

REMARKS AT THE GRAVESIDE SERVICE FOR JACOB "JACK" RADUNSKY (1909-1995)

August 18, 1995

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The relationship of a musical mentor and student is extremely personal. It can be among the most meaningful relationships in all of life. All teaching is a sacred responsibility. But the piano teacher works one-on-one, over a considerable period of time, with a student's entire inner-being.

Those who have not played an instrument may not realize how much is required. One needs physical skills, aural skills, analytical aptitude and emotional responses, in addition to nerves of steel, in order to be able to translate writing on a printed page into a meaningful musical experience for listeners. We music students enter this field because we are seeking something outside of, and greater than, ourselves. But while in our youth, we sing our songs in a state of blissful ignorance, as we deepen our knowledge of the craft, one is easily overwhelmed by the complexities of the endeavor. That is when we especially need a wise mentor to help guide us through the uncertainty and confusion which continually conspire to debilitate us.

To have had Jack as one's mentor is to have experienced one of life's greatest possible gifts. I do not believe anyone anywhere has ever had more sheer musicality gushing out of his soul than Jack. Music possessed him with an explosive, volcanic energy and intensity, as well as a tender intimacy. His ears were simply phenomenal. No one ever could have had a keener response to rhythm. Others may teach music. Jack was the music. There were no obstacles between him and the music.

To experience music with Jack was to discover the "fountain of youth." He never lost his child-like sense of wonder. No matter how many hundreds of times he had heard the same progression of chords, he always experienced it as if it was for the first time. It was so unselfconscious, so totally natural. And it was so free of the condescension and petty judgments that commonly pollute the music field.

He positively reveled in effortless pianism, and was not ashamed to enjoy virtuosity, seeing it as a virtue, even if not in itself the ultimate goal. He could be just as thrilled by a Percy Grainger arrangement of an English folk song, as by a sublime Beethoven slow movement.

It really didn't matter whether one was at the piano with Jack standing alongside, leaping about and gesticulating, or whether it was well past midnight and he was still eager to put on more records, or whether he was savoring his coffee after dinner and recounting his experiences hearing Hofmann, Lhevinne, and Horowitz in New York in the 1930's. You knew you were in touch with greatness—with what music is all about.

He didn't have a beloved mentor beyond his childhood years. How sad, I often thought, that the one who was the ultimate mentor to so many, had been let down by his own teachers. But musicality the magnitude of his did not need a "teacher."

When he finished preparing a piece with a student, everything was there—the balance of head and heart, the Apollonian and Dionysian. Every phrase had its shape, every section its proportions, and every piece its architecture. Yet he believed that ultimately the irrational was responsible for great art, and after months of painstaking preparation, he was able to tell a student to "throw away and forget the damn score." Above all, one had to avoid a performance which was like Hamlet "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." He knew the central dilemma in performing was how to retain an inner calm

in the midst of the excitement of ecstasy , exultation, and nervousness, and he could actually get his students to experience this precarious balance.

He took the music seriously and he took his responsibility to the student seriously. But he didn't take himself seriously. In fact, he lost himself in that beautiful world of music. In this field which is usually so permeated with egotism, he transcended the ego. Music got him through life's difficulties, because music was his life. Time did not exist in such a world. The 2:00 student would still be being taught as the 4:00 student arrived, while the 3:00 student had already been there waiting an hour.

When he was in pain in the later years, he would have difficulty walking or standing in regular life, but yet could stand unassisted and teach for hours in a row when caught up in the music. His response to music was inexhaustible.

But Jack did not like to see himself as a teacher. In fact, later in life he held the view that "teachers get in the way." All through his career he aimed to get the student to think for him or herself, to not be dependent on a teacher, and to outgrow the need for a teacher. He wanted a student, most of all, to be him or herself and enjoy the act of playing. In an endeavor where everyone is obsessed with how he is perceived or how well he is doing, Jack's admonition was to "forget what anyone else thinks and just get out there and enjoy the music."

Of course, one cannot separate the teacher from the man. No one can be a truly great teacher without first being a great person. Jack saw the best in everyone, and in every situation. In turn, he brought out the best in everyone. He couldn't help but charm everyone with his innate sincerity, his honesty and his warmth. It didn't matter if it was a server in a restaurant, or if it was Leonard Bernstein, who after sharing a plane ride with Jack, termed him "very provocative." In the cut-throat and back-biting world of academic politics, Jack apparently was spared hostility. After his mandatory retirement from Oberlin, everywhere he visited resulted in an offer to teach—the Cleveland Institute, University of Wisconsin, Indiana University, Northwestern, University of Illinois.

He knew life's bitterness, pain, and darkness. He was not naïve. Yet a true gentleness, a tenderness—even an angelic quality, was present. He empathized with all who have suffered, and do suffer, in the world.

That same sense of wonder that Jack displayed in response to every musical gesture, was evident in his delight in life in all its aspects. One of my wife, Susan, and my great joys was taking Jack and Betty to Cleveland Indians games, where he never could stop marveling at the accuracy of the pitchers or the grace of the fielders. It was that same child-like wonder. The enthusiasm was always there—it was contagious.

I was almost ready to quit the piano when I came to Jack as part of his teaching overload in 1971, and he resurrected my confidence and enthusiasm. Later I had to make a come-back after being away from regular practice for years, and it was Jack who led the way back again. And he's not done showing me the way. The tools he gave me, and his confidence in me, are what will get me through future challenges.

I am just one of hundreds and hundreds of students scattered around the world who feel such devotion to Jack. Many of us would travel significant distances to spend a brief while with him. He was like a magnet. He was a Father to us all, and we could bring any problem to him.

We students also owe a debt to Betty, to Cynthia, to David, to Michael. You are the ones who gave him much of his zest for life. Many times I heard him credit each of the four of you with having taught him so much.

In addition, you shared him with us. That's no small sacrifice. At times it could not have been easy.

Despite the challenges and drawbacks of being a musician, one of the most fulfilling aspects of having devoted one's life to the cause of music is that one's work clearly does live on forever. A part of Jack is in each of us—in our lives, our teaching, and our playing. And we, in turn, can pass that along to our students. At the close of one of his unforgettable master classes, he told us all to "pass the torch." If we can be to others just a little of what he has been to us, we shall not have lived in vain.

George Fee