

The Pianistic Legacy of Olga Samaroff: Her Contributions to the Musical World

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the study

This study examines the life and accomplishments of Olga Samaroff, one of the most famous and influential American musicians during the first half of the twentieth century, and discusses her contributions to music education and the musical world. Samaroff was an international concert pianist and a wife of the conductor Leopold Stokowski as well as a successful piano teacher and writer. This research begins with her biography, describes her pedagogical method and teaching philosophy, and then, discusses how her unique teaching method and high standards of musicianship influenced and contributed to culture and society in the U.S.

1.2 Significance of the study

To date, research concerning Olga Samaroff is limited even though she made distinguished contributions to the classical music scene. Samaroff is a legendary but almost forgotten pianist of the early 1900's who was overshadowed by Leopold Stokowski, her second husband as well as renowned conductor. Especially outside of the U.S., she is relatively unknown to most people and there is no publication available on Samaroff in Japan.

In general, traditional piano teaching method is that student should follow what teacher says and imitate his or her teachers' performance. Samaroff's teaching method and philosophy were completely opposite from the traditional one. There were two purposes of her piano teaching, musical independence and human development of piano students. Author believes that these purposes are extremely important principles for pianists, piano teachers, and piano students.

Since Samaroff had a great influence on the musical world not only in the U.S. but throughout the world, it is indispensable for pianists and teachers to know her life and career. Anyone who wishes to play or teach the piano will find this study helpful and significant to the teaching of music.

2. Biography

2.1 Life as a pioneer

Olga Samaroff Stokowski (1880-1948) was the first American woman to win entrance into piano class at the Paris Conservatoire Nationale de Musique (1895); the first American female pianist to make her concert debut at the Carnegie Hall (1905); the first American pianist to perform all thirty-two Beethoven sonatas in public (1920-21); the first woman to serve as music critic for a New York daily newspaper (1926-27); the first American-born member of the piano faculty at the Juilliard School (1924-48); and one of the first female pianists to make recordings (1908).¹ Her students include many prominent names from the musical

world of the last half of the twentieth century such as William Kapell, Joseph Battista, Rosalyn Tureck, Maurice Hinson, Alexis Weissenberg, and Eugene List.²

Samaroff strove for and gained musical success and reputation even though there were strong prejudices against both women and American concert performers. In 1928, in order to oppose the international prejudice, she founded the Schubert Memorial, a competition for young American performers, providing professional performance opportunities for them to get a hearing in the larger concert hall. She also realized that one of the great needs of America was to educate audiences. In 1933, she initiated and organized the Layman's Music Courses, an innovative and successful course for adult people that emphasized active listening. She authored a series of books in connection with these courses and lectured widely.

2.2 Early years

Olga Samaroff, whose birth name was Lucy Mary Olga Agnes Hickenlooper was born in San Antonio, Texas on August 8, 1880. Both her maternal grandmother, Lucy Palmer Loening Grünwald, who had also been a concert pianist in the United States and Europe, and her mother, Jane Loening Hickenlooper, were talented piano teachers. They recognized Samaroff's musical ability and gave her piano lessons as soon as she could reach the keyboard.³ Although her mother contributed to Samaroff's musical training, it was chiefly her grandmother who taught the early fundamental disciplines and technical mastery to her. Olga Samaroff wrote many years later:

I remember thinking . . . that she somehow made me feel ashamed when I played wrong notes. She not only corrected them, but she managed to make me feel it would have been much simpler to play the right ones in the first place. She was ahead of her time.⁴

With her grandmother, Samaroff moved to Paris in 1894 for her musical studies. After a year of study, she became a first American woman to win a scholarship to study at the Paris Conservatoire Nationale de Musique. There she studied piano with Elie M. Delaborde. She wrote memories of Delaborde:

He greeted me at my first lesson with the words: "You are an American, are you? Why do you try to play the piano? Americans are not meant to be musicians!" He then gruffly ordered me to play for him and while I did so he relentlessly beat time with his foot upon a little wooden footstool, muttering to himself a sort of running commentary on Americans and their lack of musical talent. That experience made an indelible impression on me. . .⁵

She also wrote:

As time went on, I became the favorite pupil in his class, but try as I would, I could never quite banish the memory of his ruthless reception of "L'Americaine."⁶

These impressions must have influenced Samaroff's views on piano teaching in later years.

