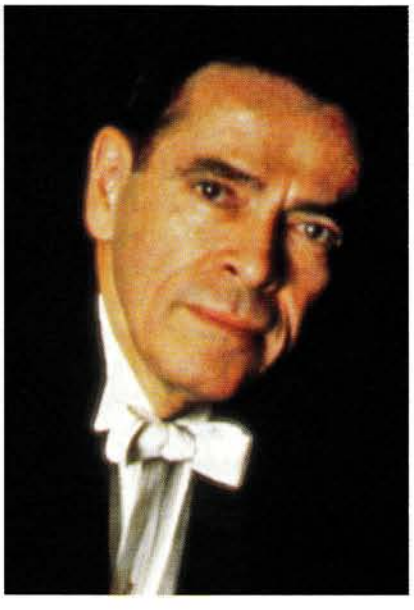
The Portrait of a Pianist

By Ernesto Valdés

Admittedly, any interview I would do of Abbey Simon would not be objective because I have known him as a friend for several years. I am ashamed to say, however, that several months had passed after our initial meeting before I learned of the magnitude of his professional standing.

Once equipped with his education in New York City and Philadelphia, he began to play with American orchestras. Although engagements were limited, the youthful Abbey Simon went to Europe in order to play with established orchestras whose audiences, weary of hearing the same soloists, yearned to hear fresh new talent. It was a call Abbey answered, although it kept him away from home for many years.

Eventually he came to play engagements on six continents from which he drew the highest accolades from critics throughout the world. To this day he keeps an active agenda of concerts around the world maintaining his permanent residence in Geneva, an apartment in New York City, and another in Houston, where he teaches piano at Moores School of Music, University of Houston.



Ernesto Valdés: Tell me something of your background.

Abbey Simon: I was born in 1922 in New York City…in Manhattan. My parents were of Russian origin but they both came here when they were very young.

EV: Were they musically inclined?

AS: Enormously musical but not professional musicians. My mother died in her 30s when I was maybe 15. The rest of the family were all doctors…if you got sick between Boston and Miami you will be treated [by family].

My son, Jonathan, who should have been a pianist because he is so naturally gifted, is a doctor in Geneva but he is a successful jazz pianist. He is a professional. Absolutely. As a matter of fact, I just left our jazz professor here, Noe Marmolejo, a record of my son.

EV: Do you have other children?

AS: No. My wife is in Geneva, and I have two grandchildren. As you know, I live in Geneva. I have three homes: I have one here [Houston], I have an apartment in New York City, but my home has been in Geneva for 50 years.

EV: Are your grandchildren musically gifted?

AS: Oh yes. They all play musical instruments. My 17-year-old granddaughter plays the piano and the harp. I believe every child should play an instrument. It has nothing to do with being a professional musician…a concert pianist or harpist or anything. I think it has been proven that any child who has a musical background does better in school as he progresses.

EV: What was your education like?

AS: My grade school education began in New York, but when I was 8 or 9 they saw I was very gifted in the piano, I had a facile gift. I enrolled at the Curtis Institute of Music, in Philadelphia, a remarkable school. I went off to school there and received the rest of my grade school education…We had English, we had history, math, and various languages. When I was at school, I could do whatever I wanted. I could go to bed at 2 o'clock in the morning, 3 o'clock in the morning. But when I came back to New York and school closed for the summer time, I had to become a 12-year old boy again. And while I loved my family dearly, I still thought of reasons to get back to Philadelphia early.

EV: So you went to high school there, too?

AS: Well, during that period…today they give degrees, like at Julliard, but in those days, they didn't, and you graduated when they felt you were ready to graduate. The result was that I graduated when I received the Naumburg Prize, which is a big competition, a very distinguished competition.

Today there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of music competitions in the

world. Every town here in the United States has a competition – whether it is Dallas, Fort Worth, Shreveport, New York – you name it. But in those days that was one of three competitions in the country and it was a very distinguished one to win. So when I won that, I was ceremoniously, or unceremoniously, graduated from the school. I was 19 or 20, something like that.

EV: What was your first professional "gig," as they say?

AS: Oh, I don't remember that. I remember playing my first professional "gig," as you say, as a student. My first date was to play at the girl's junior state penitentiary. Yes, it was a prison, a jail for under-aged girls.

And I remember sitting in what was then backstage and I was given this enormous steak to eat, which was very tough. There was this gigantic dog laying there and I gave it to the dog. I will never forget that.

EV: Were you ever in the military?

AS: Yes, but they lost.

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AS: It is very funny. I went down to enlist in the Navy Symphony Orchestra but I couldn't pass the physical. I went to the Air Force, and I couldn't pass the physical. And then the Army took me, but then my disabilities came up. I was an asthmatic and very allergic...so I was discharged after about eight months. I was sick, I was really ill with asthma and terrible allergies.

Whatever it was, and I still suffer from the same thing. When I was a kid they once did scratch tests on me and according to the results I couldn't wear wool, I couldn't wear cotton. Everything came up positive. And when I went off to Curtis, my family was all alarmed because they said I couldn't last a month. But from the day I arrived in Philadelphia, I never missed a day of school except for one severe reaction. Without that single period, I never missed a day.

