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Gary Graffman, Piano Virtuoso and Renowned Teacher, Dies at 97

Mr. Graffman was a onetime child prodigy whose career was curtailed by a neurological condition that restricted him to his left hand.

By Vivien Schweitzer

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Gary Graffman, a former child prodigy whose successful international career as a concert pianist was cut short when a rare neurological disorder cost him the use of his right hand in his 50s, setting him on a new and distinguished path as a teacher and administrator, died on Saturday at his home in New York. He was 97.

His death, after a short illness, was confirmed by Jenny Cho, a friend.

The son of a professional violinist, Mr. Graffman was 8 when the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia awarded him a scholarship to study there. (Decades later, Mr. Graffman would become the conservatory's president.)

At 11 he gave a concert after which The New York Times praised his "searching sense of style and an almost uncanny amount of musical understanding and poetry for a child of his years."

His performing career lasted until the early 1980s, when he began to suffer from focal dystonia, the same neurological ailment that derailed the career of the pianist Leon Fleisher, a good friend. Unlike Mr. Fleisher, however, Mr. Graffman never regained use of his right hand and instead focused on teaching and performing repertory for the left hand. (The disorder can affect either hand or both.)

Mr. Graffman after a 2006 concert. He never regained use of his right hand, but focused on teaching and performing repertory for the left hand. Patrick Andrade for The New York Times

Until that point he had found acclaim as an unglamorous specialist in Romantic repertory. In 1972, the critic John Rockwell wrote that Mr. Graffman "is not exactly the kind of charismatic firebrand that ordinarily commands the loving affection of the media and public."

"Short, pleasant, comfortably stooped and bespectacled, he lacks the craggy grandeur of a Rubinstein or even the gawky magnetism of Cliburn," Mr. Rockwell added. "All he does is play the piano very well."

The quality of Mr. Graffman's playing cemented a blooming international career, including performances with all the major orchestras. His wife, Naomi, accompanied him on concert tours that sometimes lasted 10 months.

In 1964 Mr. Graffman canceled a booking in Jackson, Miss., after learning that the house would be segregated, leading other prominent classical artists to publicly announce that they would no longer perform in segregated halls.

Probably no performance of his was more widely heard than his rendition of Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," featured on the soundtrack of his fellow New Yorker Woody Allen's 1979 cinematic valentine to their hometown, "Manhattan."

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Gary Graffman was born in Manhattan on Oct. 14, 1928, the only child of Vladimir and Nadia (Margolin) Graffman, both of whom had immigrated from Russia in 1917. His father had studied with the violin virtuoso Leopold Auer at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, and performed professionally and taught music for more than 40 years at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan.

Mr. Graffman began studying violin at 3 but soon switched to piano, taking lessons with Isabelle Vengerova at the Curtis Institute.

His parents wanted their son to have a normal childhood, however, and limited his concert appearances.

“My father sat with me and made sure I practiced from the time I was 4 until I was 9,” Mr. Graffman told the Times in 1985. “But he knew that even if a child is enormously gifted, the chances of a big career are still very small. He wanted me to have a balanced, normal preparation for life.”

In a 1981 memoir, “I Really Should Be Practicing,” Mr. Graffman described himself as a stubborn student — a recipe for friction at Curtis under Ms. Vengerova, for whom “ferocious shouts and furniture throwings” were standard procedure, he wrote.

His parents also encouraged him to attend a liberal arts college, an unusual idea when most aspiring young pianists of the era focused exclusively on music.

Mr. Graffman, who attended four or five concerts a week in his late teens, entered Columbia University in 1946, but dropped out after winning a competition, and a contract with the impresario Sol Hurok.

In his memoir, Mr. Graffman described how at 19 he sent Mr. Hurok a brash letter when the terms of the contract were not honored, leading Mr. Hurok to call Mr. Graffman’s parents to inquire whether their son had lost his mind. Mr. Graffman made his official debut in 1947 and in 1949 won the prestigious Leventritt Competition. He married Naomi Helfman in 1952 in a ceremony at City Hall in Manhattan.

His wife died in 2019. He leaves no immediate survivors.

The Graffmans traveled the globe as Mr. Graffman pursued a staggering concert schedule, logging 100,000 miles a year for a time. He kept a container, called the “truth box,” with index cards for each city he played in listing the pianos used and their qualities.

A perfectionist, Mr. Graffman considered an inadequate instrument a valid reason for canceling an appearance. By the early 1980s, however, he was forced to cancel for another reason: a mysterious malady that had begun to interfere with his playing.

Ms. Graffman recalled that on a tour in 1979 in Tokyo she would cringe as her husband performed a particular passage in Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2.

"I'd think, 'Why the hell doesn't he practice that passage?'" she later recalled. "'Is he so bored with Russian Romantics he's just not bothering?'"

But apathy wasn't the cause of the mistakes. Indeed, Mr. Graffman continued to practice diligently, but his wife noted "a quality of horrible despair" in the effort.

She persuaded her husband to seek medical help, and thus began a long and frustrating search for answers. Some doctors initially suggested that Mr. Graffman's problems were psychological, perhaps "battle fatigue" from long stints on the road.

After receiving the focal dystonia diagnosis, Mr. Graffman used an exercise brace, nicknamed the Schumann Machine, in reference to the contraption that Schumann had hoped, wrongly, would strengthen his fingers.

Mr. Graffman began playing music for the left hand, and found it a humbling experience.

Mr. Graffman, here in 2002, now played works including Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand, commissioned pieces from the composers Ned Rorem and William Bolcom, among others. Richard Termine for The New York Times

“How well I remember the arrogant letter I wrote in my heyday to one of America’s leading composers, who had berated me for giving yet another performance of the Rachmaninoff Second while his piano concerto remained unplayed,” Mr. Graffman wrote in an essay in The Times in 1985. “I reminded him that my options were far too extensive to permit sidetracking for 20th-century trivia.”

As a left-handed pianist, of course, Mr. Graffman had far fewer options. What he described as a “mighty Niagara of repertory” had suddenly been reduced to a trickle.

Mr. Graffman now played works commissioned by Paul Wittgenstein, the Austrian pianist who had lost his right arm in World War I, including Ravel’s Concerto for the Left Hand and Korngold’s Concerto. Mr. Graffman also commissioned works for the left hand from the composers Ned Rorem and William Bolcom, among others.

Mr. Graffman was appointed director of the Curtis Institute in 1986, having been on the piano faculty since 1980. He became its president in 1995 and retained both titles until he retired in 2006, while remaining on the piano faculty. His students included the acclaimed Chinese pianists Yuja Wang and Lang Lang.

Mr. Graffman continued performing repertory for the left hand, including concertos and chamber works. To honor his 85th birthday, Sony released a 24-disc set of his complete recordings.

His hobbies included collecting Asian art and ceramics. He also enjoyed flavoring vodka to create his own varieties, using hard-to-obtain ingredients like buffalo grass as well as all manner of fruit, for which he would forage at Ninth Avenue markets. (Ms. Wang especially loved the tangerine.) He traced the hobby to his sampling vodka in his parents’ home as a boy.

In his memoir, Mr. Graffman wrote vividly about the pitfalls of live performance. Describing a concert of Prokofiev’s Piano Concerto No. 3 with the conductor George Szell, which almost derailed after a section of the orchestra counted wrong, Mr. Graffman wrote, “I felt like someone who had been tied to the railroad tracks as a train whistle is heard in the distance.”

But, he added, “Szell made some magic passes in the air and led the orchestra safely across the Red Sea.”