

Three Great Pianists

Clara Haskil (1895-1960)

The international piano pedagogue **Peter Feuchtwanger** pays tribute to the great pianist, one of the foremost Mozart players of the 20th-century, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of her death.

'Never, even amongst my most illustrious colleagues, have I met with that incredible and disconcerting facility and pianistic ease, which manifested itself always with a spontaneous, uncalculated, natural flow of the music. That which others achieve by work, research and reflection, seems to come to Clara from Heaven without problems.'

Thus wrote Clara Haskil's close friend, Nikita Magaloff. Other colleagues and critics were no less enthusiastic: Dinu Lipatti described her playing as 'the sum of perfection on earth' whilst Rudolf Serkin, much to her embarrassment, nicknamed her 'the perfect Clara'. Despite such admiration from the twentieth-century's musicians, international fame came to Haskil late in her career due to a tragic life beset by ill health and adversity.

Born in Bucharest on January 7, 1895 of Sephardic Jewish parentage, Haskil's precocious musical talent was evident in early childhood. After the death of her father, her uncle brought her to the attention of a celebrated piano teacher in Vienna, Anton Door, who described meeting this girl in the *Neue Freie Presse* in 1902:

'This child is a miracle. She has never had any music lessons beyond being shown the value and names of the notes. More did not seem necessary, for every piece of music that is played to her she repeats by ear without mistake ... [and] ... in any key ... It seems incredible, for this early maturity of a human brain strikes one as uncanny.'

In 1903 she began piano studies, and soon created a stir in musical Vienna with a performance of Mozart's Concerto in A major, K488. In 1905 she entered the Paris Conservatoire, where she impressed the director, Fauré. Joining Cortot's class in 1907, she graduated three years later with the Premier Prix. She proceeded to give concerts in France, Switzerland, Italy and Bucharest. In Switzerland, the 16-year-old was heard by Busoni. Greatly taken by the young pianist's performance, he invited her to study with him in Berlin, but her

mother declined the offer on the grounds that her daughter was too young. The first of many severe physical setbacks brought Haskil's concert career to an abrupt halt in 1913, when in an attempt to delay the onset of scoliosis (curvature of the spine), she was forced to spend the next four years in a plaster-cast.

Though acclaimed in later years as the foremost Mozart player of her generation, it was in such works as *Islamey*, *The Great Gate of Kiev*, *Feux follets* and the Brahms B flat Concerto (which she learned in two days!) that she excelled when she was young. She learned *Feux follets* by hearing Vlado Perlemuter play the piece at a private function: when she performed the work a few days later, she confessed afterwards that she had never seen the score!

From early childhood Haskil was very fond of the violin: the playing of Joseph Joachim had moved her almost to tears. Peter Rybar, the Swiss violinist, recalled an occasion in Winterthur in 1944 when, during a rehearsal break, Haskil picked up a violin and began playing the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto. Rybar could hardly believe his ears: the playing was perfect, with impeccable phrasing and intonation and, above all, a most exquisite tone. Yet she claimed to have had barely three years of violin tuition and to have practised only on the day of her lesson! Throughout her career she partnered many great string players, amongst them Ysaye, Enesco, Casals and Grumiaux.

The outbreak of the Second World War once again interrupted Haskil's career. Shortly after a gruelling escape from occupied Paris to the free zone in the south, she began to suffer from double vision, accompanied by severe headaches. A tumor pressing on the optic nerve was diagnosed. A doctor was smuggled out of Paris to perform an operation which, against all odds, proved a success. When news came that the Germans were about to occupy the south, Haskil managed to escape to Switzerland with the help of influential admirers.



In the last ten years of her life Haskil, to her own astonishment, found herself in demand all over the world. 'Suddenly, everyone wants to hear me and I don't seem to play differently from before!' After hearing her play at the 1954 Salzburg Festival, Hans Keller wrote: 'Haskil played Mozart's great A major K 488 without showing off either her virtuosity or her lack of exhibitionism: the rarest of achievements in a solo artist!' When she performed the same Concerto in 1958 at the Royal Festival Hall in London, *The Times* critic observed that 'she simply expunged from the Concerto what was temporal and found instead what was eternal.' No one who heard her will forget how a hall fell into a hushed silence as her bowed figure approached the platform with almost floating step, how she crouched over the keyboard, and proceeded to coax from the instrument sounds of unearthly beauty.

Arriving in Brussels with her sister Lili, in December 1960, a few days after partnering Arthur Grumiaux in a triumphant concert in Paris, Haskil lost her grip and tumbled down a steep stairway at the railway station. Rushed to a hospital unconscious, doctors fought to save her life. Regaining consciousness briefly, she spoke to Lili and to her younger sister Jeanne, quickly summoned from Paris, asking them to tell Grumiaux how sorry she was not to be able to play with him the next day. Holing up her hands weakly, she whispered with a faint smile, 'At least, I didn't damage these!' In the early hours of December 7, 1960, Clara Haskil died. ■