

challenge:

The career

Problems facing today's pianists

An interview with Jacques Leiser

by Pete Jutras

The twenty-first century is blessed to be an era with no shortage of talented young pianists, many of whom are armed with impressive technique and a commanding repertoire. For the pianists themselves, this poses a particular challenge. With a seemingly endless supply of competition winners and recording artists facing dwindling audiences and shrinking commercial support for the arts, how can young pianists get noticed and parlay their talents into a sustainable living and a meaningful career?

For answers to this question, and ideas on the state of affairs facing pianists today, I interviewed Jacques Leiser, a manager, recording producer, and impresario with decades of experience in all facets of the music business. Mr. Leiser has had a long-term interest in launching careers, and he's been involved with some of the biggest in the last sixty years, including Sviatoslav Richter, Maurizio Pollini, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, Lazar Berman, Georges Cziffra, Julius Katchen, Annie Fischer, Dame Moura Lympany, Grigory Sokolov, and Krystian Zimerman, among others.



Photo courtesy of Daniel Truhakowski.

In your view, what are the obstacles facing pianists today?

Young pianists today face serious challenges in launching viable careers. Graduating students are not trained or prepared to overcome the practical problems that await them when they enter the music profession and concert world. It is not easy to establish a “name” that will get you noticed and lead to concerts and recordings.

It is increasingly difficult to convince sponsors to get around the “risk factor” and make a reasonable investment in the marketing and promotion that is necessary to promote talented artists. Today’s pianists have to be more self-sufficient, and this is not taught at the conservatories. Unlike decades past, today’s artists will not get time and attention from managers and concert promoters. Artists must be ready to create an attractive package of materials for promotion, including professional photographs, flyers, and graphic materials along with high-quality audio and video recordings. They should understand the importance of an attractive website—it has been said that an artist without a website is like having an unlisted phone number in the telephone directory! Pianists need to be made aware of the various working tools and options available that will help them get started.

A career in music is like a never-ending obstacle course. Aspiring students who are seeking professional careers must have fierce commitment and dedication. How some artists manage to overcome these obstacles on their own, without outside help, is an astounding achievement. Sheer perseverance, faith, and self-belief, as well as infinite patience and lucky breaks in getting attention (i.e., cancellations) often account for this. It is the talented artists who persevere, who ultimately make it.

Shouldn’t managers and concert promoters be doing this work?

Unfortunately, today’s managers and promoters are too focused on the short-term commercial end of the business, and they show little interest in building careers. They are often not creative in seeking unknown talents, since building a name and developing a career would represent an investment of time and money, which requires risk. This is unfortunate. Generally speaking, hardly anyone is prepared to think about careers on a medium- or long-term basis anymore, even though history proves it has often taken decades to develop and establish the careers of artists who gained their popularity at relatively later stages of their lives, such as Artur Schnabel, Sviatoslav Richter, Claudio Arrau, Alfred Brendel, and Alicia de Larrocha.

In a recent discussion with Krystian Zimerman, he mentioned that he did not know of unknown talents who emerged on the international concert scene in the last thirty years due to the work of managers, with only a few exceptions. Zimerman attributes this problem to current business practices, where managers and promoters are only interested in the “sure thing”—a proven seller with no risk. It takes a considerable amount of flair to discover unknown talent. Unfortunately, the approach of today’s managers and promoters is less of a resource and more of an obstacle to young artists.

An uncommon example of this was communicated to me recently by an outstanding young German pianist, Joseph Moog. Moog has already established a substantial career for himself in Europe and recently made a successful American debut. On his own he

had to negotiate an advertisement in an established American record magazine and arrange for an interview to appear in conjunction with his debut. He remarked that, “the goal in today’s music world is making the largest amount of money possible and replacing the artists afterwards by new, fresh ones. Artist’s careers have often been reduced to a sportsman’s career, reflecting a very commercial tendency in today’s business world that places artistic value or quality behind financial interests.”

If the people on the business end are not qualified to make musical judgments, how can quality be identified and promoted?

This is precisely the problem today: quality is no longer a principal goal in the initial chain of events that leads to the development of new careers. Unfortunately, the priorities are often confined to creating instant sensations who possess the kind of charisma and stage presence that attracts audiences and entertains them. One prominent music festival manager has told me that the public relations potential of an artist is among the primary considerations in engaging artists. A leading record company has gone so far as to insist on a contractual clause with one of their world-renowned

pianists that stipulates a minimum number of yearly interviews to maintain his public presence.

