Richard Rhodes

The Teaching of Karl Ulrich Schnabel

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PREFACE

Werner Grünzweig

In his book *Music and the Line of Most Resistance*, Artur Schnabel wrote that the amateur in the arts is the least inclined to make concessions in quality. Why should s/he? The amateur has no interest other than the respective art itself; s/he deals with art for art's sake and seeks only the highest quality.

The author of this book on the teaching of Karl Ulrich Schnabel, Richard Rhodes, is a perfect example of an amateur who insists on the highest standards in the arts. Early in his life he was introduced to the canon of classical piano music, and—although he decided at the age of 18 that he did not want to become a professional pianist—he has tried since then to find out how this repertoire should be played. He is conscious that, in Artur Schnabel's phrase, "the music is often better than it can be played!"

His most profound musical impressions came from Artur Schnabel's interpretations, and he was therefore lucky to meet Schnabel's son, Karl Ulrich Schnabel, who could answer Rhodes' questions as no one else could. When Rhodes took his first lessons with Karl Ulrich in 1969, he was already 40 years old and was working successfully as a lawyer for an international American company in Geneva.

Born in England in 1929, Rhodes was educated at Eton, and at Trinity College of Music, London, before studying Italian as well as Italian and Greek art in Italy. After his military service, he worked at French at the University of Aix-en-Provence before reading Modern History at Oxford (Christ Church) under Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper from 1950 to 1953. When he finally studied, and consequently made a career in, international law—first in South America, then in Paris and Geneva—he never lost contact with music. However, his interest in classical piano music dates back to his school years at Eton:

"From 1944 onwards, I had access to the gramophone library at Eton. All the great composers were represented in these recordings. The volumes from the Beethoven Sonata Society included Beethoven's 'Waldstein' and 'Hammerklavier' sonatas.

"These made a strong impression on me. When I compared the recording of the 'Waldstein' by Vladimir Horowitz with the one by Artur Schnabel, the superiority of Artur's performance struck me forcibly.

"This impression was reinforced when two years later, in May 1946, I heard Artur play Beethoven's Diabelli Variations in the Albert Hall in London. That performance remains an outstanding memory over 60 years later. Close in style to his recording of that work, the playing was freer than in the recording, and the crescendi were often accompanied by a resounding series of grunts. He appeared totally oblivious of the audience.

"The clarity, transparency and vitality of Artur's playing seemed a true expression of Beethoven's musical thought. I was puzzled by the way in which the sonority was achieved. Music teachers to whom I put the question could not answer it and were, in general, not interested."

It was not until 1969 that Rhodes came close to receiving an answer. This was when he met Karl Ulrich Schnabel. Schnabel was then 60 years old and at the height of his powers as a master teacher of piano. His own career as a concert pianist had been developing very well but slowed down considerably with the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany. With the outbreak of World War II, international concert life came to a halt altogether. Whereas "established" pianists such as his father still found opportunities to perform or teach, the younger generation was affected more harshly. When Karl Ulrich emigrated to the United States with his future wife, the American pianist Helen Fogel, he was employed in the war industry and could not give concerts for several years. For some time he did not even have a piano in his house. After the war, Karl Ulrich took up his father's tradition of holding master classes at Lake Como in which he had already participated as an assistant teacher before the war. He also taught many students at his home in New York City and was invited to teach master classes around the world.

Karl Ulrich Schnabel's relationship with Richard Rhodes however was a very special one because Rhodes received lessons for more than three decades. The two usually met several times a year, mostly at Lake Como. The last lesson took place only a year before Karl Ulrich died at the age of 92 in 2001. Over the years Rhodes developed an effective system for notating his teacher's remarks in his own music editions: he used a different coloured pencil for each lesson so that he could clearly see what advice had been given at which lesson. Yet, a comparison of the notes

written in the scores throughout the years shows that Karl Ulrich always had a very clear concept of the music he taught and did not change his opinions concerning tempi and the like very much.[1]

Rhodes based his book entirely on these notes. Its individual chapters—each dedicated to one piece of music—give much valuable advice to anyone studying the compositions discussed in them. It is not a book that could (or should even) be read from cover to cover. Rather, it would probably best be read sitting at the piano with an open score of the piece to be studied. In contrast to his father, Karl Ulrich also gave very exact technical advice. He often gave helpful hints about how a certain passage could be mastered more easily by a student with limited technical abilities—even if this meant that a certain passage would be executed in a way that differed from what the composer had notated. (When we look at Artur Schnabel's edition of Beethoven's piano sonatas, we can see that for him even the *way* a passage was executed mattered and was not to be decided by the pianist, whereas for Karl Ulrich only the musical *result* was crucial. On all musical questions, however, Karl Ulrich referred to the autograph whenever it was accessible in the form of facsimile editions.)

