

I Believe...
Mme. Zlata Fay: A Loving Memory
By Rhett DeVelay
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I Believe...Madam Zlata Fay was the most important person that affected my progression from ignoramus to professional musician. This Tribute to her is for the patience, expertise and generosity she showed me over many years.

Mme. Zlata Fay was my “musical mother”. I met her in 1958 when I was four years old and had gone to meet her when my ten-year-old sister started piano lessons with Mme. Fay. For most teachers I was a bit too young to start lessons (too fidgety, no attention span) but when Mme. Fay asked me to try a simple piano exercise I quietly emulated her with little difficulty. She changed her mind and said she would give me 15-minute lessons before my sister had hers, which I started that day. The 15-minute lessons quickly turned into half-hour lessons and within a year were 45-minute lessons. As my lessons grew longer, my sister’s grew shorter, much to her pleasure.

Within six years I was seeing Mme. Fay for two-hour lessons twice a week and studying two to three hours a day. My sister had long stopped taking lessons and years later bitterly regretted it. Mme. Fay once described her playing as wild horses stampeding across the keyboard: Perhaps not a nice thing to say, but funny (and true).

While my sister was having her lessons, being a young child, I would meander through Mme. Fay’s two-story house and snoop though her things. In retrospect this was beyond being a rude thing to do but boy, was it fun. I wasn’t interested in personal papers on her desk, but I did like looking in her drawers and closets and to check out what knick-knacks she had on her den shelves. The ultimate in daring was to peek into her bedroom that resembled the cell of a nun: Sparse and pristine.

I was by no means a prodigy and had to study very hard for any signs of improvement. Still do. As much as I loved playing I also enjoyed making up melodies. This did not please Mme. Fay at all since she and my mother were determined to mold me into a concert pianist. However, they didn’t count on a couple of things: I was the poster-boy for the definition of stage-fright and, more importantly, I didn’t really want to be a concert pianist since I knew my talent and technique just weren’t strong enough to make it in that frighteningly competitive World. I am many things but competitive is not one of them. In fact, competition in the Arts is anathema to me.

I remember distinctly a humorous incident between Mme. Fay and me during my early teens. There was a TV commercial at the time promoting an aspirin product by using a catch phrase that became very popular. One day, while at my lesson, she became annoyed with me for making a silly error over and over again and asked me, in a testy tone, “What’s wrong with you, today?” Just as annoyed at her for being so obtuse to my feelings I responded in a testy manner, “I have an Excedrin headache” whereas she promptly threw her pencil at the wall in anger and frustration and told me to go home. I had to slink downstairs to my mother waiting outside in the car and tell her what I had done. Naturally, I was marched back into Mme. Fay’s house, apologized and my lesson continued.

We never really knew very much about her except that she was Yugoslavian and Jewish because of a Star of David she always wore, although she never talked politics or

religion. And, talking about sex was out of the question. But, even that was debunked many years later when I found out she had a son. I don't know how that happened because I just couldn't see her doing the "big nasty", but in a moment of melancholy she mentioned that she missed her son. I never pursued it since it would have been in bad taste, as opposed to searching through her belongings when I was much younger.

As a child I thought she was an old and towering figure. In actuality she was about five feet tall and was 41 years old when I first encountered her in 1958. She had short, unruly and graying black hair, wore bifocals, and spoke five languages fluently: Yugoslavian, French, German, Italian and English. However, those were the languages I heard her speak but I later learned she also spoke Russian and Hungarian as well. Since my mother was French and we spoke it at home, my lessons were in French which is another reason why I called her Madam and not Mrs. (There's a rule of thumb in France that a woman whose marital status is unknown is always called Mademoiselle until a certain age usually until about 40, when she is then called Madam regardless of whether or not she's married.)

I never knew the names of the keyboard notes in English until I joined choir in middle school. Mme. Fay didn't have to remind me that French, at the time, was the universal language. Heaven knows I made her say things she probably never said to any other student. I remember one long phrase she used to spit at me when I was being...difficult. I'm writing it the way I heard it but no one I've spoken to has any clue if this is a real language or not. I'd be in a pissy mood and she would sit there fuming and erupt, "Asta, basta, chista, chasta, gubilasta!" This was not a good thing because I'd start giggling and depending on her mood she would either start laughing or would scowl at me. Needless to say we loved each other very much, as teacher and pupil. Knowing this, what happened years later was horrible.

I was fifteen years old, in 1969, when Mme. Fay and my mother had a huge falling out. I was starting to compose piano music and whenever I would play her one of my new pieces Mme. Fay would denigrate it. Harshly. My mother, being the ultimate in French mother hen's, told her in no uncertain terms that this was not acceptable behavior. Mme. Fay must have been in a really bad mood and told her to take her "neurotic" son (yes, she called me neurotic) to some other teacher. I don't think she thought my mother would do it, but anyone who knew her well should have known not to "dare" her. So, I was reluctantly yanked away from my "musical mother" after eleven years and had to find another teacher.

To say that I was crushed is an understatement. We next went to a well-known teacher, whose name escapes me, but after studying with him for two months I realized he was more interested in hearing himself speak than in actually teaching. So, after having made absolutely "zip" progress I was looking for another instructor.

Although this second quick-change led me to a great teacher, Sergei Tarnowsky, whom I will talk about in a future article, my life with Mme. Fay was not over.

In 1983, at the age of 29, I decided to contact Mme. Fay and see if she would instruct me, again. I hadn't taken piano lessons from anyone since 1972 and although I could still play it was very sloppy and shaky since I was composing more and practicing less. I called with great trepidation since I hadn't spoken to her since the great schism of '69.

Amazingly she was at the same address and had the same phone number. When I told her who it was she said, "Of course I remember you, Rhetti". This was a good sign since

she would call me that whenever I'd done something to please her. By this time she was 76 years old. I asked if she would give me lessons again and she readily agreed. We made an appointment and was duly instructed what music to bring with me. We never discussed the awful break years before. I studied with her for two more years and my technique quickly took shape and I loved my lessons in a way I hadn't as a child. I was now doing this because I wanted to and I studied my butt off working four to six hours a day practicing well into the night since I was also working a full-time job.

It was at this time while again studying with Mme. Fay that I found out something amazing. The great classical pianist and composer Frederick Chopin had a French student named Alfred Cortot who not only composed but also created many piano exercises and taught piano. He was very famous, in his day, and his keyboard exercises are still used by serious piano students. As a young woman in Paris, Mme. Fay studied with Cortot during the 1930's. Consequently, there are two degrees of separation between me and Chopin: One of my favorite composers to perform. It boggled my mind, and still does.

I continued studying with Mme. Fay until 1985 when I had to stop due to finances. Although I didn't really socialize with her, we went to the movies, once, to see *Amadeus* and she fell asleep. The last time I spoke to her she had fallen down and broken both her wrists, which is a nightmare for a pianist. When I went to visit her while she was convalescing I gave her a piano composition specifically written for and dedicated to her. She never told me whether she liked it or not and I didn't have the temerity to ask. Soon after she suffered a stroke and her doctor wouldn't allow anyone to see her. Our last phone conversation was in mid-1989 when she was a bit delirious from the medication and she said, "Rhetti, you're a famous composer, now." I wasn't then, nor am I now, but I didn't want to destroy her generous illusion and replied, "Yes." I told her I loved her and would try to come see her when the doctor allowed and hung up. I tried calling a couple of days later and was told she was in a coma. She died a few weeks later. To this day and moment, I miss her and think of her often.

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