If the goal from the outset is confined to commercial success, it risks being in conflict with the growth of artistic development. A career is not a commercial product. It is a lifetime commitment to artistic goals and their development. Once this is established and properly promoted, a demand will have been created, a demand that can result in commercial success. I am convinced that the explosion of artist fees has contributed to the reduction and scarcity of concerts.

The talented and aspiring young Canadian pianist of Polish origin, Daniel Wnukowski (pictured on page 24), noted, “If someone had told me at an early age what the music business entails, I would have moved to Tibet and become a monk.

But it’s too late now! Today, many extremely

talented pianists are rejected at the doors of agents and artistic directors. Those that don’t become their own managers, at least in the beginning of their careers, are completely left out in the cold.”

Is there a way for artists to circumvent the traditional business channels and try other ways to promote their art?

Artists have to learn to rely on themselves as much as possible and get acquainted with all the facets of the music profession, particularly the practical aspects of promotion and marketing. Young artists should try to seek a mentor in whom they have confidence—someone who could guide them and give them precious advice about their repertoire, programs, and career development. Unfortunately, young artists often don’t have access to real professional advice, and this is a problem our profession needs to address.

As aspiring pianists do make contacts in the professional world, it is essential that they actively work on networking with sponsors, artistic directors, festival managers, record producers, and others who have a keen interest in pianists. Young artists can create a mailing list of these contacts and continually update them with information about their activities and careers. One contact often leads to another, opening new doors that may translate into valuable opportunities.



Joseph Moog

Tommy Marco

Marketing is an important component of any professional career. Building audiences requires creating a name and reputation. In a sense, there are similarities to introducing a new “product” on the market. (It is not my intention here to compare artists to products, but to illustrate a point.) Word of mouth is an excellent form of publicity, but it is rarely generated by itself and requires promotional support. International recording companies used to devote a considerable amount of time, effort, and funds to market and promote their artists and their appearances, but this has been considerably reduced in recent years due to budgetary restraints. This leaves a vacuum for artists who require this kind of support to draw audiences as well as the media. Sol Hurok, the legendary American impresario used to say: “if the audience does not want to attend a concert, you can’t stop them!”

Bill Naboré, director of the prestigious International Piano Academy at Lake Como, notes the following: “As professor-in-residence, part of my job is mentoring students in their choice of career. Competitions are not the only way to achieve success for a young artist today. Agents are mostly out for a quick buck, often driving young artists to impossible situations. Burnout is frequent, but many young artists can’t refuse the bait. If you have the talent, you will always have the talent. I try to advise my charges to make their own niche in the concert world doing something that many cannot do better. They should educate their public when they find one. This public will always remain faithful to quality and dedication.”

Have higher technical standards made it more difficult to get noticed?

Yes. Here’s what Daniel Wnukowski had to say on that subject:

“Today, young musicians are faced with the daunting task of performing the piano with pristine, technical perfection, often at

the cost of compromising musicality. I was astonished to read some of the reviews that many of my colleagues had received after their recitals in which critics based their reviews on the amount of wrong notes they had heard!

However, I feel that we have so much creative energy and power among young pianists today who are ready to overcome such mediocrity and musical torpor. Today, more than ever, musicians have at their disposition incredible tools that can effectively convey their message to an eager audience such as the use of online blogging or the creation of ravishing, new program ideas.”

Have competitions also served to compound these problems?

There’s no question that the exponential proliferation of piano competitions is not helping the situation facing young pianists today. Odd decisions by competition juries are nothing new—in 1933, Dinu Lipatti entered the Vienna Piano Competition and got the second prize. Alfred Cortot, who was on the jury, resigned in protest and invited Lipatti to study with him in Paris. At that time, however, the number of important international competitions could be counted on one hand. Today, there are over 750 major piano competitions.

Daniel Wnukowski notes that, “Many young pianists today are terrified of losing, obsessed about pleasing a jury. Some pianists enter competitions knowing that they will win, but even when they do their fame is often quickly replaced by the next ‘king’ who can play octaves a little cleaner and faster, and perhaps is a little younger.”

