert Academic Publishing, 209 pp. (with photos and appendices), ISBN: 978-3659804656, New York, NY, 2013

Breaking from the tradition of New York Concert Review as a publication chiefly about concerts and recordings, this book review is justified based on its subject, noted musical pedagogue, Solomon Mikowsky, whose musical legacy dwells in the concert halls and music schools of New York and throughout the world. As “one of the world’s most sought-after artist teachers” (*Clavier*), whose students have racked up over 150 international competition wins, he has been a vital if often behind-the-scenes figure in the world of concert life today.

Among Mr. Mikowsky’s students have been some highly celebrated pianists of the day, including Simone Dinnerstein, Kirill Gerstein, and others. Many are on piano faculties throughout the world, guiding the next generation of musical leaders, performing, serving on juries, and yes, still competing and performing in contests themselves. Lest the reader be misled by the word “legacy” in the book’s title, let there be no doubt that Dr. Mikowsky is still going strong after many decades of teaching, notably at the Manhattan School of Music since 1969.

What’s more than all of the credentials and success he has achieved – though going hand in hand with it – is his successful personal mission to share music, more a way of life than a profession. It is that personal mission that makes Dr Mikowsky’s career worthy of a book, rather than just a list of prizes in some compendium. His students, present and past, speak of him as a beloved friend, who has helped them artistically, personally, and even financially. They have traveled to new places because of him, tried unknown exotic repertoire because of him, sampled new foods, read new books, and met new people because of him. Together they are helping to keep the love and celebration of piano music alive. Anyone who was captivated by the 2015 film about music teacher, Seymour Bernstein (*Seymour: An Introduction*), should enjoy Ms. Hong’s book in a similar way, but with new dimensions: enter Solomon.

At this point, it may sound as if Ms. Hong, a former student of Dr. Mikowsky, has written a promotional puff piece, but rest assured that the book goes much deeper than that. Though one or two moments in the interview-

format book may resemble the so-called “humble-brag” as various triumphs are recounted (how can they not with his string of achievements?), there is always rigorous self-assessment with Dr. Mikowsky, from the half-joking wish to refund money to students at some earlier points in his career to his comments about how much he is still always learning.

There is also much more to the book than a recollection and analysis of his teaching – beyond the ample discussion of fingering approaches, editions, and other specialized issues. Dr. Mikowsky’s life has been one of serious ups and downs, all which have made him the remarkable man that he is. The reader will find references to his Russian-Polish-Jewish roots, an engrossing account of his parents’ immigrant experience, colorful descriptions of his early days in Havana and a family jewelry business, and his musical beginnings. There are some humorous personal anecdotes, but also chilling references to his extended family’s peril at Auschwitz. There are tales of financial and personal struggle – including a physical injury preventing him from performing – but also tales of addictive Cuban croquettes. One is reminded in some ways of the much longer memoirs of another gourmand, pianist Arthur Rubinstein, as Dr. Mikowsky has a similar zest for living (without Rubinstein’s much-touted dalliances). One can only envy his current class of students. Young musicians will find in this book the constant reminder that not only must life be filled with music, but music must be filled with life.

Among the valuable cautionary tales, Dr. Mikowsky recounts various tests of character and diplomacy, such as politically constrained competitions and his dilemmas when colleagues’ students have wished to study with him. He also tells of one of his students asking to study with a different teacher, a technique specialist of dubious grounding – guessable by those in the know, but mercifully unnamed. Though there is some name-dropping, names are generally only mentioned when historically significant or of personal importance to him, such as his teachers Sentenat and Gorodnitzki.

From political obstacles to personal sacrifice, from student years in one’s homeland to scholarships in the US at Juilliard, doctoral studies at Columbia University and years of teaching, Dr. Mikowsky shares a wealth of experience – even how he became involved in a lucrative real estate investment out of his involvement in an apartment originally for the benefit of a student. Such serendipitous situations, plus much hard work have enabled him to gift performance halls and pianos to the Manhattan School of Music, the Chicago College of Performing Arts, and the City of Havana – all in addition to spearheading several festivals. It is not every piano teacher who maintains such philanthropic endeavors on the side. There are lessons to be learned from his life story as much as from the valuable section on pedagogy.

The book is a quick read at 148 pages, plus 50-plus more in appendices, and flows like a fireside chat. Ms. Hong is to be commended for achieving this effect naturally, without intrusive editorializing or ego. Part I centers on the biography of Dr. Mikowsky and Part II, on his pedagogical beliefs and experiences, with some interesting specific examples. Part III is a very generous string of appendices about pianists and teachers, plus student testimonials and lists of laureates. Those readers not interested in piano teaching may not be inclined to read Part II on pedagogy (just over half of its 148-page main text), though it seems that any lover of piano music could benefit from it all.

On a critical note, there is room for some further editing of this book (perhaps before its next printing), as some corrections are needed. Most seem not to be the fault of the author but of other contributors, but at least “sic” would be welcome occasionally, as the spelling of “Juilliard” appears “Julliard” and “book” becomes an unfortunate palindrome, which I’ll omit here. I’m sure, when a student states, “Another day goes by without me using something that you thought me...” that it was meant as, “Not a day goes by without my using something you taught me” but such errors such as these are easy to fix. The spelling of “Solomon” should be consistent, as “Salomon” in the photograph section was surprising.

Minor quibbles aside, I feel this book is a valuable addition to any music library. Dr. Mikowsky is a gift to the music world, and thankfully part of that gift is now knowable in prose form.

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by Kookhee Hong (Author)

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Kookhee Hong

The Piano Teaching Legacy of Solomon Mikowsky



Kookhee Hong, a native of South Korea, studied first at the Curtis Institute of Music and later as a full-scholarship student of Solomon Mikowsky at the Manhattan School of Music in New York. Under his guidance, she received Bachelor and Master of Music degrees, the Professional Studies Diploma and the DMA degree. She has performed worldwide.

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Solomon Mikowsky, one of the world's greatest piano teachers, shares his life and teaching experience with his student Kookhee Hong for all music teachers and students to profit from his vast knowledge. Born in Cuba of Russian-Polish parents, his early training was with César Pérez Sentenat, who studied in Paris with Joaquín Nin, student of Moszkowski, a pupil of Liszt. Mikowsky was granted scholarships by the Cuban government and the Juilliard School to study at The Juilliard School in New York with Sascha Gorodnitzki, foremost pupil of the legendary Russian virtuoso Josef Lhevinne, later earning a doctorate from Columbia University. Cited as "one of the world's most sought-after artist teachers" (Clavier) for "a magical ability to develop his piano students into artists" (Sur Exprès), Mikowsky's students have won more than 150 international competitions. He is featured in Benjamin Saver's The Most Wanted Piano Teachers in the USA, has been honored by the Institute of International Education, and was awarded the Presidential Medal by the Manhattan School of Music. He has been a member of the Manhattan School of Music faculty since 1969.