

OUT OF THE SHADOW

His father, Artur Schnabel, may be more famous, but Karl Ulrich Schnabel – who was born 100 years ago – was one of the greatest pianists and teachers of the 20th century, says **Stephen Wigler**



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Karl Ulrich Schnabel: 'The very essence of a great teacher'

Several years ago I was one of three jurors invited by the Peabody Conservatory of Music to judge its annual school-wide piano competition. During a break for lunch, we three – the others were the pianists Claude Frank and Tong-Il Han – were joined by Peabody's Leon Fleisher, the doyen of American pianists and piano teachers. Conversation was sparked by Han's observation that nearly all of the most promising contestants seemed to be students of a young Russian émigré, who had recently been appointed to Peabody's faculty.

'He definitely has a knack for getting the best out of a student,' said Fleisher.

'A sort of latter-day Baltimore version of Schnabel?' suggested Han, making reference to Artur Schnabel (1882–1951), one of the 20th century's greatest pianists and teacher of pianists, whose celebrated students included not only Fleisher and Frank, but also Clifford Curzon, Rudolf Firkušný, Adrian Aeschbacher, Lili Kraus, Carlo Zecchi and Leonard Shure.

'Schnabel – yes,' said Fleisher.

'But not the Schnabel you think,' added Frank.

'Karl Ulrich, Karl Ulrich,' Fleisher sang out.

'You were the Schnabel we're most grateful for.'

Most piano aficionados know Karl Ulrich (1909–2001) as Artur's piano-playing older son – a second son. Stefan, had a distinguished career as an actor – who, before the second world war, was his father's teaching assistant in Berlin and, after 1933, in Tremezza on Lake Como in northern Italy. They are also likely to know that Karl Ulrich partnered his father in recitals and on several classic recordings of the two-piano and four-hand repertoire, and that after the war he was part of another two-piano



From left: Karl Ulrich with his parents Artur and Therese Schnabel in Berlin, 1912; Artur and Karl Ulrich performing on two pianos, 1940s; Karl Ulrich, 1940s; Therese, Artur, Karl Ulrich's daughter Ann and wife Helen, and Karl Ulrich in Menaggio on Lake Como, Italy, 1949

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team, the Piano Duo Schnabel – first with his wife, Helen Fogel Schnabel (1911–1974), and then, a few years after Helen's death, with Canadian pianist Joan Rowland.

What they may not know is that Karl Ulrich was one of the 20th century's most successful teachers. Before and after the war it was Schnabel *filis* – not Schnabel *pere* – who actually did most of the teaching of younger students, like Fleisher and Frank. 'While Artur primarily taught the piece, Karl Ulrich taught the student as well,' said Frank that day at lunch. 'His lessons were indispensable for me. Almost everything I know of technique I learnt from him and he was – throughout his life – always available to provide musical counsel. In no way was he a shadow of his father.'

Today, Fleisher is just as adamant about Karl Ulrich's importance. 'He was the very essence of a great teacher. Inspiring, imaginative, inventive, motivating, moralistic without being overbearing, he would instil a set of values not only for music but for life. His imagery was irresistible as well as enlivening, his way with the triple icons of German Romanticism – resignation, reconciliation and redemption – was revelatory, all communicated with a deft and light hand, witty and avuncular.'

One hundred years after Karl Ulrich's birth, his students – which include long-established major pianists as Richard Goode, Murray Perahia, Peter Serkin and Ursula Oppens, as

well as up-and-coming stars Jon Nakamatsu and Stanislav Ioudenitch (the first-prize winners, respectively, of the 1997 and 2001 Cliburn Competition in Fort Worth) – want the secret out: Karl Ulrich was one of the 20th century's greatest teachers. And some recent releases, made available through TownHall Records by the Schnabel Music Foundation (see boxes on pp.35 and 36), may shed light on another secret: Karl Ulrich, like his much more celebrated father, was one of the best pianists of his time.

