

From the book "Pianists Speak" [Pianisty Rasskazyvajut]
Michael Sokolov, ed. (Moscow: Sovetskij Kompositor, 1979).
English translation adapted by Kenneth Derus.

Recollections of Leopold Godowsky (Vosporomanija o Leopold'e Godovskom)

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To speak about a great composer or great performer is always difficult, and I could probably convey my impressions more effectively if my words were supported by good recordings. I tried to talk about Godowsky on an earlier occasion and listened to his recordings, but they were so unsatisfactory that I have decided not to refer to them here, even though they would be in some ways useful to those who never heard Godowsky play.

I want to tell you something about Godowsky's ideas and pedagogical opinions, and I will also mention some things about his life — insofar as I can remember them. But first of all I must speak autobiographically, to explain how I got to know Godowsky.

The first time I played for him I was around sixteen. This was a long time ago, as you can imagine. Fifty-five years ago. Why did I go to Godowsky? This is an interesting question. During my teens, as I began to study piano more seriously, my parents asked Felix Blumenfeld and Alexander Glazunov to recommend a teacher with whom I might continue my musical and more specifically pianistic education. Blumenfeld was my uncle, and was at that time working in Petersburg.



Dem ehrlichen, genialen Menschen, dem echten, edlen Künstler, sein aufrichtig ergebener Freund Leopold Godowsky, Moskau, 25.5.35

["To the earnest and genial man, to the true and noble artist, from his honest and devoted friend, Leopold Godowsky. Moscow, 25 May 1935"].

This photo of Godowsky appears on page 75 of *Heinrich Neuhaus: "Recollections, Letters, Papers"* [Genrich Nevgauz. *Vospominanija Pis'ma Materialy*] (Moscow, 1992), edited by the Neuhaus pupil Elena Richter.

Today I believe that if I had not gone to Godowsky, but more simply to one of the Russian conservatories — the Moscow or the Petersburg — almost certainly I would not have left off composition studies, because I would have met Lyadov or some other excellent composer who was at that time teaching this subject. But I went to Godowsky because both Blumenfeld and Glazunov said that I absolutely had to go to him. They, as well as

other members of the Belyayev Circle, were enormously impressed by him, and I can easily understand why. The qualities of Godowsky's playing were completely in harmony with the pianistic and artistic and interpretive ideals of the Circle.

Later on, my uncle told me that he himself had fallen in love with Godowsky the moment the pianist played the first chord of Beethoven's G major Concerto. Godowsky's perfection of tone, and his almost unique ability to orchestrate at the piano, immediately impressed everybody. For all these reasons, my parents were invariably advised that I should go "only to him." Actually, I was too young to study with a musician of such caliber, away from the atmosphere of a conservatory, but to dwell on this now would be pointless.

Russian musicians held Godowsky in very high regard, as the Polka which Rachmaninov dedicated to him clearly demonstrates. The Polka recreates the unique spirit of Godowsky, his manner of transcription, to such a degree that, when I was asked which Godowsky transcription I loved best, I jokingly answered, "the Rachmaninov Polka." To impress musicians of the caliber of Rachmaninov required above all a mentality of extraordinary refinement, which could be appreciated not only in compositions and arrangements, but also in performances, and as a pianist Godowsky was of more interest to Russian musicians than Hofmann, for example.

So I went to Godowsky and studied with him for a year. At that time I was living in Berlin with my sister, who was already taking lessons from him. As an exam my sister and I each gave two concerts, paid for by our father. We each gave a recital and a concerto performance with orchestra. I played Chopin's F minor Concerto and the Strauss Burlesque, while my sister played Beethoven's Concerto No.1 and the Franck Symphonic Variations. Somebody criticized us, but the newspaper reviews were quite favorable.

I should now say something about the artistic principles that underpinned Godowsky's method of teaching. He used to repeat: "The best musician of all is he who reproduces the text of the composer in the most clear and precise way". If you had seen the scores which he himself studied, and which he occasionally showed to his students, you would have noticed that every page was literally filled with annotations. As an example, in his score of Beethoven's G major Concerto, you could see "hair pins" and signs in all colors, because everything had been analyzed and thought about to the Nth degree — such was his way of working.

How did I feel about the way he taught us? I had great respect for his teaching but I sometimes disagreed with his ideas. I came to feel that basically a composer writes down all that is necessary, and that therefore there is no need to wallpaper a score with "logicising", in Godowsky's manner.

