

Unpublished article, January 2006

1. In Memoriam:

Constance Keene, a pianist trained in the Romantic tradition and one with a direct approach to music, teaching and to life itself.



Constance Keene, a pianist trained in the Romantic tradition and Professor at Manhattan School of Music for nearly 40 years, died in Manhattan on December 24, 2005, at the age of 84. Ms. Keene also adjudicated several international competitions and gave master classes in the U.S. and abroad throughout her career. She taught a multitude of students, some of whom have established international performing careers, such as Peter Nero and Anne-Marie McDermott, in addition to those who teach on many levels. Although her teaching took precedence over concertizing in recent years, Keene's performances and recordings achieved noteworthy success. Ms. Keene's first major accomplishment was winning the Naumberg Competition in 1943 at age 22. As a result, solo and orchestral appearances were arranged on several continents. She made her first professional tour in 1945 and one year later received additional accolades when she substituted for Vladimir Horowitz for an audience of nearly 4,000. In addition to her solo performances, she appeared with such prestigious orchestras as the New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Ms. Keene was born in Brooklyn, New York on February 9, 1921, and began to study the piano at age 4. She never attended a college or conservatory but when she was 13 she became a student of Abram Chasins, the noted pianist, composer, writer, musicologist and broadcaster. Chasins was also the protégé of Josef Hoffman, the great virtuoso. Keene and Chasins were married in 1949 and performed duo piano music together both in concert and on radio. Chasins died in 1987, and Keene later married Milton Keane, who survives her.

Keene performed and recorded a wide range of repertoire. In addition to the great romantic works, Keene performed and recorded many works by American composers such as those by Chasins, Griffes, and MacDowell, and toured with Benny Goodman and his orchestra playing Rhapsody in Blue. One of her most successful interpretations committed to disc were the complete Preludes by Rachmaninoff endorsed by Artur Schnabel, as he stated, "I cannot imagine anybody including Rachmaninoff himself, playing the preludes more beautifully. I was flabbergasted by the fantastic sweep, color, tone, and last but not least, the incredible technique."

Other recordings include keyboard works of J.S. Bach; A Romantic Tradition, that features works of Chopin, Liszt and various transcriptions; An American Tradition; the complete Chopin Preludes; works by MacDowell; sonatas by Weber and Hummel; a recording of variations featuring works of that genre from different eras; and one of sonatas from different historical periods. One of her personal favorites was the recording of Mendelssohn's piano music which included the Variations Sérieuses, Rondo Capriccioso, Fantasy in F# minor, some Songs without Words and the Three Etudes Op. 104. I began studying with Constance in 1979 while pursuing

my Master of Music degree and worked on these Etudes with her. One of her many invaluable suggestions was to practice the second etude in F-major with a very light almost inaudible thumb. This lightness aided in evenness and ease of execution. She also said there should be “spaces between the notes” to insure clear articulation.

Example:

Communicating the musical message, a long lyrical line, a solid technique, and careful preparation were the hallmarks of her teaching. She had little tolerance for careless study, misreadings or anything that suggested that the student did not have an idea about the music. Keene believed that students should know their recital repertoire by memory at “least a month before the actual concert.”

A glimpse into her approach was evident during a second lesson I had with her on Bach’s English Suite in A-minor. She sensed I was not happy with my performance and firmly said, “You know, it takes a long time to be comfortable with these big Bach pieces.” We also had a few light moments in the lessons. Once I was humming or singing and said, “Wow, I have to stop this singing. Do you hear me?” Well-known for one-liners her comeback was, “Maybe next week you can add some lyrics.”

Although small in stature, Constance’s personality was as towering as her artistry. Pianist Abbey Simon and Constance were friends since they were teenagers. He had the following to say about his esteemed colleague; “She was an uncompromising, tireless, and unrelenting artist who loved music. She was loyal to those she believed in, and almost cruel to those she felt had no business playing the piano.” Simon goes on to say that she was always “expanding her repertoire, teaching and practicing right before her death.” Constance would be the first person he would call and visit while he was in New York. Shortly before her death, Simon visited Keene in her apartment and she said, “Abbey, I can’t make you dinner, I’m dying.”

Constance’s home was also the location for several master classes and dinner parties. One special occasion was the fiftieth birthday party for the late John Browning, when he “tried out” all five Beethoven Concerti. She encouraged all of her students to practice their recitals more than once and told how Artur Schnabel used to pay the door man to listen to him. On another occasion, Abram Chasins presented a master class offering anecdotes about his mentor Josef Hoffman, which allowed us to experience the lineage of the great Romantic tradition through these three generations of teachers, Hoffman-Chasins-Keene. We were also treated on one occasion to Constance playing works she unfortunately never recorded, such as the Four Impromptus of Chopin.

She was responsible for bringing great artists who presented master classes at The Manhattan School. These included, Rosalyn Tureck and Magda Tagliaferro, who was in her 90’s yet gave a memorable class. The ‘grand dame’ of the French Piano School was enthralled with a performance of Chopin’s Nocturne in B Major, Op. 62 #1, by a brilliant young pianist, Marc Silverman, who was Constance’s assistant. Silverman is currently the Chair of the Piano Department at Manhattan School of Music and was himself a student of Constance. Of her teaching he stated; “Both artistically and personally, Constance Keene led by example. Never pedantic, she sensed music deeply and intuitively. She was insistent on hearing the music, on

developing an idealized sound before approaching the keyboard. She believed that all effective technique grew out of the musical image and saw little reason to stress technique in isolation from art. I will always be grateful to Constance for helping me build the confidence necessary to express myself fully and to project my artistic ideas boldly. When warranted, she was effusive and unreserved in her praise and was always creating opportunities for me, and for all of her students to perform and build a wider audience.”

All who studied with her can vividly recall the wonderful lessons with Constance and still feel her presence. Although her passing represents a dwindling of the generation of pianists trained in the Romantic tradition, her legacy lives on through her recordings and through her students who are performing, teaching, and directly communicating their art.

Donald Alfano

[Constance Keene playing Rachmaninov's Prelude in G # minor Op. 32#12](#) (in Windows Media Player format)

A memorial service for Constance Keene will take place at The Manhattan School of Music, 120 Claremont Avenue (corner of Broadway) New York City on Sunday, September 13th at 3pm.