From the reports about studying with Artur[2] or Karl Ulrich Schnabel, we can learn a lot about the rich metaphorical language they used in order to stimulate their students' musical fantasy. For the Schnabels, music was a language that should speak to both player and listener alike. Not only do whole works tell a story—but every musical detail is similar to language. Very often Artur Schnabel demonstrated the phrasing and articulation of a passage by fitting words to the music. It was not important what the text meant, as long as the phrasing demonstrated the language-like character of a passage. But it was particular to Karl Ulrich to point out the *emotional* content of a passage or a movement: all details of the music, all analytical aspects, and even technical advice were subservient to how to render best the particular emotional content of a piece.

Richard Rhodes' book is an important and unique contribution to the larger picture of Karl Ulrich's legacy as a master teacher of piano. Several of his former students as well as his grandson Claude Mottier pro-

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1 In the future, these materials will be kept as Richard Rhodes Collection within the Karl Ulrich Schnabel Archive at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

2 Cf. William Glock, *Notes in Advance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 17– 28; David Goldberger, "Artur Schnabel's Master Classes," in: *Artur Schnabel. Musiker Musician. 1882–1951*, ed. Werner Grünzweig (Hofheim: Wolke, 2001), 57–68.

vided us with information about his way of teaching.[3] At the archive of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, Peter Serkin's recordings of his own lessons with Karl Ulrich Schnabel (that also spanned several decades) can be studied. Mary Lou Chayes' film *Con Brio* shows Karl Ulrich in various master class situations.[4] All these documents will enlarge not only our understanding of one of the greatest music teachers of the last century but of the musical wisdom of generations of musicians that was united in his person.

3 Claude Mottier, "Karl Ulrich Schnabel's Approach to Expression," in: *Artur Schnabel. Bericht über das Internationale Symposion Berlin 2001*, ed. Werner Grünzweig (Hofheim: Wolke, 2003), 187–193.

4 *Con Brio. Karl Ulrich Schnabel. Master Teacher of Piano*, Los Angeles 2007, produced by Mary Lou Chayes, available under e-mail: lulula@aol.com from TownHall records, HAVE Inc., 350 Power Ave., Hudson, NY 12534 or http://www.townhallrecords.com.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

"You will never be a pianist. You are a musician."

Theodor Leschetizky's remark to Artur Schnabel has often been quoted. Many people, including myself, will not agree with the first part of this statement. They regard Artur Schnabel as one of the greatest pianists of the 20th century. Indeed, Schnabel's interpretation of innumerable works for the piano was incomparable—the Adagio of Beethoven's op. 106 ("Hammerklavier") is but one example.

Artur Schnabel's son, Karl Ulrich, claimed he did not have his father's technique. But when one listens to his recording of the Schubert "Wandererfantasie", one may feel he was being too modest—he was never a man to boast about his musicianship. As a musician, Karl Ulrich Schnabel had a sensibility to and understanding of great music that I have never encountered in anyone else. That is why I decided to write this book.

I wish to thank my beloved wife Luba for her encouragement, Lynn Matheson, Werner Gruenzweig, and Anicia Timberlake for their exemplary work on the text, and Jennifer Siddle for her wisdom, energy, and good humour in typing it.

Geneva
February 2013

INTRODUCTION

In his book on the teaching of Artur Schnabel, Konrad Wolff aimed to set out the principles underlying Artur Schnabel's teaching and performance of music.[1] In the present volume on the teaching of Karl Ulrich Schnabel, Artur Schnabel's son, my aim is similar but my approach is different. I set out Karl Ulrich Schnabel's advice on pieces which I studied with him. In doing so, I have tried always to give Karl Ulrich Schnabel's view and not my own (for instance, on questions of tempo).

In putting down on paper the ideas of a teacher, there is the inevitable risk of presenting what seems to be permanent and unchangeable advice. Karl Ulrich Schnabel often said that music is an art, not a science; therefore, what might seem to be good advice one day could be changed later. Having said this, however, I must observe that it was characteristic of him to be remarkably consistent in his advice: when he looked at a score many months after his previous study of it, tempi did not change appreciably, nor did dynamic levels.