After she graduated from the Paris Conservatoire Nationale de Musique, she went to Berlin with her grandmother in 1898. She studied piano with Ernst Jedliczka and Ernest Hutcheson. After a few years of music study in Berlin, in 1900, Samaroff married Boris Loutzsky, a Russian civil engineer from the Russian embassy in Berlin.⁷ They spent their time between St. Petersburg and Berlin, which were cultural centers in the world. For over three years she temporarily gave up her plans for a career as a pianist, but her interest in music continued:

Having abandoned all idea of a concert career, I had given free rein to my interest in other types of music.

I had explored chamber music and orchestral scores, made music with the few musicians I knew at that time, and spent a large part of my life in concert halls and opera houses. All this widened my musical horizons and proved to be very valuable when I became a musical critic and lecturer, but at the time my actual piano-playing suffered.⁸

2.3 Life as a pianist

In 1904, she divorced Boris Loutzsky and decided to pursue a concert career. She returned to the United States and changed her name from Hickenlooper to something more exotic. She chose "Olga Samaroff" and felt that it would be fashionable and good for her career to have a Russian sounding name.⁹

Samaroff made her professional debut in January 1905 with the New York Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Walter Damrosch at Carnegie Hall in New York. Her program for the concert consisted of Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1 in Eb Major, Schumann's Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 54, and some solo pieces by Tchaikovsky, Chopin, and Sgambati. Good reviews led to several private engagements, and in May she made her London debut.¹⁰ From 1906 her concert career flourished and she became internationally successful. In 1911, Samaroff married the conductor Leopold Stokowski and gave up performing. She wrote:

In 1911 I terminated my contract with Ellis and gave up the whole thing (as I thought permanently) in order to be married to Leopold Stokowski. . . . I was very much in love, and was quite willing to agree that it was too difficult to combine marriage and a career.¹¹

When she met Stokowski, he was unknown church music director. Stokowski's early career as a conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and of the Philadelphia Orchestra was managed almost entirely by Samaroff since she had powerful connections.¹² Although she spent the early years of her marriage to support her husband, she began to perform again in 1913 and became active as a performer after her divorce in 1923. Samaroff and Stokowski had one daughter, Sonya Maria Noel, who was born in 1921.

During the course of her concert career, Samaroff played with most of leading orchestras in the United States and also concertized in the major cities of Europe. She performed with many famous musicians such as violinist Fritz Kreisler, violinist Efraim Zimbalist, and Kniesel String Quartet, cellist Hans Kindler, and singer Geraldine Farrar.¹³ Her notable performance was her recital series of Ludwig von Beethoven's thirty-two piano sonatas in Philadelphia and New York, in 1920, years before Artur Schnabel considered such a project.¹⁴

In addition to her concert career, Samaroff became involved in other musical activities, making piano recordings and teaching piano. Her first experience in making records was with Welte Mignon Company in Germany. Later recordings were made with Victor Talking Machine Company in New Jersey.¹⁵ She recalled how her first recording were planned:

Very often a battle with the company on the choice of music would result in a sort of compromise. For instance, they would let me play a Rhapsody of Brahms if I would consent to record the Spring Song of Mendelssohn. I never agreed to anything below a certain artistic level, but I always chafed at wasting of the making of a record on an innocuous composition. The more I played that cheerful Spring Song, the more innocuous it seemed. The record I finally made of it is probably the coolest rendition it has ever had.¹⁶

Samaroff was forced to cancel all concert engagements when she hurt her arm in 1926. By the time she had recovered from her injury, she became more involved in the personal concerns of her pupils and less interested in performing. She wrote:

There was much else I wanted to do. I was deeply interested in writing a novel. It may or may not ever

see the light of day, but at the time I was deeply engrossed in it. Each year my little daughter needed more of my time and attention, and, in addition, my piano pupils were presenting a problem that had been causing me increasing anxiety. For all these reasons I decided not to resume public playing. I did not announce permanent retirement from the concert stage, nor did I give any farewell concerts. I simply retired.¹⁷

2.4 Life as a teacher

Samaroff held a teaching position at the Juilliard Graduate School from 1924 until her death in 1948. She was selected as the first American-born member of the piano faculty at the Juilliard School. She felt that she was even happier in teaching and working for the young artists than in her own public career.¹⁸ She possessed a combination of French, German, and Russian piano styles and technique; the French tradition of gracefulness, elegance, clarity and the German and Russian traditions of a phenomenal technique combined with passion and dramatic power. She always tried to establish herself as an independent musician who was free from any nationalistic traditions. Musical independence was the most important teaching philosophy when she began teaching at Juilliard School.¹⁹

In 1928, Samaroff accepted a teaching post and served as chair of the piano department of the Philadelphia Conservatory. Her weekly trip between New York and Philadelphia lasted another twenty years. Since the conservatory accepted beginners, amateurs, and talented musicians, the performance level of the students was lower than the Juilliard students, but there were many students who wanted to become music teachers. She had great interests in music education and training music teachers. She wrote:

One of my chief interests in teaching has always been the development of outstanding teachers. I also found splendid material for this type of work at the Philadelphia Conservatory.²⁰

She believed that America needed more well-trained music teachers and musicians throughout the country and encouraged some of her students to return to their hometowns to educate the public about music. For the next two decades (1928-48), she had become a powerful, demanding music teacher.

2.5 Her numerous public activities

In addition to her teaching, Samaroff was involved in numerous public activities related to music. From 1926 to 1928, while working as chief music critic for “The New York Evening Post,” she became a controversial figure in journalism.²¹ In 1928, Samaroff established the Schubert Memorial Foundation, the first competition only for Americans, which provided professional performance opportunities for music students. She also created Layman’s Music Courses which educated audiences in music study in 1932. She wrote:

I felt it would be more constructive to work at an increase in audiences rather than refuse education to gifted potential performers. Owing to this conviction, work on the Schubert Memorial project and Layman’s Music Course became inseparably bound up in my mind. They complemented each other.²²

She published four books to accompany the course: The Layman’s Music Book, The Magic World of Music, A Musical Manual, and The Listener’s Music Book, and her autobiography, An American Musician’s Story. She presented educational broadcasts on radio and television and wrote numerous magazine articles on musical topic.

During the Great Depression she helped organize the Musician’s Emergency Aid, and in 1935 she became one of the twenty-five musicians chosen to work for a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project, as a part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal.” Her various award included honorary doctor of

music degree from the University of Pennsylvania (1931) and the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music (1943). In 1944 President Roosevelt appointed her a member of the Advisory Committee on Music to the Department of State.²³ Olga Samaroff died in New York City on May 17, 1948.

3. Her pedagogical method and teaching philosophy

3.1 Musical independence

Samaroff had two major goals of her piano teaching: first, the goal of musical independence, the concept that each student must work out his or her individual approach on a composition, and second, the broader goal of human development for her students.²⁴ One of her students stated:

One of the big things was that she made you think for yourself. Discovery was a very important part of the educational process. She insisted on a tremendous amount of independent study . . . but she gave you hints and encouragement.²⁵

She believed that the first step for the musical independence was accuracy in musical performance. She described her student William Kapell's first piano lesson with her in 1936 at the age of fourteen:

He brought me his first assignment—a Beethoven Sonata—with a wild assortment of mistakes. Before he had played eight measures I decided not to correct them and I let him storm through the first movement without comment . . . Then I closed the book and told him that if he needed to be told an F-sharp was an F-sharp, and a quarter note a quarter note, he would have to seek another teacher.²⁶