Godowsky's technical command was astonishing and unique in its way, but his compositions speak to his best qualities. His most important works are his elaborations of the Etudes of Chopin. In order to write something like the Badinage (the combination of the Op. 10 No.5 Etude with Op. 25 No.9) one must be a musician of diabolical ability and great seriousness. I have never been a great virtuoso and have worked on his elaborations of Chopin only with difficulty: Perhaps this explains my initial hesitation to take lessons from him. I think Ginzburg would have been better equipped to study with Godowsky: I had other desires at that time, even though I esteemed and deeply loved the Master, who was also a wonderful human being.

As I said, I studied with Godowsky for a year, taking in all eight to ten lessons. Then I stopped, but a few years later, in 1912, I entered his Meisterschule in Vienna. Later still, I went back to him, always very interested in his lessons. During the period when I studied with Godowsky in Vienna, other Russian pianists were working with him. Issay Dobrowen came before me. He was famous for having played for Lenin, who was a fan of Beethoven. Another pianist who worked with Godowsky was Emil Wei, who performed with Heifetz and Zimbalist and whose touch resembled that of Hofmann.

The lessons were carried out in this way There were eight or nine participants and around twenty auditors, who had to submit to an examination even though they never played during a lesson. The auditors sat with scores and wrote down (sometimes inaccurately) all that Godowsky said. There were two pianos in the classroom. While a student played, Godowsky was always beside the piano, staring at the score, even though he knew it by heart. He made his observations with his eyes fixed on the page. The observations would often come down to this. He would want a particular line emphasized, or a rest made longer or shorter. Once I did not do what he asked and he said to me: "You have your own individuality and I respect it." Most of his observations related to tone quality.

During the lessons, Godowsky was always very calm. He never raised his voice or lost his temper, but if a student failed to listen in the proper way to the music he was performing, Godowsky could devastate him with an ironic comment. He was very witty, but was able to say quite unpleasant things. A third too many in a Chopin Etude, or an added note in a chord, could drive him mad.

Godowsky had a very refined and picturesque way of hearing things. He loved it when a musical performance resembled a landscape (a bell tower, a small house), and when he spoke about music he did so as if he had the figurative arts in mind. This visual element was always very evident in his playing. One may disagree with Godowsky's interpretations, but it must be admitted that whatever he did was really unique.

Pachmann was a pianist with a velvety tone who would usually play miniatures rather than large works. I have been told that, after hearing Godowsky play some of his own Waltzes, Pachmann decided to learn one of these, but a week later he returned the score, saying that it was too complicated. Some of Godowsky's elaborations of Chopin Etudes are truly brilliant, and can give listeners and performers great pleasure. Even though many would consider it a thankless task, working on them is a truly valuable way to better appreciate the outermost limits of modern virtuoso piano technique. No pianist has the right to ignore them.

Godowsky's modesty was well known, even if he could be witty at the expense of others. Once, when we met in Moscow, he said: "Perhaps I suffer from graphomania. Perhaps that is why I write so much." He had brought me a number of his scores from America, including his Passacaglia on the theme of Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony. This is the most miraculous of all his original compositions and merits our serious attention.

I have listened to Godowsky's great Sonata many times. It took him a long time to compose, and it is a long work — lasting approximately 45 minutes. Unfortunately the Sonata usually was played by the worst students, who would program it to impress their teacher. The work has a rather perplexing and childlike aspect: passages in the style of Beethoven and Chopin and others, but when Godowsky himself performed it, one could not help but admire his compositional technique.

As a pedagogue, Godowsky was very interesting. He established and maintained close personal relationships with his students, but never expected them to attain his degree of technical command. He would be pleased if a student could give a work a compelling formal shape, while reading though it, even if technical deficiencies were at the same time apparent. On one occasion Godowsky told me about his studies, as a fourteen-year-old, with Saint-Saëns. He said Saint-Saëns would sit in a dressing gown, reading *Le Figaro*. Every now and then, without looking up, he would say: "My boy, what you are doing is delicious." The lessons never amounted to more than that.

Young pianists hoped to learn the secrets of piano technique from Godowsky, but Godowsky never said a word about such matters (and I must confess that in some ways I have inherited his reticence). He had an assistant in Vienna, a very cold Englishman, who would teach us the same way that we in Russia teach our worst students; he used a kind of weight school. In order to understand what Godowsky was really interested in, it is sufficient to look at his compositions.