The pianist Stephen Hough remarked that competitions are like lotteries.

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How does all of this differ from some of the other careers you have been involved with?

Times have changed as well as concepts. There existed a sense of commitment and passion previously, which unfortunately are hardly known today.

Alexander Merovitch was a Russian impresario who arrived in Berlin in 1925 with an unknown young Russian pianist and violinist, taking upon himself the responsibility of guiding the careers of these young artists. He made the same proposal to an unknown young Russian cellist, telling him, "I can offer you, as I offered them, my energy, experience, and my very life." The two instrumentalists had already entrusted their careers to him unconditionally as their personal representative in Russia. Believing in each other, they arrived abroad with their genius and the Russian impresario's managerial capabilities as their only contract and promise. The impresario's obligations were to protect their unique gifts from the pitfalls of their profession and to help reveal their art to the world. "The whole world will share my fanatical belief in them. It won't be long. I hate comparisons, but even if I wanted to—well, what can I say? They are great artists. They are wonderful people, and, as yourself, they are in their twenties. I know our lives will be bound together."

As the cellist later recalled, "There would be no salary, no guarantee, no concentration of activity in one given city or land. I had to be available for concert engagements everywhere. Merovitch's gift for outlining the strategy for my future turned vagueness and



Georges Cziffra

insecurity into an exciting daring and a sense of rightness. He spoke of the urgency of humanizing managers, of changing the unhealthy pattern of the concert "business," and of finding the methods of achieving more creativity in the performer's life."

The cellist's name was Gregor Piatigorsky, the violinist Nathan Milstein, and the pianist Vladimir Horowitz, referred to as "The Three Musketeers." The three were the only artists managed by Merovitch, who devoted his full time to their careers.

When certain elements are in the news, the artists benefit. For instance, when I signed up an unknown and incredible Hungarian virtuoso pianist, named Gyorgy Cziffra in Vienna in 1956, to make recordings, the timing was perfect because it was the year of the Hungarian revolution, and Cziffra fled Budapest as a refugee. EMI Pathé Marconi in France did a fantastic job to

make and release his recordings in record time, and, at the same time, launch one of the most brilliant marketing and promotional campaigns which was ever undertaken by a recording company at the time. Timing is everything, and most of the time, the timing is off for one reason or another. But in this instance, everything was perfectly synchronized and Cziffra became a household name in France and developed an international career within a very short period of time.

Another interesting case is that of pianist Grigory Sokolov, whose career has been one of the most unusual that I have encountered. Grigory Sokolov was the youngest pianist to win the

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Tchaikovsky Competition in 1966 at the age of 16, on a unanimous decision by a jury headed by Emil Gilels. Sokolov has gained an almost mythical status with audiences in recent years in Europe and other parts of the world and is considered one of the piano giants of our day.

Sokolov was first introduced in the U.S. by Sol Hurok in 1969, but his career did not initially get much momentum from the media. After Hurok passed on in 1974, Sokolov had no management in the U.S. and I signed him up. Unfortunately there was little name recognition and sponsors were not interested. This was, no doubt, largely due to the absence of recordings, except for isolated ones on the Melodya label that were poorly distributed and mostly unavailable. For incomprehensible reasons, no major or other recording firm showed interest in recording Sokolov, in spite of the fact that his performances at the time were already spectacular. Sokolov subsequently made some live recordings in the 1990s for a small French record firm by the name of Op. 111. There are 22 record-



Sviatoslav Richter

© 1970 Jacques Leiser

ings by Sokolov listed in the record catalogue, as compared to 128 by Horowitz, 130 by Gilels, 158 by Rubinstein, and 280 by Richter.

It took Sokolov over thirty years to achieve the international recognition which he deserved, and he is one of the rare examples of a pianist who attained this recognition without

the support and promotion of any major recording company. The legendary Russian pianist Simon Barere (1896-1951), one of the greatest virtuosi of our time, never achieved the recognition he deserved for lack of promotion and unfortunate timing.

Has the landscape changed over the last few decades?

The landscape has indeed changed in the last few decades. It would have been unthinkable in former times for an established artist to carry around his own recordings for sales and autographs at the end of a concert. Although the commercial aspect has always existed in the past, it seems to have grown disproportionately in

recent years, reducing the emphasis on quality. Basically, the classical music world appears to have been confused by many with organizations whose primary functions are to generate business and make profit. This is a fallacy, and it is doomed from the start. Classical music has never been a business in past centuries. It is an important part of culture that makes it possible for successful artists to make a good living, but it is not intended as a commercial business solely dedicated to profit generation.