Samaroff insisted that her students should find their own performance style, not imitate her playing. She did not perform for her students during their lessons, except for occasional demonstration to solve a technical problem, so that students were not able to imitate her playing. As a result, her students' performances were quite varied. She wrote:

I will not perform as an example, because I don't want you to imitate my interpretation. I want you to find your own, not through any coaching, but through teaching in generalities, broad concepts, knowing the significance of the composer and music, and exhausting the printed page.²⁷

She claimed that watching her former husband, Stokowski's rehearsal had given her a guide for teaching. She advised her students to study the score away from the piano, to mark it, sing it, and conduct it, as Stokowski had done.²⁸

3.2 Method of work

Samaroff summarized her "method of work"²⁹ which listed suggestions for practice in order to realize musical independence as follows:

1. Examine the score away from the piano.
2. Form musical and imaginative interpretative concept of the goal towards which you will work.
3. In order to save time, instead of reading through, take the first eight or twelve measures. Examine carefully for phrasing, type of touch, dynamics, accents, fingering, division of hands, and pedaling.
4. Repeat this section slowly at least twenty-five times, with all these things included, plus mental concentration.
5. Practice the entire piece in small sections in this manner: Every time you stumble, examine whether it was caused by a special technical difficulty or whether you slipped a cog in

concentration.

6. If you find a special difficulty within these passages, isolated it for even more intense work. Master the special difficulty before going back to practice the section as a whole.
7. NEVER LET REPETITION BECOME MECHANICAL. If you are tired, stop for fifteen minutes or so.
8. Every time you begin practicing any section, go over it for accuracy.
9. Remember that the object and inevitable result of practice is the establishment of habit of playing a certain thing in a certain way.
10. Do not establish the wrong habit.
11. Even though working slowly and carefully, keep in mind the elements of mood and feeling.
12. The playing of music on the piano is a very complex function, including as it does the spiritual, the intellectual, the emotional, the imaginative, and the physical powers of the player. This complexity must be practiced.
13. Budget time and work on schedule.
14. NEVER practice more than two hours at a time.

3.3 Human development

The second main goal of her piano teaching was to help her students become a well-rounded human being. Samaroff printed the following words in 1948:

The human being who develops his own highest possibilities is a success no matter what the ensuing circumstances of his life may be.³⁰

This word shows her overall purpose in teaching, which is the human development of her students. She also mentioned:

The world is full of 'slick' pianists. By that I mean the pianist who can play a great many notes at once, achieve great speed, read well at sight, and memorize a great many pieces. This is all praiseworthy and requires a great deal of hard work, but unfortunately one can do all these things without being an artist.³¹

She believed that one could not be musically mature while one was humanly immature. Samaroff did not work much with fingering and technique, but expected her students to work out every aspect of the score, including dynamic levels, tempo, and imaginative interpretation. When she taught piano to her students, she taught in broad musical concepts and placed piano music as part of a larger cultural experience.

Samaroff expected all her students to learn music from all periods and styles of the keyboard repertoire and concertos plus the orchestra parts.³² She felt that piano students should become well-rounded musicians. She mentioned:

Regard the mastering of your chosen instrument as only one step on the road of progress toward virtuosity, the next move being to take advantage of every opportunity offered to store away knowledge and keen appreciation of music in all forms of its expression, that is to say, music outside the pale of the particular branch in which you specialize. Such a plan, if systematically and thoroughly pursued, cannot help but unfold new thoughts, new ideas, and new views, by establishing a comprehensive understanding of the foundation on which the art as a whole is built, and at the same time broadening your artistic horizon.³³

Rosalyn Tureck, one of her students, who became a specialist in Bach later, said, "Madam kept me buried under a load of original manuscripts and made me plow my way out."³⁴ Samaroff also required her students to learn as widely as possible, especially in other arts, history, and literature. She believed that knowledge of

the related arts was also very important in order to be mature artists. She often sent her students to museums, art galleries, concerts, theatres, and cultural events to broaden their cultural experiences and stimulate their human development.³⁵