Nevertheless, Karl Ulrich's son-in-law, François Mottier, who is the president of the Foundation, says his father-in-law never underestimated how difficult it would be to make his own way as a pianist, given his heritage. 'He knew how hard it would be to be taken seriously as an artist because he was his father's son,' explains Mottier.

Many aficionados wrongly assume that Karl Ulrich was a student of his father's. In fact, his only teacher was Leonid Kreutzer (1884–1953), one of the great proponents of the Russian school – he was among Anna Essipova's favourite students in St Petersburg – and, with the elder Schnabel, one of the two most important piano teachers at Berlin's State Academy of Music. But while he never studied formally with his father, he often played his concert programmes for him. 'He was never dogmatic in his musical advice,' Karl Ulrich told David Blum in a 1994 interview for the *New York Times*.

'Quite the contrary. He hated it when students were obsessed with imitating him.'

Recognising that the family name would prove burdensome, Artur tried to persuade his son to become a conductor and Karl Ulrich left Kreutzer's studio in 1926 to study conducting. It did not take long for him to discover that he had neither an interest in nor a talent for the baton, and by 1929 he was giving piano recitals. 'For the first ten years of my career I was always the wrong Schnabel,' he said to Blum. 'Sometime later, I came upon a recording of the pianist Jean Casadesus, son of the famous Robert Casadesus, and thought, "That's the wrong first name; this probably isn't very good." And I suddenly asked myself, "What am I saying?"'

Karl Ulrich's career in Germany was interrupted in 1933 by the advent of Hitler; and his European career was brought to an end in 1939 by the outbreak of war. The Schnabels were Jews and they recognised that, for them, continuing to live in Nazi-occupied Europe was a death sentence. Karl Ulrich made it to safety in the United States, where he was joined in New York by the other members of his family. But his life had been changed by forces other than Fascism. He had fallen in love with one of his father's students, a young American named Helen Fogel, and in 1939 they married. In less than two years their daughter, Ann (now Ann Schnabel Mottier), was born.

Although he was lucky to have escaped at almost the last moment, his arrival in America could not have come at a worse time, says Ann: 'Now in his early 30s he was no longer a young pianist.' Unlike his father he was not an internationally famous musician. And unlike ▶



From left: Helen and Karl Ulrich as the Piano Duo Schnabel in the late 1950s; Karl Ulrich, 1980; Karl Ulrich at a masterclass in the early 1990s

• another émigré, his slightly older (by six years) contemporary, Rudolf Serkin, who had made his American debut several years earlier and who had already acquired a prestigious faculty position at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, young Schnabel had no American reputation, no job, no money and no powerful friends. In fact, he didn't even own a piano and was not able to acquire one until after the war. 'He had a terrible time with that,' says Ann. 'For six years he didn't own a piano and didn't go near one.' During the war, she adds, her parents worked in the defence industry.

In 1947, now nearing 40, Karl Ulrich returned to concertising, playing some solo dates but largely concentrating on the four-hand repertoire with the Piano Duo Schnabel, in which he performed with Helen until her death in 1974. Devastated by her loss, the grief-stricken pianist did not return to this music until 1980, when he began performing with Joan Rowland, who remained his partner in the Piano Duo Schnabel until his death in 2001. 'The literature for four hands at one piano is sadly neglected,' Karl Ulrich said in the 1994 documentary about his life and teaching, *Con Brio: Karl Ulrich Schnabel: Master Teacher of Piano* (first released in 2001 and now available on DVD from TownHall Records). 'There are four volumes of Schubert, which include such treasures as the F minor Fantasy, the "Grand Duo" and the A flat Variations; there are wonderful pieces by Mozart, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Dvořák and Debussy.

'Four-hand playing is a complex art that requires enormous time and patience,' he continued. 'You are half of a whole rather than a whole in yourself. The four-hand repertoire

possesses qualities of chamber music, symphonic music and virtuoso music – sometimes all in the same piece.'