EV: Why did you pick Geneva as your home?

AS: I was having career difficulties as a very young fellow. It wasn't that I wasn't successful, it was that I wasn't getting the kind of engagements that I wanted to get. I played community concerts all over the United States and Canada, but my manager at one point said, "You need an international career. You aren't getting any engagements anywhere here with the major orchestras."

I couldn't get any engagements in the United States so I went back three months later to play in the orchestras in England and Amsterdam. There was this 12-year period where I really didn't set foot in the United States, well, 13 years, maybe it was more than that. The only time I set foot [in the United States] was when I wanted to come back because the Far East, Australia, New Zealand, they all opened up to me. So, I was staying and we were living in Paris and we had a newborn son.

EV: So your professional career really got its boost in Europe?

AS: It got boosted, yes. My first records were made in Europe.

EV: I remember back in the late 50s and early 60s that one of the complaints about American artists was that one had to go to Europe in order to become known...the United States didn't really have a taste for its own artists.

AS: Well, I don't know how true that is. It just so happens that at that time, which was the post-war period, the Europeans had been hearing the same artists throughout the war years and the immediate post-war years and so if anybody had a great success, they were eager to embrace your name and make a new hero. As a result, Europeans discovered that Americans were really quite gifted.

Here, the opportunities were much smaller. Our orchestras in those days did not have 52-week employment for musicians. Most of them, with the exception of what we called a few "major symphonies," had big seasons. The smaller orchestras like Indianapolis and New Orleans had seasons of 16, 20 weeks a year so to maintain their public [support] they had to have superstars of the day. They had to have Yasha Heifetz or Arthur Rubenstein. They might have a concert with no soloist at all. So by the time you got up to 16 concerts a year, there were limited opportunities for a young artist. I think it was in the 1960s that things began to change.

EV: Other than the classics, what genre of music do you like?

AS: I love jazz, but I love real jazz, the jazz of my infancy – the 1940s—you know, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Larry Benton, all those men.

While I do play jazz, I don't play real jazz. When I was younger, I played in restaurants in the summer time. There was one in Fenton, New York where I played. I think it's still there.

EV: Do you have a favorite venue that you look forward to?

AS: Whichever one I'm playing at.

EV: Is there a favorite conductor you like to play with?

AS: Dimitri Mitropoulos, one of the great conductors. One day, the phone rang and it was a friend of mine, he said, "What are you doing now?" I said, "Nothing." "I'm coming over with Dimitri." Well, I mean, I practically went into hysterics! I had no idea I would be auditioning for one of the outstanding conductors of my time. And 20 minutes later, he [my friend] came in with Dimitri Mitropoulos. And I, of course, met him at the door and sat him down in the chair. Mitropoulos started to laugh. He said, "Come on, sit down, relax. We'll sit here and we'll talk." We talked for about one hour and then he said, "Well, play me something." And I played for him for perhaps another hour. I remember after playing he invited me to dinner. Later, I got a letter from one of the big management firms who informed me of an invitation to play. Mitropoulos was a wonderful person and he was apparently wonderful to many young people.

So, if you ask my favorite...my heart belongs to Mitropoulos because he went to so much trouble for me.

You cannot stop loving to play with the Boston Symphony or the New York Philharmonic or the Philadelphia Orchestra. Any of those orchestras...American orchestras now are very good.

EV: Have you done any composing?

AS: You asked me that question years ago when I had come in late

to the bar of the restaurant—"Do you compose?" I answered you, "Yes, but the trouble with my compositions is they sound like other people's music, like Ravel and Chopin," and you looked up and said, "Those bastards." I've quoted that story all over the world. No, [I don't really compose] and the fault is because I was lazy.

EV: How many students do you carry here at UH?

AS: It varies. I only take the very talented ones.

EV: Do you hand pick those students from auditions?

AS: Yes, that goes for all the teachers here. We have very selective auditions and pick only the best students. Sometimes we say that so and so plays well enough to get into school but not as a piano major. If he wants to choose another instrument but not to play the piano. There is no messing around with that. As a matter of fact, I think our standards get higher and higher all the time.

To come play with me, you have to be a pianist. But, I have seen people who really did not study the piano very well, come in with a great love for music and with a different degree where they could teach music with love, enthusiasm. And you would hear them and say, what a pity that he didn't start earlier because he was so gifted.

EV: Is there any danger in those kids getting burned out or is this the kind of creativity....

AS: No. Nobody is driving these kids eight hours a day. I repeat. I mean, some of them practice one-half hour. They are young. Some of them are only 6 years old, 5 years old. And some of them practice more than one-half hour and they are already interested in music. The idea of the preparatory school is to surround them with other children who have talent to give them a basis of comparison with the other children.

EV: How do you find these children? Do they audition?

AS: No. I don't know how they get into the preparatory school. I don't know if they have to audition. I don't know how that works, except that there is no question that the school is very beneficial.

