



AMICA International

Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association

Honor Roll

Gitta Gradova - by Alf Werolin

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AMICA's Board of Directors has just voted to confer Honorary Membership to Gitta Gradova, now Mrs. Maurice Cottle, living in Chicago. Ms. Gradova recorded at least five numbers for the Duo-Art reproducing piano, but she recalls making many more recordings than this number.

Gitta Gradova made a triumphant debut as a concert pianist at the age of 19 at Town Hall in New York. The New York *Herald* wrote: ". . . the best and most talented young pianist heard in some time." The New York *American* critic said: "A player of exceptional gifts, consisting of strongly marked interpretive talent, splendidly virile attack, accurate technical mastery, and 3 sensitive touch and soulful tone." Her Duo-Art recordings demonstrate and preserve her musical ability and insight for us -o enjoy.

She retired from a concert career because of a serious automobile accident and the duties of raising two children. However, she and her husband frequently entertained musicians visiting Chicago, among whom were such greats as Arturo Toscani, Vladimir Horowitz, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and many others.



Gitta Cottle

Mother-son relationship troubled by her musical genius

By David J. Craig



Thomas Cottle Photo by Kalman Zabarsky

Critics considered her among the best pianists of the early 20th century, yet music lovers today have never heard of her. She was championed by the likes of composer Sergei Rachmaninoff, conductor Arturo Toscanini, and pianist Vladimir Horowitz, yet no recordings of her playing are available.

Gitta Gradova (1904–1985) disappeared from classical music in 1942, abruptly quitting a sensational performance career to raise a family. To the prominent musicians she counted as friends and who regularly cajoled her to return to the concert stage -- legends such as Elman, Rubinstein, Prokofiev, and Heifetz -- it was a tragic waste of talent. And to loved ones who bore the brunt of Gradova's simmering resentment and unhappiness, says her son and biographer Thomas Cottle, it was apparent that Gradova's premature retirement eventually pushed her, and him with her, to the brink of mental breakdown.

“My mother was a remarkable person who made an unbelievably foolish, although understandable, mistake,” says Cottle, an SED professor of education and special education and the author of *When the Music Stopped: Discovering My Mother*, to be published in March by SUNY Press. At once a biography of a frustrated artist and an intimate account of Cottle's strained relationship with her, the book combines insights culled from love letters, interviews, and concert reviews with the author's own reflections and psychological analysis.

In *When the Music Stopped*, Cottle attempts to understand why his mother, a strong-willed and sharp-tongued firebrand who had been known to chew gum on stage -- and subsequently wowed audiences with her emotional playing and flawless technique -- would settle down, at the height of her career, to a conventional married life. After all, there was nothing conventional about her. A child prodigy born to Russian immigrants in Chicago, she moved to New York at age 13 to study and live with composer Sergei Prokofiev, was internationally known by her early 20s, and was firmly established in the top echelon of the world's pianists in her 30s. Opinionated, clever, and boisterous, Cottle says, she was a free spirit with a bawdy sense of humor at a time when it was considered high praise for a music critic to write that a woman “played like a man.”



Gitta Gradova with fellow pianist and friend Vladimir Horowitz. Photo courtesy of Thomas Cottle

Overtones

Among the revealing items Cottle turned up in his research were love letters from his physician father to his mother, written in the 1920s, when she was traveling regularly and performing with the world's most prominent orchestras. “He was really putting pressure on her,” says Cottle, who is also a clinical psychologist and sociologist. “In letters that are very subtle, very articulate, and very powerful, the message is: when is this career business going to end?”

Also contributing to his mother's decision to walk away from her passion, Cottle speculates, was a stage fright that worsened over her career and her tendency to allow other people to make decisions about her life -- while

generally fiery and self-assured, he says, his mother grew increasingly unable to exhibit those qualities outside of her music. “I remember as a teenager yelling at her, ‘Why can’t you express an opinion about the way you want your own bedroom decorated?’” Cottle says. “‘Say what you want!’”

Gradova never gave up playing music or associating with musicians after retiring, and Cottle says his fondest memories of her include listening to her daily practice sessions, and watching her charm guests at large parties at the family's Chicago home, which was frequented by famous musicians and other artists. “She was phenomenal on those occasions,” he says. “She'd have 50-year-old bankers and 2-year-olds eating out of her palm. The parties may have been bittersweet for her because friends were constantly asking, ‘Why aren't you playing, Gitta? You've got to play, you've got to record! You've got to, got to, got to! If you're afraid of forgetting the music, just use a music stand!’ But mostly her time with other musicians was a lifeline.”

On a daily basis throughout his childhood, however, Cottle remembers his mother as depressed, defensive, bitter, and unkempt, and the two argued constantly, especially when Cottle and his older sister were in their teens. “I think it became extremely difficult for her when my sister and I were at the age that she was when she went to New York,” he says. “I think she began to realize just how much she had given up by being a prodigy. I had sympathy for her, but I also had a lot of rage for the way she treated me, and the way she acted around the house. When I had the choice, I chose rage.”

Comeback



Gitta Gradova, age 11. Photo courtesy of Thomas Cottle