During a lesson, he would stress the listening aspect of performing. He would undertake an auditory analysis of a performance and would correct deficiencies primarily in this area. I do not remember anything specific that he said about technique. He invited us to study 72 variants of the Op. 10 No.1 Etude of Chopin, but I am sure that he himself never practiced scales. In him, as in every great pianist, there are elements which are difficult to put in words, and even if he played in a free and assured way, there were moments when he showed effort. In a passage from Grieg, for example, he always churned his tongue.

I do not know if you are interested in hearing what I played for him. I played two Sonatas of Chopin, the Burlesque of Strauss, and three Ballades of Chopin (not No.1). At my first lesson I played a large number of delightful transcriptions — ten organ chorales of Bach transcribed by Busoni, and the fugues of Bach transcribed by Liszt. (At that time I loved to play transcriptions; later on I played them less often.)

Please forgive my immodesty if I say that Godowsky held me in high regard as a musician, and addressed me with attention and tenderness. When an interesting thought occurred to him, he often spoke to me about it, even if other more virtuosic pianists were present. As I have already said, Godowsky was mainly attracted to logic and the rigorous analysis of musical texts, and he may have felt that I had similar interests.

Let me say something about Godowsky's public performances. As soon as my sister and I arrived in Berlin, we went to hear him in concert. He played Bach (fugues from Book One of the Well-Tempered Clavier) and Beethoven's E minor Sonata, op. 109, on the first half of the concert; on the second half he played the Liszt B minor Sonata. We knew the opinion that great pianists had of Godowsky, but on that occasion we were a bit disappointed, perhaps because it was his first concert of the season. The day after the concert, at a lesson, Godowsky told us he played badly. Subsequent concerts were absolutely fantastic, and most of all I remember a truly exceptional Schumann Carnival.

It wasn't in Godowsky's nature to make an overwhelming impression in the concert hall. After a performance by Busoni, we often did not know if it had been fire or ice — such was his greatness. With Godowsky, one would not feel a similar impact. When Busoni played, you could forget that he was playing a piano, because he could make a piano sound like a real orchestra. With Godowsky, you would never forget it was the piano you were hearing. Sometimes, when Busoni played, the instrument did not even sound like an orchestra, but like something coming from another world. In his final years, he resorted to very little forte,

and he even played Liszt's Dante Sonata in a very dynamically restrained way, except for the last chord. Some of those who heard Busoni in his early Moscow years said that his tone wasn't especially interesting, but I, on the contrary, found it to be astonishing. His was a super-piano. Once he played Liszt's Mazeppa Etude and we actually became frightened — because it sounded so different from a piano. In the Polonaise-Fantasy, after the introduction, one could hear a real trumpet.

With Godowsky, on the other hand, there was always the piano — used in a wonderful way, in all its purity. In order to speak about Godowsky's pianistic virtues, one must keep in mind his legato, which was truly unique. A better legato could not be imagined. Listening to Godowsky was always very interesting, but it was even more interesting to watch him play. Watching his hands in motion was fascinating. No movement was superfluous, and it was beautiful to see what he could accomplish with small hands. (I still remember a magnificent performance of a Brahms Concerto.) Godowsky disliked a percussive piano sound, and he never resorted to a forte even though he had great power in reserve. I have purposely spoken of Busoni because I often thought of him while I was studying with Godowsky.

There was a time when I was passionate about transcriptions — the art of which Busoni takes to extraordinary heights. I would spend hours with Godowsky, listening to him, and watching him play his Waltzes and Studies. It was wonderful to see how he could surmount great difficulties with surprising economy. His playing was itself a work of art, and it reminded me of a goldsmith's craft. Some of Benvenuto Cellini's gold work resembles Godowsky in its refinement. If Rubinstein played wrong notes, it was never a problem. With Godowsky everything was so perfect that even four or five wrong notes would stand out. His style was pure and pianistic, with no hint of ultra-pianistic sonority. Busoni as a pianist was of wider scope.

Godowsky had many remarkable talents. For example, he could learn things very quickly. Two hours after buying his first car he could already drive it, and he learned to play the organ in four hours.

Leopold Godowsky was a good, intelligent, and just man. This is what I remember of him as a person.