Classical music should not be confused with show-business entertainment, as it often is. Classical music is primarily an artistic and spiritual experience.

Would Michelangeli and Richter have a harder time launching their careers in the year 2012? If so, why?

It could well be so, since it's always a calculated risk to launch careers of unknown or relatively unknown performers. There are fewer and fewer managers and talent scouts around today who have flair and who are willing to put their names on the line.

Sviatoslav Richter's career burst on the international scene in 1960, when he was already forty-five years old. His career blossomed in part because of the existing mystique and tradition of great Russian pianists and the easing of cultural exchange between the Soviet Union and the West at that time. The timing was right for the West to discover some of the pianistic giants of Russia who were largely unknown outside of their home country. The American impresario Sol Hurok brilliantly masterminded the launching of Richter's career in the West in 1960 by organizing five debut recitals with different programs at Carnegie Hall for Richter within a period of 10 days. This was a spectacular coup and a historic first in presenting an unknown pianist. This type of tour de force by a pianist had not occurred since 1885-1886, when Anton Rubinstein performed cycles of historic recitals in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Vienna, London, Leipzig, Dresden, and Brussels. The coordinated release of new recordings by Richter contributed to a gigantic promotional effort for him in all facets of the media, and it was followed by extensive sold-out concert tours. There has not been any other manager since Hurok who has taken such large and ingenious risks to launch an unknown pianist in such a spectacular manner.

Michelangeli started to appear on the scene after winning the first prize of the Geneva International Piano Competition

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in 1939, when the President of the jury, Alfred Cortot, remarked that "a new Liszt is born!" Michelangeli had just won the seventh prize of the Ysaye International Competition in Brussels the year before (later known as the Queen Elisabeth Competition). Michelangeli was soon invited to perform prestigious engagements throughout Europe and America, but his career was somewhat erratic and he never played a large quantity of yearly concerts or undertook large tours. In fact, during the twelve-year period between 1954 and 1966, his performances were mostly confined to Italy. It was not until 1966 when his stunning appearance (which I organized) at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees in Paris with memorable performances of the Grieg Concerto and the Liszt Totentanz created a deluge of prestigious invitations throughout the world that regenerated his international career. It should be noted that this concert was coordinated with a major television appearance as well as interviews in leading international newspapers and periodicals, which I arranged, including *Time*, *Der Spiegel*, *l'Express*, *Le Figaro*, *The New York Times*, *High Fidelity*, and others.

What can we (piano teachers, concert-goers, buyers of recordings) do to help? How can our actions help to let the music business know that we appreciate (and want) quality, not just flashy showmanship? Is there any way we can do something, even a little bit, to improve the situation?

Piano teachers, concert-goers, and buyers of recordings should seek quality artists and performances and make the industry aware that there exists a significant market for this, a market that is not to be confused with flashy showmanship. A large number of refugees from Eastern Europe settled in New York during and after World War II, as well as other major American cities, and they brought their habits with them. One of these habits was a keen interest and enthusiasm for classical music, creating and regenerating a striving market for connoisseurs of chamber music, lieder recitals, and distinguished programs of lesser-known works of merit. ▲

Jacques Leiser has represented or collaborated with many of the world's leading artists, including Sviatoslav Richter, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, Claudio Arrau, Edwin Fischer, Alfred Cortot, Annie Fischer, Lazar Berman, Grigory Sokolov, Maurizio Pollini, Krystian Zimerman, and Maria Callas, to name just a few.



In 1956 he created the milestone EMI archive series Great Recordings of the Century. In addition to his extensive work in recording and artist management, he has been involved in major piano festivals and competitions in locations including Montreal, Budapest, San Francisco, and New York and created the Tours Music Festival in France (Grange de Meslay) with Sviatoslav Richter in 1964.

Jacques Leiser is pursuing his photographic exhibits and lectures in Europe on career development and completing his memoirs, which will be published in 2012, together with his photographic portraits of legendary artists. Jacques Leiser can be contacted at www.jacquesleiser.ch.

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