Some of Karl Ulrich's four-hand and two-piano performances with his father can be found in the eight-CD EMI collection *Artur Schnabel – Scholar of the Piano* (50999 2 65064 2 5). Others can be found on various Artur Schnabel collections on the Pearl and Arabesque labels. Karl Ulrich's collaborations with Helen Schnabel and Joan Rowland can be found on TownHall Records. Richard Goode says that what one hears in Karl Ulrich's playing in his four-hand partnerships is a noble etching of musical line, conveyed with a transparency of texture comparable to that of a fine string quartet. 'This contributed to his amazing sense of balance in ideas about voicing,' says Goode. 'He believed that everything must be transparent and he had a rare ability to articulate these underlying elements in his classes on interpretation.'

He also had a way of expressing complicated things simply.

'A reporter once asked me to define beauty in music in a few words,' recalled Karl Ulrich in *Con Brio*. 'He thought he would floor me completely. I answered with a single word: proportion – the same as in all the other arts. My father gave much attention to this. There are dynamic proportions: the differences in

weight of successive beats within the bar and of bars within the phrase – these follow the unique formulation of the given piece of music. And there are rhythmic proportions: minute deviations from absolute rhythm – so subtle that you couldn't even call them rubato.'

He commanded an unusually wide range of technical means to attain his musical ends. He meticulously explored the artistic possibilities of the pedal, in both its timing and its shadings. 'His imagination and tone colouring were revelatory, his discovery of varieties of articulation opens a new vocabulary for the piano, he even teaches how to make a crescendo on a single note,' noted Peter Serkin in *Con Brio*.

Karl Ulrich began teaching again when he returned to Lake Como in Italy in the summer of 1947, and he went back every year thereafter to resume the tradition of summer masterclasses for young musicians that his father had started in 1933. Teaching played a growing role in his life, especially from the late



Karl Ulrich teaching, c.1997



The evidence on four collections, recently released by TownHall Records, suggests that throughout his career, Karl Ulrich Schnabel remained as steadfast in his commitment to playing the piano as he was to developing and encouraging young musicians. The solo piano performances – some live, some in the studio – range in time from 1934 (19 of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* on *The Schnabels – A Musical Legacy: Unpublished or Lost Historical Recordings*, THCD-74, 2-CDs) to 1971 (Schubert's Sonata in A minor D845 and *Moments musicaux* D780 on *Karl Ulrich Schnabel – 100th Birthday Celebration*, THCD-69). All of them display a pianist with an abundance of style, insight and technical expertise. Karl Ulrich did not deserve to be obscured by his father Artur's shadow; he should have been recognised, not as his epigone, but as the heir to his mantle.

I was most curious to hear Karl Ulrich's performances of Chopin's C sharp minor Scherzo and three of Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage* (both on *Karl Ulrich Schnabel – The Tenth Decade – A Celebration*, THCD-58, 2-CDs). We know that until the mid-1920s Artur was still programming Chopin's 24 Preludes and B flat minor Sonata (Horowitz recalled with enthusiasm the performance he heard in

St Petersburg) and Liszt's B minor Sonata, 'Funérailles' and *Mephisto Waltz* (Curzon heard Artur perform these works for an all-Liszt recital in London that he called 'colossal'). But except for a few piano rolls of Chopin, Artur left no evidence of how he might have played either composer.

Karl Ulrich's performances, therefore, bring us about as close as we're going to get. He presents a clear, beautifully organised performance of the Chopin Scherzo: the notes roll deliciously off his fingers, and in the coda he is sensational. His *Années* is just as impressive, with playing of poetic delicacy and formidable power. The performance of Schumann's *Papillons* on the same collection reminds me of Schnabel père's 1947 recording of the same composer's *Kinderszenen*. Like his father's performance, Karl Ulrich's is distinguished more by its strength, clarity and organisation than by its flickering and vanishing flights of fancy.

