

THE MUSICAL FORUM

The International Godowsky Society

By Dr. Clarence Adler

AS this year marks the fifteenth anniversary of the passing of Leopold Godowsky in New York, on Nov. 21, 1938, it is timely and fitting to recall some facts about this founder of a pianistic school of composition and performance. And particularly how there came to be organized a remarkable group known as the International Godowsky Society, composed of admirers, former associates and pupils of that piano master.

Godowsky made the serious mistake of being born too soon. It will take at least another 25 years of progress and development in the art of pianism before he will be sufficiently appreciated. At least, that is the belief of a number of his disciples.

In the history of music, few composers have inspired such complete devotion at the hands of one individual as Godowsky did in the case of the late Paul Howard, of Australia. Their names are linked together by an unbreakable chain. Wagner had his Liszt, to be sure, but doubts and pettiness sometimes put a sour coating on their friendship. This was not so in the case of Godowsky and Howard.

I never had the privilege of meeting Paul Howard, and alas never shall have, for he departed this life on March 8 last. Nevertheless, we corresponded for a quarter of a century, and I feel that we knew one another very well.

He was born in London on April 8, 1875; when he was 13 the family settled in Australia. He lived in Adelaide, was an amateur pianist—but “amateur” only in the sense that he never took money for his services. This was not necessary, because he had enough wealth of his own; he was the head of a large and important correspondence school in this country. Howard must have been an excellent musician and a splendid pianist, to judge from the many programs he gave publicly—some 65 in all, in which a number rarely was repeated, a feat for any pianist.

He was a direct descendant of John Field, the great Irish composer, who created the musical nocturne, and from whom Chopin gleaned so much inspiration. Like Field, Howard was a musical explorer—a trait rare among many professional musicians today. His business activities kept him at his desk from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon. On his estate he had a subterranean studio where he often practised and played until the early morning hours.

Some years ago when Artur Rubinstein was touring Australia, he was entertained at Howard's home. After a collation of choice food, the host sat down at the piano and played thirty compositions of Godowsky's from memory. Among these were such important works as the Sonata, the Java Suite, Paraphrases of Chopin Etudes, Walzer Masken, the Triakontameron, his Contrapuntal Metamorphosis of Strauss Waltzes, and many others, all to the amazement of his guest.

About a year later, Rubinstein while dining with Godowsky told him about Howard and his almost fanatical love of his music. Delighted, Godowsky wrote to his admirer, and thus began a lively and stimulating correspondence on all sorts of subjects—art, literature, philosophy,

religion, as well as the particular topic of his music. I possess a number of these letters, which I cherish greatly, as Godowsky, who was my teacher, told me of the remarkable man in the Antipodes. I also wrote to him, and we became warm epistolary friends.

AS time went on, Howard became more and more devoted to the Godowsky cause, and kept studying his music until he knew from memory about 300 of his compositions. He taught his children to play the piano, and together with them toured Australia, playing all of the master's Miniatures for four hands.

He decided that the world should share his beliefs, and he founded what is now known as the International Godowsky Society. The story of its origin has a good deal of the romantic about it. Nothing could be simpler than to achieve membership, as there are no fees or business transactions of any sort. All Howard asked was that the members should pledge themselves to play some of Godowsky's music and encourage others to do so, either on the concert platform or in the home. If one was a teacher, one was expected to use some of the works for his pupils.



The astonishing result was that one man who had never met his idol was the means of leading pianists the world over to study and, if able, to perform the colossally difficult works of a keyboard giant. The membership of this Society is very large, covering many countries where there is an interest in things cultural. It includes some of the most noted names in music, not alone of the piano but other fields.

The means Howard used to promote interest in Godowsky and his works included the issuance of booklets and various documents relating to his music, three or four times a year, to the many hundred members of the Society. He paid all the expenses from his own purse. Often it was suggested that he assess some small dues from each member to cover this cost but he would not hear of it. Over a period of years he spent many thousands of pounds on his project.

The material contains writings which one could not receive from any other source, Godowsky's artistic aims, his philosophy of life, his ideals are among the matters discussed. One finds there the tributes paid to Godowsky by other great figures in music. As far back as 1934, the late Serge Rachmaninoff wrote that “Godowsky is the only musician of his age who has given a lasting, a real contribution to the development of piano music.” And Josef Hofmann once remarked, “Godowsky is the master of us all.”

THE literary installments which Howard sent to members of the Godowsky Society are called After-Midnight Thoughts. The reason for the title is obvious: he did all of his writing, practising and thinking about the composer after the witching hour.

In one of the installments written during 1951, he included facsimiles of some of his master's letters to him. He also reproduced excerpts from the same source which were sent him by other members. Here, for example, are some passages written by Godowsky just 16 days before his passing—under date of Nov. 5, 1938—to Leonard Lieblich, the late editor of Musical Courier, who was a Godowsky pupil in Berlin some years previously and a life-long friend of the composer-pianist:

“Our friend Howard persists in making me feel more and more conscious of the unworthiness of his victim of adulation. Not because I am so modest, but owing to my theory that no human being *can* be great. We can only be *less* insignificant.”

“I am in constant gloom, and my despair is growing daily, due to the unprecedented, barbaric happenings all over our little, wobbly planet, happenings which make the Dark Ages seem like expressions of transcendental liberalism.”

“And what is the future of our beloved music? Is the source of musical inspiration completely exhausted? Is all culture going to be with a ‘K?’ Where is Fate driving us? Is this the Dusk of the Earth? Is the annihilation of all human achievements ahead of us? . . . When we allow our thoughts to deepen, life becomes unbearable. . . .”

On Feb. 3, 1938, Godowsky remarked to Howard: “My desire was to write you long ago and frequently, but my state of health and my very dark and gloomy disposition kept me from doing so. I lack vitality, initiative. . . . I feel that I do not fit in this contemporary world. And I would willingly leave it. . . .”

“You have been such an enthusiastic devotee and promoter of my works that the dedication [Godowsky had inscribed a work of his to Howard] is but a small expression of my gratitude to you. . . . I had and still have plans and ideas for new compositions, and would like much to conclude some series I have got to complete (Renaissance, Miniatures and some other serial works), but I feel so discouraged and apathetic!”

In a letter dated Dec. 10, 1933, to Howard, Godowsky had explained: “My compositions have such a personal idiom, involved inner voices, complicated contrapuntal and polyrhythmic devices, sonorities of a new kind, that the *hoi polloi* of pianists keep away from them. They are too indolent mentally and physically to make the supreme effort. It was not my intention to be involved. The technical side of music, though it interests me, is not the one to attract me at the expense of the emotional. I am convinced that emotion is the prime requisite of art, it must be tempered by knowledge and intelligence. I have never written a note that I did not feel. My music is myself divulged through sound. . . .”

Thus wrote Godowsky, who certainly combined many of the traits of the prophet, the idealist and even of the fanatic. In any case, this year, marking his fifteenth death anniversary should bring again to musical programs many of the works of a unique personality. It is my firm belief that the relationship of Godowsky and Paul Howard was one of the choice ones of musical history, and one hopes that these two souls have found lasting peace and happiness in the realms where the eternal music is to be heard.