This consistency in his interpretation of the music stemmed from a respect for the intentions of the composer. The music comes first; the performer does not. His father, Artur Schnabel, took the same view. For us today, it is instructive to read the excellent liner notes by Eric Blom included with Artur Schnabel's recordings of the 32 piano sonatas and other works by Beethoven, when they appeared in the 1930s. Throughout those notes, there is no mention of Artur Schnabel! Contrast today. Programme notes are largely a puff for the performer. At that time it was difficult to know anything about the performer. Soloman, Schnabel—such names were mysteries.

Although the technical level reached by many pianists today is high, musically they may be less successful. This is why I believe that Karl Ulrich Schnabel's advice should be available to musicians and should be listened to. As a teacher, he was more approachable and more articulate

1 Konrad Wolff, *The Teaching of Artur Schnabel. A Guide to Interpretation* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1972).

than his father. Artur Schnabel could do things spontaneously at the piano which he was less ready to explain to a student than his son, who not only had a keen analytical mind but was able to convey clearly his ideas to his students.

Surprisingly, many pianists reach quite an advanced level without understanding some of the basic requirements of hand and finger positions. Having reached a certain point, they do not make further progress. The sound they produce is thin in *piano* or *pianissimo*, dull in *forte*, and crude and even banging in *fortissimo*. There is, however, some basic advice that Karl Ulrich Schnabel imparted in lessons with his students.

To begin with, sit on a hard seat or bench at a height which feels comfortable when the arm, with the hand resting on the keyboard, is approximately parallel to the ground. In books about famous pianists, one will find all manner of different approaches to the keyboard and the position of the pianist's body in relation to it: some sit on a very low seat, some on a very high one. (We will do well to remember, however, that circus performers know many tricks that most of us would do well not to emulate until we are equally capable of such technical feats.)

The fingers should be in contact with the keys before beginning to play. Theodor Leschetizky, the teacher of many great pianists including Artur Schnabel, insisted that even when there is a leap, the fingers should be in contact with the keys before the note or chord to which the pianist has leaped is played! In many cases this involves only a fraction of a second. In order to practise jumps and speed scales, jump to the new notes but do not play them, for example, at the end of Schubert's "Wandererfantasie". The habit of hitting the keys from a distance above the keyboard is to be strictly avoided: in addition to the ugly sound which results, it is impossible to control the relative strength of the notes within a chord (see glossary: proportions).

To play a chord, advance the arm, thus raising the wrist. Suppose, for example, one wants to bring out the top note of a chord. Think of that top note and as the wrist moves upward, one should have the sensation that that particular key is going to be depressed slightly more than the others. (There are exercises to facilitate study of this later in the book: see glossary: proportions.) To play a succession of notes, the same basic hand motion is used: for example, four notes are played with a single upward motion of the wrist. The fingers move very little and should not

be used as hammers. To play legato, there must be no gap between successive fingers and the fingers should overlap slightly in legatissimo. To articulate a staccato, the average position of the wrist is slightly higher, and the fingers are drawn back rapidly. If the hand is almost vertical, the part touched by the finger is reduced and therefore the note value is shorter. Loudness will depend on the speed and the size of the arm-hand motion. Regardless of the articulation or dynamics at any given point in a piece, the motion of the wrist and arm is always forward and upward; downward motions should hardly ever be used as the sound produced tends to be hard and dull.

When practising, a mirror placed at one or both ends of the keyboard can help the pianist to see the motions of his/her hands, wrists, and arms. The pianist may, unconsciously, be using insufficient motions. By observing the motions used in playing, the pianist will be able to ascertain whether it is necessary to make any adjustments in the position at the keyboard or in the movements of hands, wrists, and arms.

When learning a new piece it is important to write in the fingerings in pencil from the start. This forces the pianist to make a decision at an early stage of learning a particular composition. It is better to make a wrong decision initially than to have uncertainty and inconsistency. By using pencil, a change can be easily made if a better fingering is discovered later. However, Karl Ulrich Schnabel cautioned: "But even if you have the worst fingering in the world and discover a better one, never change it within three weeks before giving a concert!"

Finger substitution should be practised very rapidly at a slow tempo. At performance speed, the substitution will then seem easy. Difficult passages should be practised both slowly and at performance speed, perfecting the passage first in small groups with gaps between them. Progressively reduce the length of the gap between the groups until perfect continuity has been achieved. Practise each hand separately.