The all-Schubert disc (THCD-69) is superb. Karl Ulrich's account of the late A minor Sonata D845, while played without repeats and relatively straight in its approach, still manages to include tenderness along with Classical discipline. The six *Moments musicaux* are played with appropriate lyricism that eschews affectation. And Schnabel plays the virtuosic, forearm-straining *Wanderer Fantasy* with sure magnificence. His performances of Mozart and Beethoven (on *Karl Ulrich Schnabel: Mozart, Beethoven* THCD-68) will remind many listeners of those by his father. The trills and the haunting atmosphere of the theme-and-variations finale of Beethoven's op. 109 could not be more exquisite.

1960s onwards. He was to give hundreds of masterclasses in almost every important school of music on the earth's six habitable continents. With humour and humanity he combined the scholarly learning and the insistence upon fidelity to the score that were characteristic of his father with the direct emotionalism of a born showman. In *Con Brio* he urges an Israeli teenager to take risks in the coda of Chopin's G minor Ballade. 'The audience will love it because they realise that you are risking your life for them,' he says. 'The audience doesn't want security – that's what we want on the streets at night when we're going home. But we don't want it at the piano – we want risk.'

Karl Ulrich always attributed his musical emotionalism and his emphasis upon the intuitive to the influence of his mother, lieder singer Therese Behr, whom he often accompanied in recital. 'She had a spontaneously heartfelt approach to interpretation,' he told Blum. 'I grew up immersed in the world of Schubert and Schumann song cycles. Her emotionalism complemented [my father's] fascination with musical form.'

It was around 1970 in New York that Goode – along with his friends and fellow-students Perahia, Oppens and Serkin – first experienced

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RICHARD GOODE

Karl Ulrich's lessons. 'I learnt more about him from teaching than from anyone else and I still remember his classes the way one remembers particularly revelatory performances,' says Goode. 'He would rarely make a point without drawing attention to the score and always gave you a sense that the score could be mined for ever more illumination. I think he was obsessed with the idea that *everything* must be heard. But this tremendous attention to detail was combined with a zest for life that liberated him and set his fantasy free. He made you feel that once you struck a note the adventure was just beginning. When he taught Schumann's *Kreisleriana* or G minor Sonata, for example, the goblins were really let loose – there was a sense of living on the edge.'

'There was another extraordinary thing about him,' continues Goode. 'He never behaved like a master on high. He seemed a student like the rest of us; we felt we were engaged in the same processes together, trying to achieve the same

things. And he remained a profound student till the end of his life.'

The four pianists, all still in their twenties, were so impressed that they began to study privately with him. 'He invested everything he did with an enormous kind of joy and adventure,' says Goode. 'The lessons were marathons – three or four hours. We all had a sense of walking on air. Today I still look at the scores he marked for me. There are interesting ideas everywhere and each time I feel the old feeling of exhilaration returning.'

Goode, along with Serkin and Perahia, had studied earlier with another detail-oriented, Austro-Germanic classicist: Rudolf Serkin. 'We learnt enormously from Serkin, maybe more from his example than from his teaching,' says Goode. 'Possibly because in his teaching, one got a feeling that he was never satisfied.' Karl Ulrich, too, was never satisfied, adds Goode. But with Karl Ulrich 'I always felt that never being satisfied was a good thing. That you were always

reaching for something higher. And there was a feeling of aspiration about it. Studying with him was the only time in my life that I looked forward to and actually enjoyed lessons.'

Karl Ulrich's was a most satisfying career; he played neglected masterpieces for four hands for most of his life with a partner with whom he saw eye-to-eye musically and loved deeply; he always

had a number of solo engagements, he was in ever-increasing demand as a teacher, and he was loved and revered by his students.

But he had to endure one great disappointment, according to Ann Mottier. 'As successful as he was in his teaching and as deeply satisfying as he found it, his career as a performing musician meant more to him. Especially as he grew older,

he was bitter about the musical marketplace, saying that the music profession had reached an all-time low in which public relations had taken over everything. Nevertheless, he remained optimistic; I remember him saying that he thought audiences wouldn't stand for it much longer. I don't think he would be too happy with what's happened in the eight years since he died.'

