

FACULTY OBITUARIES

Roman Totenberg Dies at 101

Violinist, beloved CFA professor, classical music legend

By Susan Seligson

JUST DAYS BEFORE his death on May 8, 101-year-old Roman Totenberg lay in bed at his Newton, Mass., home, listening to a student play the Brahms violin concerto. “Slow down,” he told her, according to a blog entry by S. I. Rosenbaum on the *Boston Phoenix* website. Suffering kidney failure, his voice just a whisper, the famed violinist spent his final hours doing what he loved most: teaching.

Born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1911, Totenberg, a College of Fine Arts School of Music professor emeritus, had been a constant and inspiring presence in classical music over the past century, having worked closely with many well-known composers, including Samuel Barber, Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, Paul Hindemith, and Darius Milhaud, and musicians and conductors, among them Fritz Kreisler, Arthur Rubinstein, Leopold Stokowski, and Pierre Monteux. Totenberg was featured on hundreds of recordings, had appeared with most of the renowned orchestras of the world, and had performed in recital at Carnegie Hall, the White House, the Library of Congress, and Queen Elizabeth Hall in London.

The child prodigy, whose playing helped feed his family in war-torn Russia, made his debut with the Warsaw Philharmonic at age 11 and went on to win the Wieniawski Medal of Poland, the Ysaye Medal of Belgium, and the Mendelssohn Prize (Berlin Academy).

Totenberg, who joined the BU faculty in 1961, began his career at the University teaching violin and later chaired the string department. Even after leaving his full-time post 50 years later, he never stopped teaching.

“There’s a great satisfaction in teaching,” Totenberg said last year.



CFA Professor Emeritus Roman Totenberg (left) and violin student Daniel Han (CFA’98,’00,’02).

“You learn a lot more than the students do.”

He received BU’s Metcalf Cup and Prize, the University’s top teaching honor, in 1996, and was named Artist Teacher of the Year in 1981 by the American String Teachers Association.

“A survivor of two world wars, Roman Totenberg offered the world hope and love through his extraordinary music-making,” says Benjamín Juárez, dean of the College of Fine Arts. Juárez says that Totenberg was more than a mere virtuoso: “He was a true global citizen who bridged the centuries with his artistry and teachings.”

Totenberg formed lifelong relationships with his students, ushering many into stellar performing careers of their own. Mira Wang (CFA’89,’92) was 16 when she met Totenberg in Poland, where the renowned violinist was judging a competition of young violinists. The girl from China was struck by the kindness of the virtuoso and soon wrote to ask if she could study with him in the United States. For the next six years, Totenberg was Wang’s teacher at CFA and beyond, and he welcomed the young musician into his home and family, where she became like another daughter. Wang and her husband, cellist Jan Vogler, were among those honoring Wang’s mentor and dear friend at a Boston Symphony Orchestra concert in April 2010.

In November that year, again at Symphony Hall, the College of Fine Arts celebrated Totenberg’s 100th

birthday with a concert by the Boston University Symphony Orchestra.

Totenberg attended the concert with family, friends, and former students, many of whom are among today’s leading concert artists, including Wang, Na Sun, a violinist with the New York Philharmonic, and Ikuko Mizuno (CFA’69), a Boston Symphony Orchestra violinist. Proceeds from the concert benefited the Roman and Melanie Totenberg String Scholarship Fund for outstanding young musicians. Melanie Shroder Totenberg, who died in 1996, was her husband’s business manager for half a century.

“I think that all three of us would say we were extraordinarily lucky to have him as our father,” says Jill Totenberg (CAS’69), one of their three daughters. “He was the most supportive, nonjudgmental, uncomplicated, loving parent anyone could hope for.”

In addition to Jill Totenberg, who heads the Totenberg Group, a New York-based communications and marketing firm and is a consultant to Kenneth Freeman, Allen Questrom Professor and Dean of the BU School of Management, Totenberg leaves daughters Nina Totenberg (COM’65, Hon.’11), longtime legal correspondent for National Public Radio, and Amy Totenberg, a U.S. District Court judge for the Northern District of Georgia.

Patrick L. Kennedy contributed to the reporting for this story.