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JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Gary Graffman to Teach Young Pianists

By

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“Everyone knows who Gary Graffman is,” said Ching-Yun Hu, and by everyone, she means all pianists.

She was speaking on a FaceTime audio call from Beijing, China, which is 12 hours ahead of and about 7,000 miles away from Philadelphia. It’s also home to some of Graffman’s best-known students.

Indeed, the 89-year-old Graffman is revered by pianists on both sides of the Pacific Ocean.



Gary Graffman is a legendary pianist and teacher. | Phila. Young Pianists' Academy

He has a lifetime of experience behind the piano. He's performed with The Philadelphia Orchestra and, in 1949, he won the prestigious Leventritt Competition. But Graffman became more drawn to teaching in recent decades, helping generations of young pianists follow in his footsteps.

From Aug. 8-15, 21 students from across the world will converge in Philadelphia for the sixth annual Philadelphia Young Pianists' Academy. Graffman is scheduled to teach public master classes during the week of study, and anticipation is building for both the students and Graffman.

"I enjoy working with very talented young people," Graffman said.

Hu is a renowned pianist herself and was in Beijing in mid-July for performances. The PYPA artistic director wasn't a student of Graffman, but said inviting him to last year's session was a no-brainer — as was bringing him back this year.

Graffman got his start teaching at the Curtis Institute in 1981, taking an Amtrak train down from New York several times per week. He was named Curtis' director in 1986 and its president in 1995. He served both roles until 2006 when he transitioned to a less-demanding teaching role.

The experience at Curtis was a homecoming of sorts. Graffman got his start at Curtis as a student in the 1930s and '40s. A first-generation American, he fit right in among the other students, many of whom also had Eastern European Jewish roots. Graffman's father was born in Vilnius, Lithuania, which was once called the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." His mother was born in Kiev, Ukraine.

But his pivot to teaching wasn't entirely by choice. At the age of 50, he developed a problem with the pinkie and ring finger on his right hand. It wasn't painful, but when he played the impacted fingers started curling in.

He eventually learned he suffers from focal dystonia, a neurological condition that causes affected body parts to twist uncontrollably and is often found in musicians. There is no cure, so Graffman, at perhaps the peak of his playing career, was forced to refocus.

"From the age of 20 to 50 I played about 100 concerts a year. I canceled two years of concerts, which were booked very far in advance, [after learning about the condition]," Graffman said.

A 1981 article in *The New York Times* about his forced retirement shed light on Graffman's mindset then.

"Playing is one thing I do very well," Graffman said in the article. "Of course, I'd like to play. There isn't much for the left hand, but I've enjoyed going out and playing my piece as well as I could. I'm not unhappy. There are all sorts of things that interest me. But I'd prefer to do what I did before."

He started teaching at both the Manhattan School of Music and Curtis, eventually choosing to spend his time at the latter exclusively. A long list of high-profile students followed: Lang Lang. Kuok-Wai Lio. Meng-Chieh Liu. Natalie Zhu. Ignat Solzhenitsyn. Haochen Zhang. Yuja Wang. And on and on.

"For a young pianist he is a legend," Hu said. "His name is always associated with young pianists and I think that he is not just a teacher who teaches wonderfully, but he also takes care of students a lot. He calls and helps them build bridges."

Hu attributed Graffman's teaching acumen in part to his attention to detail. He is skilled at interpreting what composers write in score and parlaying the knowledge to his students. Pieces of music played by Graffman students often sound more refined and nuanced. He can readily identify proper speed and dynamics phrasing, Hu said.

“It’s like how two actors look at a script, but it comes out differently,” Hu said.

Every pianist has their own sound, but with Graffman’s assistance pupils often take their playing to the next level. He’ll have a diverse swath of students at this summer’s PYP session, including those from across the United States, Canada, Asia and Europe. One student is just 9 years old, the youngest in the academy’s six-year history.

With Graffman in town, Hu thinks they’re all in for a treat.

“From beginning to the end of the class, you can see the pianist has changed their interpretation,” Hu said. “The piece sounds better.”

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