In memorising a piece, it may also be advantageous to practise hands separately and especially to practise hands separately from memory, since a memory failure usually occurs only in one hand at a time. If a memory failure does occur, always jump forward in the score, never backward. On each page in the score, the pianist should have a point to which s/he can jump immediately and automatically, if necessary. That particular passage will have had to be practised enormously. In most cases the pianist will know the piece better than anyone in the audience. Gener-

ally the audience will notice a wrong harmony less readily than a rhythmic gap; thus a rapid jump forward—if sufficiently rapid—will not necessarily disturb the audience, even if the harmony to which the pianist jumps does not logically follow the harmony of the passage where the memory failure occurred.

In many pieces, a section may be repeated later in a different key and often in varied form; for instance, in the first movement of a sonata. In order to reduce confusion when memorising, it may help the pianist to postpone work on the repeated section (in the recapitulation) until some other movement of the work or a different piece of music altogether has been practised. By allowing a substantial interval between practising the two sections, they will tend to fix themselves at different levels in the memory.

In monodic music, the voice carrying the melody must sing over the other voices: often the top voice is much louder than the other voices. In cases where the melody predominates over the accompaniment, such as in the opening of Schubert's B-flat sonata, D. 960, the pianist is faced with the necessity of playing the accompanying notes *ppp* as the melody itself is *pianissimo*! It is technically difficult to do this with perfect evenness and to respect vertical proportions in all voices. Many pianists therefore often take the "line of least resistance" and play the accompanying voice or voices too loudly. This is contrary to Artur Schnabel's advice in *Music and the Line of Most Resistance* and to the teachings of Karl Ulrich Schnabel.[2]

There is much detailed instruction here on how to play the piano. The pianist may feel overwhelmed by the details, but he or she should not be worried on that account! When a pianist plays a piece at a concert, every detail of instruction or advice received must be forgotten. Everything that has been taught must have been totally assimilated so that the words of the professor or teacher have disappeared and only the music remains. In *Music and the Line of Most Resistance*, referred to above, Artur Schnabel writes: "The teacher has warned you: 'Don't give an accent on this first beat!' If you try to remember this whole sentence before delivering this first beat you will have passed the beat before the words have had time to pass through your memory. You start to remem-

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2 Artur Schnabel, *Music and the Line of Most Resistance*, ed. Lynn Matheson and Ann Schnabel Mottier (Hofheim: Wolke, 2007).

ber before this contested beat and arrive at the last word after it is all over. Consequently, the neighbouring tones of this beat must have been neglected and mechanically executed."[3]

Theodor Leschitizky, Artur Schnabel's teacher, told Artur repeatedly "You will never be a pianist. You are a musician." This book is for the pianist who is also a musician.

3 Ibid., 26–7.

LIST OF EDITIONS

The following is a list of the editions used and recommended by Karl Ulrich Schnabel and the author for study of the compositions which appear in this book:*

Bach, Johann Sebastian. *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, BWV 903.* Edited by Alfred Kreutz. Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, n.d.

Beethoven, Ludwig van. *Complete Piano Sonatas.* Edited by Artur Schnabel. 2 vols. Reprint, Melville, N.Y.: Belwin Mills Pub. Corp., 1977.

—*Complete Works.* Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1862–1865; 1888.

Chopin, Frédéric. *Ballades.* Edited by Carl Mikuli. Complete Works for the Piano, vol. 5. Reprint, New York: G. Schirmer Inc., 1916.

—*Mazurkas.* Edited by Carl Mikuli. Complete Works for the Piano, vol. 2. Reprint, New York: G. Schirmer Inc., 1934.

Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus. *Sonatas and Three Fantasies for the Piano.* Original Version Unedited (Urtext). New York: Edwin F. Kalmus, n.d.

—*Complete Works.* Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1877–1883.

Schubert, Franz. *Sonatas for Pianoforte Solo.* Complete Works vol. 5, series 10. Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1884–1897. Reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1965–1969.

—*Fantasy, Impromptus and Other Pieces for Pianoforte Solo.* Complete Works, vol. 5, series 10. Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1884–1897. Reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1965–1969.

Schumann, Robert. *Piano Music.* Edited by Clara Schumann. 3 vols. Reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1972.

* In order to facilitate easy reference for the reader, the bar numbers indicated in the discussion of the compositions in this book are not taken from the above editions but rather from more recent editions of these works, including Urtext editions by G. Henle and Wiener Urtext Edition. This was necessary since, in some cases, there are discrepancies between various older and newer editions in the numbering of bars within a single work, and occasionally even in earlier editions of the same work published by a single publisher. Footnotes indicating differences in dynamics, articulation, and the like between the editions used by the author and other editions are by no means exhaustive; they merely reflect something of the complex and non-uniform nature of the various editions even when they are based on original sources.