

December 29th, 2005

Ralphination: A Short Tribute to Ralph Kirkpatrick (1912 – 1984)

I remember the year of Ralph's passing because it was also the year I lost my other "foster grandfather," an amazing, elderly Scotsman named Thomas Robertson, who briefly owned the guitar store where I had my first decent guitar instruction – in fact my only ever regular guitar instruction of any significance. More on the wonderful and incorrigibly independently-minded Robertson at a later date. Now to the matter of Ralph Kirkpatrick, another one who as he himself put it "Must have been exposed to Emerson's Essay on Self Reliance much too early!"

Ralph was my musical mentor during my years as a student at Yale in the middle 1970's, but more importantly he was also one of the most important musicians of the entire 20th century, one whose life and work still have powerful and invigorating messages for all of us today.

No student of music at Yale in my era could be unaware of the great eminence that was Ralph Kirkpatrick, world famous harpsichordist, first cataloguer of the complete Sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti, author of a universally lauded monograph on Scarlatti, editor of countless authentic editions of early music, and author of numerous scholarly articles. Almost single-handedly Ralph had pored through all the sources and identified, ordered and catalogued all the then known 550+ binary -form sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti. Ralph's last name initial K now replaced the largely irrelevant Longo or L numbers previously affixed to Scarlatti's sonatas. This K was for Kirkpatrick, not the Koechel of Mozart's catalogue. Ralph's numerous recordings for DGG were in all the record stores, particularly the complete Bach, *Wohl Tempiertes Clavier*.

Ralph was rumored to be frightening to play for. People spoke of him with a kind of hushed awe. Yet, as he was also a fellow of my residential college, Jonathan Edwards, he occasionally graced us with free solo recitals in the same Great Hall (our dining area, but actually possessed of a very decent acoustic) where I gave a number of my own little recitals during my undergraduate years.

Finally in February of 1974, midway through my sophomore year at Yale, through the good offices of Phillip Nelson, then Dean of the Yale School of Music, it was arranged for me to play for Ralph. Having walked across half of the Yale campus on a blustery winter day in February of 1974 with my extremely heavy traveling guitar case, I reached Ralph's office in the still decrepit Stoeckal Hall, then seat of the Yale School of Music. Climbing up creaking stair cases I arrived at Ralph's domain in the inner sanctum.

My first impression was that he was much more massive than he seemed in the DGG cover photos. There he was invariably pictured seated at the harpsichord surrounded by antiques with his long, sculpted, tapered fingers poised in frozen ballet over the harpsichord keyboards about to transfer messages from the Great Beyond to the rest of us mortals. By the time I met him, later in life, Ralph resembled more and more the figure of George Washington carved into Mt. Rushmore, his hair worn long, despite the slightly receding hairline, still a great white lion's mane framing a face with all the power and wisdom of the years written on it in heroic dimensions.

I sat down to play for this imposing presence, but first there was a whole verbal minefield to be negotiated. We immediately engaged in the antler testing that was part of any pedagogical encounter with Ralph. Finally, having first withstood this intellectual artillery barrage, I played my Bach Suite for him (*BWV 995*) and later my transcriptions of some Scarlatti Sonatas, the latter experiment pronounced "fascinating." Ralph's famous monumental one volume biography of Scarlatti was one of the first to call attention – in passages of poetic prose! – to the relation of the Spanish guitar to Scarlatti's music. Perhaps his positive reaction (I didn't yet realize what a compliment such a one word reaction from Ralph actually was!) owed something to my transcriptions being a partial confirmation of some of his own hypotheses offered in the book.

After the Scarlatti he said, "Now you've got what you came for," a sentence recalling the tendency of the musical world to pigeon-hole him as merely the "re-discoverer" of Scarlatti. Even the celebrated virtuoso pianist, Vladimir Horowitz, who certainly suffered from no lack of self-confidence, had famously sought Ralph out before making his own spectacularly successful all -Scarlatti LP!

It was not until some months after this first encounter that I dared to try to have regular lessons with Ralph, a decision that was to affect the rest of my life in music in the most profound way. Indeed, Ralph became a kind of second grandfather to me, or a sometimes severe "Dutch uncle" as he termed it.

The sessions derived a unique intensity from the fact that Ralph was losing his sight. I would sit across from him in the study in his house out in Guilford, Connecticut, a house built in part with his own hands and perched back from the edge of a cliff looking down into some of the world's most beautiful and wild seascape. As the sun set slowly through the large picture window behind him, our sessions continued into the early evening hours. Ralph sat behind his huge and atypical desk, itself a 4- inch thick, curving slab, the entire expanse of some ancient, monstrously huge tree trunk from prehistory,

Once Ralph asked me to check his progress in reading Braille as his fingers traced the words and his melodious voice recited as if from the Great Beyond Shakespeare's *Sonnet, #73*:

*"That time of year thou may'st in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang...
In me thou seest the glowing of such fire,"*

(How powerfully I remember him pronouncing the word "fire"!)

*"That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by..."*

By experiences such as this highlights of the thousand years of Western culture with which Ralph was

intimately familiar entered into the heart and soul of a young man, to remain there forever.

But it's important to state that studying with Ralph was not some sort of unstructured, abstract cloud gazing! No! It was very direct, very tough, very nuts and bolts. We demystified complex, musical structures, reducing them to their simplest components like a couple of chemists working in the lab. Then we put these structures back together little by little, which, to borrow a metaphor from physics, was sort of like projecting the birth of multiple universes. This never-routine process involved not just discerning intellectually the fundamental structure beneath the elaborate surface ornamentation of the great Baroque masterpieces, but even walking and singing bass rhythms while the guitar rested in its case.

For example, Ralph once had me walk and sing the four bar, fundamental bass of the famous Bach *Ciaccona for solo violin from the Partita in D minor, BWV 1004*, for 40 minutes straight! My footsteps were to be proportionate to the bass intervals: a short step for a minor second, a larger one for a major third etc. The distance between scale degrees was to be proportionate to my physical steps when walking the bass line. Above all I was never to lose balance as I choreographed the structural pillars of a 15 minute long masterpiece. I was to correlate physical movement with an intact, intellectual conception of the entire shape of the line. The line was to remain convex, never to collapse into the concave or meandering.

By the time of this particular lesson Ralph was completely blind, so he was just relying on his instinct to tell if I had indeed made the connection between intellect and solar plexus that was the basis of all his musical thought and instruction. It is a testament to his efficacy as a teacher that I am still learning from this and other lessons he gave me almost 30 years after the fact.

From the time of that first encounter in Stoeckal Hall until his death ten years later, I was never long out of touch with Ralph. His insistence on the highest and most pure standards of musical aspiration, his utter indifference to the "cry of the madding crowd," to the callow temptations of the "music business" remained a North Star by which I tried to navigate the course of a career in music. Although it is often hard to find it amidst the ecological devastation of the current musical ecosystem, I try still to sail by Ralph's pure and beckoning light. And in the many moments of soul-searching doubt that necessarily assail anyone trying to live a decent and upright existence in- or outside-of the musical realm, I often pray that I haven't gone too far off the noble course he charted so socratically on those many magical evenings long ago.