EV: How did you wind up at UH?

AS: I had taught at Julliard, one of the best schools, for a number of years but it got to be too big. I loved the school but I realized I wanted to teach in a university setting. By that time, Julliard was already at Lincoln Center. Milton Kaditz, who was the director of the school (UH, Moores School of Music), asked me to come here and he sort of chased me around. In

Abbey Simon performing at his piano.

Photos courtesy Gurtman & Murtha Artist Management

world. Every town here in the United States has a competition – whether it is Dallas, Fort Worth, Shreveport, New York – you name it. But in those days that was one of three competitions in the country and it was a very distinguished one to win. So when I won that, I was ceremoniously, or unceremoniously, graduated from the school. I was 19 or 20, something like that.

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1978, I guess, he invited me here for one day to come and "see for yourself." I had known him for a long time so I came. I stopped off, and he showed me what I would have to do, and what my duties were and I have been here ever since.

When I decided we should organize the Houston International Piano Festival, Milton, who died a few years ago, helped me enormously. I mean, I had the grandiose idea of starting this piano festival but if it had been left in my hands, the detail, the nitty-gritty, it probably would have never seen the light of day but with the assistance of Miriam Strain, it suddenly came into fruition and it has been here now for over 20 years or so.

EV: Is the goal of your teaching more technique and mechanics?

AS: No, it is not that. I am teaching first and foremost an interpretation of what is on the printed page. In other words, some of them think that because a composer writes notes on a page that that is all there is to it. But it isn't that. I mean, we can all recite a Shakespearean speech and it is the same. Put another way, we can all read the Bible but everybody reads it and understands it in a different way. The same thing happens with the printed page of music. The notes on the page are just the first step, how we get to understand them within the piece of music is another. In other words, if you see a forte, an F forte, it doesn't mean you have to play it like you are hitting someone in the nose. If you see a pianissimo, it doesn't mean a pianissimo that you don't project.

Pianissimo to me, at the piano, may be the most challenging if I am playing on stage of Carnegie Hall, which has 3,000 seats. That pianissimo has to be heard by the student who sacrificed his meager funds. Or, if an actor in a drama whispers into the ear of his beloved, "I love you," the guy in the last seat in the theater also has to hear, "I love you." That is an element which people in the theater, people in music, in opera call "projection." The public wants to love what a performer is doing and if they are not being reached by the music they may not know how beautifully he may be playing.

I have always had friends who were artists, not because I pretend to be one of them but because I envy them. Over the years I have found they have one thing in common: an incessant urge to convert the intangible into impressions the rest of us can grasp. Thus from notes inked on paper in a distant time, the pianist lends his interpretation in a way that carries us into worlds beyond us or, perhaps, within us. As Abbey reminds us, however, it is not the degree of the artist's mechanical perfection that moves us; it is the artist's interpretation that illuminates the music.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."
The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon a blue guitar."

"The Man With the Blue Guitar"
Wallace Stevens, poet (1879-1955)

A woman and her violin *continued from page 53*

The Houston Symphony Fidelis Quartet, in front of Carnegie Hall, June 10, 2005. Left to right: Cristian Macelaru, Jefferey Butler, Ilgin Aka, Mihaela, Rodica and Wei Jiang.

Baptist University?

RW: In 1995, I got a call from the dean, I was in school at the time. Dr. Ann Debour, and she got a referral from the dean who used to be there who was a conductor, Dr. Bob Linder. He knew of me from performing with him and he recommended me to Dr. Debour who was looking for a violin professor; they had only one student that year. So she called and I said, "Sure, I'd like to give it a try." I started with one student in '95 and now I have six. So, you know, we are trying to build this within the department.

EV: Tell me how "Tre Voci."

RW: Professor John Henderson at HBU, and the cello professor, and I started playing together and we formed "Tre Voci." We went to New York in 2003 and had our debut there. I made my Carnegie Hall debut there in 2002 with John on the piano and Tre Voce. Then I went back in 2004 with another pianist friend of mine. In 2005, Fidelis Quartet, which is a quartet from the Symphony, which includes my sister, my cellist from Tre Voci, Jeffery Butler, are going to New York to make our debut as a quartet.

EV: Have you ever returned to Romania?

RW: Four times. I went back starting in '93, right after the revolution. It was sad because the people who were still there have a hard life. In a way, during communism everybody was the same, everybody had enough food, nobody was starving. Everybody had jobs, right now, it is very hard, there is very rich and very poor, there is no middle class. You know, it's shocking. It's very hard for us, I realize going back, to talk to my old teachers or friends that are still living there and they somehow expect a little bit from you, from us coming from the West, to give them presents, or money to help…It's tough.

My sister and I are very lucky to be where we are today and of course I'd like to thank Mr. Luca for bringing us to the States, but to also thank our parents for bringing us to the level where we are now and everything that we are and for our education from such an early age, you know, in music the earlier you start the further you get. Anyway, I'll try to make a career out of it. It's really hard, but that's what I love to do.