THE SCHNABEL LEGACY

The founders of the Schnabel Music Foundation – Ann Schnabel Mottier, the daughter of Helen Fogel and Karl Ulrich Schnabel, and her husband, François Mottier – describe the organisation's purpose in the following manner: 'The Schnabel Music Foundation was created to illuminate the musical contributions of the entire Schnabel Family – a legacy of creativity that began with Artur and Therese, continued through Karl Ulrich and Helen, and found its ultimate expression in their grandson, Claude Mottier.'

This declaration of purpose may sound like a justifiable expression of pride in the legacy left to the rest of us by one of the great families in 20th-century Western music – and in a way it is. But the SMF was born out of the greatest tragedy any family can suffer: the early loss of a child, particularly one so promising, so gifted in intellect, and so kind and sweet in nature, that he became the cynosure of his family.

Long before his premature death in 2002 at the age of 30, Claude completed important original work in fields as diverse as biology, linguistics and philosophy. But the overriding passion of his life had always been music – he had always loved to talk to his grandfather Karl Ulrich about what it had been like to grow up as Artur Schnabel's son in pre-war Berlin. And while he had been suffering from an inoperable brain tumour, his unexpected death in a tragic car accident shocked his parents and his young wife, Erika Zoe Schutzman, whom he had married scarcely three years earlier. Anyone who is interested in musical pedagogy should read his brilliant essay, 'Karl Ulrich Schnabel's Approach to Expression', which can be found on the foundation's website.

'The idea of the SMF came to us because whenever a family loses someone, friends always ask where they can send a contribution,' says Ann. 'It became obvious that it had to be about music because he [Claude] was so passionate about it.'

François explains that the foundation has been busy making accessible Artur's compositions. 'His first love was composing,' he says. 'At a very early age he wrote six short pieces for piano solo, over 20 songs, and a piano concerto, all in a Romantic "Richard Straussian" style. A few years later he changed to a more modern musical idiom and wrote the Notturmo for contralto and piano, and solo compositions for cello, violin and piano. There is also a significant body of chamber music.' The SMF continues to issue this music with Peermusic Classical, and is co-sponsoring three CDs of his songs and chamber works for the CPO label in 2009 and 2010.

It has published Artur's writings in cooperation with Wolke Verlag: most recently a complete re-edition of his autobiography *My Life and Music*, now re-titled *Music, Wit and Wisdom*, and in 2007 *Artur Schnabel: Music and the Line of Most Resistance* (see review in the next issue of *IP*), which contains rare lectures. 'He gave few lectures as he didn't feel comfortable talking about music,' explains François. 'Nevertheless he had very strong feelings about the importance of music performance and the obligations of the performer to the composer.' The foundation has also just privately published a small monograph of writings of and about Claude Mottier, and it is working on publishing the correspondence between Artur and Therese as well as Artur's letters to other musicians.

The SMF is making available the family's recordings – so far seven CDs of remastered material has been released on TownHall Records, and next year it will finish the remaining four CDs of four-hand music played by Helen and Karl Ulrich. The foundation also provides information to music researchers, explains François: 'Someone sent us photos of an upright piano that showed the stamp, "Ä. Schnabel, Berlin", asking if we would be interested in acquiring the instrument. (A. Schnabel

was a music store that had nothing to do with

the Schnabel musicians.) Most music history-related questions we refer to the music archive of the Academy of Arts in Berlin, which houses the Schnabel family archives and where Dr Werner Grünzweig, the most knowledgeable Schnabel expert, heads the department.'

www.schnabelmusicfoundation.com



Karl Ulrich with his grandson, Claude Mottier, in 1986. The Schnabel Music Foundation was set up after Claude's death in 2002.



Leon Fleisher and his wife Katherine visiting the SMF's display at the World Pedagogy Conference in Las Vegas, November 2007.