4. Her influence on the musical world

4.1 Contributions to the society

Samaroff's distinguished contributions to music education and the musical world are remembered by her students, many of whom are still actively performing and teaching today. After her death, her students established The Olga Samaroff Foundation to raise money for poor music students. In 1973, at the twenty-fifth anniversary of Samaroff's death, many of her students and friends dedicated a memorial piano studio at the old Juilliard School of Music. In their memorial letter to the *New York Times*, her students praised her with affection, respect, and gratitude:

. . . her lasting renown in all fields of musical endeavor, as a concert pianist, teacher, author, critic, and lecturer. . . Her greatness as a musician was surpassed only by her greatness as a human being.³⁶

As a piano teacher, Samaroff's goal was to help her students become independent musicians as well as well-rounded people. Subsequently, it was her students who have carried on her unique teaching method and high standards of musicianship in the classical music scene. She opened the musical door that had traditionally been closed to Americans and to women. She often encouraged her students who were not destined for a concert career to return to their hometown in order to teach, give concerts, and help to raise the musical standards where they were living. She tried to develop audiences of "active listeners" and founded The Layman's Music Courses.

She also had a great influence on the musical world in many ways. One of the examples was that Eugene Ormandy, the young conductor, obtained the position of a conductor of Philadelphia Orchestra for Stokowski's replacement thanks to Samaroff. Although she spent most of the time in New York after her divorce from Stokowski in 1923, she was still involved in the Philadelphia music circle, and wrote her recommendation to the orchestra.

4.2 Her most famous students and their accomplishment

Her most famous students such as William Kapell, Rosalyn Tureck, Alexis Weissenberg, Eugene List, Joseph Battista, and Maurice Hinson made their careers as specializing in contemporary music or the literature of a specific period.³⁷ They expressed high standards of musicianship which were inherited from Samaroff.

After winning the Philadelphia Orchestra's youth competition and the Naumburg Award, **William Kapell** (1922-1953) made his New York debut in 1941. His father was of Spanish-Russian Jewish ancestry and his mother of Polish descent. He appeared as a soloist with the major orchestras in the United States and Europe, specializing in modern music. When he was still 31 years old, he was killed in the crash of a commercial airliner in 1953.

Born of Russian *émigré* parents in Chicago in 1914, **Rosalyn Tureck** (1914-2003) made her public debut in Chicago at the age of nine. In concert career she dedicated herself mainly to the music of J.S. Bach. From 1960 she concentrated her activities on the keyboard, making appearances as a harpsichordist and a clavichordist as well as pianist, and she made a world tour in 1971. She held teaching posts at the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music, Juilliard School of Music, Mannes School of Music, Yale University, and University of California, San Diego. She published *An Introduction to the Performance of Bach*.

Bulgarian-born, to Jewish parents, **Alexis Weissenberg** (1929-2012) migrated to the U.S., enrolling at the Julliard School of Music as a pupil of Olga Samaroff in 1946. The following year, having won the Leventritt Competition, he made his debut with the Philadelphia Orchertra under the baton of George Szell playing Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No.3. He possessed spectacular technique following Russian School pianists although he never used it for the solo purpose of showing his virtuosity.

Eugene List (1918-1985) made his debut with Los Angels Philharmony Orchestra at the age of 12. He played the solo part in the American premier of Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No.1 with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1934. His repertoire was wide-ranging, from Mozart through the moderns, but was especially associated with the music of Louis Moreau Gottschalk, the 19th American composer. He was for some years the head of the piano faculty at the Eastman School of Music and also taught at New York University.

Joseph Battista (1918-1968) was born in Philadelphia in 1918 to Italian immigrants. His career was launched when he appeared as guest soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra under the baton of Eugene Ormandy. He won Guiomar Novaes Award and fulfilled a number of recording contracts. He held teaching posts at the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music, Juilliard School of Music, and Indiana University.

