

ISAAC MIKHNOVSKY

Isaac Mikhnovsky was born in Smolensk on April 17, 1914. He grew up at the time of World War I and Civil War, the Revolution, and the destruction that followed. His childhood was also darkened by the sudden death of his father when the boy was only four years old.

Isaac's phenomenal musical talent was evident from very early childhood. The only valuable possession that the family owned was an old piano, in front of which the child spent many hours playing by ear and improvising. On one occasion, a well-known piano teacher, Evgenia Il'nichna Gurevich-Aaghes, who was living in Smolensk at that time, walked by the open windows while he was playing. She was intrigued by the sounds of music and came into the house. This meeting determined to a large degree the future of the pianist.

Isaac's musical studies began under the guidance of Gurevich-Aaghes. The boy was developing determinedly as a pianist, and his first concerts at the former Assembly of Nobility Hall in Smolensk became a town sensation. When Isaac turned 10 years old, his beloved teacher moved to Moscow and took him with her. At first he was studying at the M. P. Mussorgsky Technical School, and later at the Gnesin School. His first years in Moscow had been extremely difficult: he didn't have a place to stay, and often spent nights in the same classrooms where he studied during the day. Not owning a piano, he had to learn the most difficult pieces without an instrument. This phenomenal quality of his was later observed by psychologists. Even to this day it is still mentioned in literature concerning the neurophysiology of memory. It also contributed to his brilliant ability to sight-read.

From this point on he also began to work: he accompanied in a ballet school, worked with singers, copied music at night, and at the same time practiced persistently. Despite the incredible difficulties of everyday life, he always worked hard trying to receive the most extensive education possible. His knowledge of literature, a delicate and sensitive perception of poetry, his love for painting (he himself possessed an exceptional artistic talent), often amazed the people who knew him well. His passionate enthusiasm for the theater lasted all his life; he especially loved MHAT [Moscow Art Theatre], where he had many friends among actors. Possessing refined knowledge of opera, Mikhnovsky later wrote many fantasies on opera themes.

At the age of 16, he entered the Moscow Conservatory as a student of L. N. Oborin and later, of K. N. Igumnov. Upon graduating from the Conservatory, Isaac Mikhnovsky continued his studies at the school of highest performance mastery. His name is present on the marble board at the Moscow Conservatory as part of the list of the most outstanding graduates, which begins with S. Rachmaninoff. It was indeed Mikhnovsky who was destined to become the first one from the USSR to perform the Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini, which served as his final degree project. Rachmaninoff himself sent the score of this composition to Igumnov, and the professor gave the honor of premiering this masterpiece in Moscow to his outstanding student.

In December of 1937 and January of 1938, Mikhnovsky took part in the First All-Union Piano Competition held in Moscow, where one of the jury members was S. Prokofiev. It was precisely his vote that determined the outcome, and the young performer became the first prize winner, while his performance of Beethoven's Fourth Concerto at the finals became legendary.

After the competition, the young musician had an intensive concert career, performing solo and orchestral concerts in major cities of USSR. He frequently played with the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of such renowned conductors as Ye. Mravinsky, K. Sanderling, N. Rabinovich, and others.

In 1939, Mikhnovsky took part in the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels, after which he performed with great success in Paris and in Brussels. The press had high regard for his playing.

After graduating from the school of the highest performance mastery, the young pianist was invited to teach at the Moscow Conservatory, where he was soon given the title of docent.

During World War II, Mikhnovsky continued his intense performing and pedagogical work, and performed together with the concert brigades in front of the soldiers of the Red Army. He was one of the first musicians to perform at his native Smolensk just after its liberation. Throughout his entire life, the musician never forgot about his native city and he performed there frequently.

After the war ended, Mikhnovsky appeared as soloist with the Moscow Philharmonic and concertized in major as well as remote provincial cities of the Soviet Union. In his repertoire there were more than thirty complete solo programs, many piano concertos, and chamber works.

Among the many outstanding musicians with whom he socialized, Mstislav Rostropovich had a special place. He and Mikhnovsky had a profound friendship which lasted until the pianist's death.

At the end of the 1940s, Mikhnovsky began working on a cycle of piano transcriptions. They include transcriptions of romances by Tchaikovsky, Glinka, Taneyev, Rimsky-Korsakov, Rachmaninoff, Shaporin. A number of them became especially popular: Tchaikovsky's Den' li tsarit [Does the day reign?], Sredi shumnogo bala [Amid the din of the ball], O ditya [O child], Rastvoril ya okno [Once I opened the window]; Glinka's Somneniye [Doubt]; Shaporin's Zaklinaniye [Incantation]; Rimsky-Korsakov's Pliaska skomorohov [Dance of the buffoons] from the opera Snegourochka [Snow Maiden], and many others, both published and presently unpublished. His concerts consisting entirely of his own transcriptions were very successful. These transcriptions remain in the piano repertoire to this day.

The fantasies on opera themes interested him both as a performer and as a composer. Among the opera transcriptions in his repertoire there were paraphrases and fantasies by Liszt on themes from operas by Verdi, Wagner, Gounod, Mozart, Meyerbeer. He thoroughly knew the works of such legendary creators of transcriptions as Busoni, Pabst, Tausig, and Godowsky. It is not surprising that while producing transcriptions of romances, the musician turned to operas of Russian composers. He created a number of piano fantasies on themes from such operas as Tchaikovsky's Queen of Spades, Glinka's Ivan Susanin and Ruslan and Lyudmila, Dargomyzhsky's Rusalka, and Rubinstein's The Demon. These works were not previously published and remained until recently in manuscript form, although many performers knew about their existence and expressed great interest in them.

Isaac Mikhnovsky was very much interested in the artistry of contemporary composers, both Soviet and foreign. For instance, he was the first one in the USSR to perform a piano concerto by the Finnish composer Palmgren. His repertoire consisted of piano as well as chamber works of Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Poulenc, Bartók, Hindemith, Szymanowski, Schnittke, and others. However, he always remained the closest to the works of Chopin, Schumann, Schubert, Beethoven, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Ravel, and Debussy. He was also a wonderful master of the piano miniatures and recorded for the radio archive many compositions that were written in this genre by Tchaikovsky, Glinka, Dvořák, Rachmaninoff, and Rubinstein.

Beginning in the 1960s and up to the end of his life, Mikhnovsky was a professor at the Gnesin Institute, where he taught classes in piano and in chamber ensemble. Simultaneously, he continued to give solo recitals and concerts with orchestras, recorded for the radio, and continued to compose. He created a cycle of vocal romances, a Sonata for Cello, a cycle of Moments Musicaux, two Ballades. Until the last days of his life, the musician worked intensively with his undergraduate and graduate students, fully devoting himself to his beloved art. Isaac Iosifovich Mikhnovsky died suddenly in Moscow in 1978.

Yevgeny I. Mikhnovsky

(Translation by Margarita Glebov)