

**P**assion, elegance, color, warmth, fiery temperament, intensity and spiritual awareness—these words capture Adele Marcus. Most of us wish we could have had the opportunity to live during her lifetime, to hear the great pianists she heard, to work with Igor Stravinsky, and to study with the legendary pianists Josef Lhevinne and Artur Schnabel.

When we first met in 1977,<sup>1</sup> I played the third movement of the Chopin Concerto in E-minor. She kindly said, "Don't you believe in starting at the beginning of a piece?" She was already 71 years old and still imbued with her trademarks of exuberance and passion for playing and teaching. She did for me what she said Schnabel did for her—opened the Bible to the piano—how to study and convey the meaning of music. She opened my eyes and ears and taught me how to listen to what I did.

Both in 1977 and the last time I saw her a few months ago in 1995, she sat quietly and listened to me play. In between those two meetings, what I learned from her will accompany me for the rest of my life. Hers was among the best playing I may ever hear. She was the epitome of the Golden Age. Arthur Rubinstein once said of Josef Lhevinne, "Lhevinne had elegance; he could move his listeners to tears by the sheer beauty of his tone." Adele had the same impact on me. Even the somber tone she brought to Bach's "Prelude in E-flat Minor," *Well-Tempered Clavier I* or the slow movements of Schubert's *Sonata in A-major*, Op. 120 and Brahms's *Sonata in F-minor*, Op. 5 is a lasting memory. Yet the greatest gift of all was that she was able to teach us how to do it too. She was able to verbalize vividly about her feeling for study and music-making. She often quoted from the Talmud: "See it, not just look. Hear it, not just listen. If you want to understand the invisible, you must study carefully the visible." In the next breath or two she would utter with a serious sense of humor, "Eat some chocolate, dear. It's good for your tone."

My favorite phrase was "Never do anything to the music, let the music do something to you." She was the embodiment of the Russian soul and "helped me to be in touch with my own soul. Whether at home or on stage, there is always the essence of her being that will continue to be part of whatever it is I am expressing in the music. Her saying, "not the down of a feather should come between you and success" convinced us that we'd be able to do our best.

There are some lighter remembrances that were part of my experiences with Adele Marcus. For instance, didn't we all know when she was nearing the corner to the hall that led to studio 558 in the "new Juilliard"? The elegant scent of Bal a Versailles or Halston was uniquely hers. After lessons, Adele often took us to dinner at the Sweetwaters or the Rhapsody restaurants. (She knew that the Rhapsody had the best cheesecake around!) She taught me to speak distinctly and dearly. She would say, "Dear, say yes, not yeah." She taught me how to compose letters of gratitude and to acknowledge those who bestow prosperity on you. No one ever gave a better lesson on the telephone. She was eager to assist students with their appearances. As a shy teenager, she sent me to the Dorchester Towers hair dressers to straighten my thick and puffy hairstyle. She even recommended famous dermatologists to help cure typical teenage skin problems. Not your ordinary

## PIANO & KEYBOARD NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1995

piano teacher, but Madame Sousatzka. In fact, Shirley MacLaine was supposed to meet Adele to learn about the style of teaching that was required for her role. The meeting did not take place, but when I saw the film, I could have sworn that the two had met. She was creative no matter what she was doing. In 1984, on the drive back from Memphis, where she gave lectures and master classes, a former pupil of hers and her pupil and myself were trying to find a place for lunch. When we stopped for gas, Adele spotted the little market section at the Mobil station. She quickly took some Velveeta cheese, some bread and plastic knives, and made sandwiches that we ate at the Mobil Mart on paper plates. That was the kind of spontaneity she brought to her daily living.

She was a pedagogue who took a total interest in her pupil as a person, musician, and pianist—in that order. My fondest memory took place in 1986. The last public appearance she made was at my New York William Petschek debut concert. After nine years of lessons and building repertoire, it was like a wedding celebration when I formally "married the piano" in front of my friends and family. When I peeked through the small box backstage at Alice Tully Hall, I could see Stewart Gordon escorting her to her box on the keyboard side. The tears streamed down my face. She knew what it took to build, establish, and sustain a career in music.

Most remarkable was her ability to grasp the structure and style of music she had never seen. Although she never performed Prokofiev's second and third concertos, she was the teacher to go to for these works. She told me she heard Prokofiev play his third concerto in New York, and that the sound of his playing was forever in her psyche. After a rehearsal of Prokofiev's *Concerto Number 2* in 1983, she took me to the Rhapsody and ordered a roast beef sandwich for me. She felt this would give me the energy required for the concert that night. Before the concert, one of her pupils came backstage to give me a dictated letter from Adele that offered me the courage and inspiration to play the concerto the best I possibly could, right down to how to bow, where to bow, how to acknowledge the maestro and concertmaster, and how many curtain calls to take. There were works she was born to play.

Who can forget her lessons on the Liszt *Sonata in B-minor*, Chopin's *Sonata in B-minor* and *Sonata in B-flat minor*, Schumann's *Symphonic Etudes*, Brahms's *Sonata in F-minor* or *Intermezzo in E-flat minor*, Beethoven's complete sonatas, Mozart's sonatas, Bach's works, Schubert's *Sonata in D-major* and *Sonata in A-major*, to name a few. These were her pieces. When she played these works, you felt that that was the way these pieces should sound.

It was her teaching of the Josef Lhevinne trademark repertoire that instilled a deep desire in me to investigate and revive this style of the Golden Age. She taught us that facility and technique are not the same. No one else could ever imitate the singing sound, velvety textures, long lines, impeccable pedaling, and how she breathed with the music. Nor did she want us to imitate. She said of Horowitz's performance of Rachmaninoff's *Concerto Number 3*, "Don't try to imitate what he does. You don't know what steps he had to take to arrive at that interpretation. If you want to imitate recordings, study with RCA Victor."

## PIANO & KEYBOARD NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1995

Her main goal was for us to understand the essence of what she said and assimilate the sounds she played, and then absorb it all and make it our own. She taught us to help ourselves.

In 1985, Adele introduced me to a monthly publication of inspirational verses, *Daily Word*. At the time, I was preparing for the University of Maryland Competition and was full of anxiety. She told me this publication would help me to live one day at a time. I haven't stopped reading it since. I recall her words before I stepped into Juilliard. "Don't look to the left, don't look to the right, just look straight ahead. Don't get confused, be focused. Know thyself."

Her favorite phrase from the *Daily Word* was "Let go and let God." In her latter years, she often quoted, "The Light of God surrounds us. The Love of God enfolds us. The Power of God Protects us. The Presence of God watches over us. Wherever we are, God is."

At the end of her life, Adele Marcus was finally able to "let go and let God" with the knowledge that although she took with her the embodiment of an era, she has left us the incomparable inspiration to perpetuate the traditions of her rich legacy.

—*Jeffrey Biegel* +