Maurice Hinson (1930-) is a distinguished authority on piano literature. The Music Teachers National Association has honored him with a Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to piano teaching. He is the author of many books, including *Guide to the Pianist's Repertoire*, and numerous articles related to piano music, and also the editor of piano music for Alfred, Boosey & Hawkes, and other publishers. He has taught, performed, lectured and given master classes worldwide, and his books and editions have become standards for piano teachers and students throughout the world.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the life and achievement of Olga Samaroff and how her teaching method and high standards of musicianship have influenced and contributed to the musical world. She believed that being artist was not only a question of what the musician could do, but what he or she was. The author also believes that two purposes of Samaroff's piano teaching, musical independence and human development of piano students, are extremely important principles for pianists and piano students around the world today because musician's personality is reflected in their performance. Pianists need to gain the confidence to express their own feelings and emotions on the piano.

Samaroff was a true artist who sought to express herself and to teach her students to express themselves. She encouraged her students to find their own way in order to create their music, thus many of her students became international-level pianists or piano teachers. In general, traditional piano teaching method is that student should follow what teacher says and imitate his or her teachers' performance which is opposite of Samaroff's idea. Since there are still many such piano teachers in Japan, many piano students and pianists have spectacular piano techniques, striving for perfection of the skills, without being an artist. That's why piano teachers need to know Samaroff's teaching method and philosophy to develop their pedagogical skills.

Samaroff never took a small view of her art. She always saw human life in the large and music in society. She always had a concern to educate the public about music and realized that the future of music in the world required more educated listeners. Her students have carried on her teaching method and philosophy, thus her achievements assured her continuing legacy. It is author's hope that this study will help anyone wishes to play or teach the piano to become a well-rounded musician and human being, and to foster next generations in order to build a better society.

- 1 Donna Staley Kline, *Olga Samaroff Stokowski: An American Virtuoso on the World Stage* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), Preface, xiv.
- 2 Donna Pucciani, "Olga Samaroff (1882-1948), American Musician and Educator" (Ph. D. diss., New York University, 1979), 50.
- 3 Kline, *Olga Samaroff Stokowski*, 15.
- 4 Olga Samaroff Stokowski, "Accuracy in Performance," *Music Journal* (January 1953): 46.
- 5 Pucciani, "Olga Samaroff," 14.
- 6 Ibid., 15.
- 7 Ibid., 17.
- 8 Pucciani, "Olga Samaroff," 18.
- 9 Kline, *Olga Samaroff Stokowski*, 40.
- 10 Ibid., 47.
- 11 Ibid., 81.
- 12 Ibid., 73-75.
- 13 Pucciani, "Olga Samaroff," 35-37.
- 14 Olga Samaroff, *The Art of Olga Samaroff* (OPAL, CD9860, 1996), Sound disk.
- 15 Pucciani, "Olga Samaroff," 43.
- 16 Olga Samaroff, CD.
- 17 Kline, *Olga Samaroff Stokowski*, 141.
- 18 Pucciani, "Olga Samaroff," 48.
- 19 Kline, *Olga Samaroff Stokowski*, 144.
- 20 Ibid., 160.
- 21 Pucciani, "Olga Samaroff," An abstract, 2.
- 22 Ibid., 163.
- 23 Ibid., An abstract, 2.
- 24 Ibid., 58.
- 25 Pucciani, "Olga Samaroff," 60.
- 26 Ibid., 62.
- 27 Kline, *Olga Samaroff Stokowski*, 6.
- 28 Pucciani, "Olga Samaroff," 54.
- 29 Ibid., 64.
- 30 Ibid., 78.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Kline, *Olga Samaroff Stokowski*, 6.
- 33 Pucciani, "Olga Samaroff," 70.
- 34 Ibid., 71.
- 35 Ibid., 73.
- 36 Kline, *Olga Samaroff Stokowski*, 227.
- 37 Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians, 8th ed., s. v. "Kapell, William," "Tureck, Rosalyn," "Weissenberg, Alexis," "List, Eugene," "Battista, Joseph."

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