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Inside the Music

At ninety-five, Professor Emeritus Roman Totenberg is a presence in the music world - teaching, traveling, and performing.

By Jean Hennelly Keith

Roman Totenberg arrives at his College of Fine Arts studio on a gray January afternoon to teach, as he has since 1961. The CFA professor emeritus, who celebrated his ninety-fifth birthday on New Year's Day, congratulates Yevgeny Kutik (CFA'07) for winning another violin performance award. He then listens intently as the young man plays a Bach fugue he is preparing for summer festivals. Needing no score for reference, Totenberg scrutinizes the presentation note by note, measure by measure, advising changes in tempo, fingering, and phrasing. "Bach put the D down because he didn't know how to get to the E string," Totenberg says dryly. "Once in a while you find there's a note because he has to get someplace." Totenberg wields his own violin to demonstrate the bowing, swaying to the music and sweeping his bow, instructing in a low mumble and nodding affirmation when his student tries again. At session's end Totenberg invites Kutik to his home for extra lesson time.



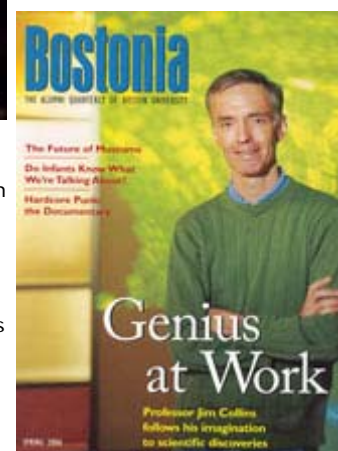
Photographs by Kalman Zabarsky

Kutik, who was born in Russia and studied with other famous violin teachers as a youngster, says Totenberg's style "doesn't touch your own personality, doesn't bend you to a preestablished form, as some teachers try to do. He gently guides you so you don't have bad habits or bad musical ideas, but he lets you express yourself." Next in the studio is Jin-Hee Kim (CFA'07), who has studied with Totenberg throughout her doctoral program. She begins with an intricate piece by Ravel. When she starts quietly, Totenberg quickly interrupts her with, "I think you are too modest," and encourages a more assertive approach. "Don't get softer too soon," he says. "It has to be forte." At the end of a rigorous lesson that extends well beyond the allotted hour, he offers, "I think it's pretty good."

"He tries to solve the problem from the musical structure first, then the technical," Kim says. "The most interesting thing is, he doesn't say much, but just his presence helps me understand the music better."

Totenberg's teaching philosophy has been greatly influenced by his own teachers, some of the preeminent European violinists of the early twentieth century. He's played violin for more than eight decades and performed with the major orchestras of the Western world — the Berlin, Vienna, and London Philharmonics, the Concertgebouw, the New York Philharmonic, and many others — for audiences that have

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included European aristocracy and American presidents. With a repertoire from Bach to Vaughan Williams, Totenberg has made recordings on wax, vinyl, and CD, and he's taught generations of musicians who perform around the world and who remain in touch with their mentor. Today he continues to travel, judge some of the world's most prestigious violin competitions, perform occasionally, and of course, teach.

Good teaching requires flexibility and respect for individuality, Totenberg believes. Getting to know students' personalities, what he calls their "mental organization," helps him cultivate their musical understanding, just as finding adjustments to accommodate their different builds helps his students strengthen their technique. "You direct the students," he says, "but you try to understand them — what are their strong points, what are their weak points. Then create an atmosphere to help them develop."

He has observed a general shift in violin teaching over the years that emphasizes technical proficiency over artistic expression. "It is our job as teachers to imbue the spirit of the composer," he says. "Beethoven and Brahms are different."

Prodigious Talent

When Totenberg was three, his family moved from Warsaw to Moscow, where his architect father was transferred to build bridges at the start of World War I. A Russian neighbor who took care of the young boy was concertmaster of the Moscow Opera and began instructing him when he was six. Within a year Totenberg was performing with his teacher at local schools, receiving white bread, butter, and sugar as payment — sustenance for his family during those war-ravaged years. By the time he was eight, Totenberg knew that playing violin was his calling.



Roman Totenberg with composer Darius Milhaud; Totenberg premiered a Milhaud concerto in Aspen, Colorado, circa 1955.

"We were simpatico," says Totenberg.

Photographs courtesy of Roman Totenberg

When his family returned to Poland a few years later, he enrolled in the Warsaw Chopin Conservatory of Music, and at eleven debuted with the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra. He recalls going through high school "very normally, but I played, gave concerts, and toured throughout Eastern Europe." At the time, Carl Flesch was "the figure in violin teaching," says Totenberg, who went to Berlin to study with him, winning the Mendelssohn Prize at his Berlin debut at age eighteen for the Brahms Violin Concerto.

In the early thirties, with Hitler's rise to power in Germany, many of Eastern Europe's artists and intellectuals, including Totenberg, fled to Paris. There he mingled with Marc Chagall, George Balanchine, Pablo Picasso, and Gertrude Stein. He continued violin studies with Georges Enesco, who like his close friend Flesch was a product of the Paris Conservatory and, says Totenberg, an outstanding musician. Totenberg debuted in Paris at twenty-two and met composers and conductors whose work he would later premiere and with whom he would perform. His deep friendships with composers Darius Milhaud and countryman Karol Szymanowski began there. He met and studied briefly with Pierre Monteux, a conductor "famous for understanding soloists," he says, who would conduct the Boston Symphony Orchestra for Totenberg's debut at Symphony Hall in 1955. He became friendly with Igor Stravinsky's son, Soulima, and they would help found the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara during the fifties. Together they composed the critically acclaimed *Cadenzas and Fermatas to Mozart's Violin Concertos*. Having formed a close friendship in Paris with renowned pianist Arthur Rubinstein, Totenberg toured South America with him in 1937.



Program for a Town Hall concert in New York, circa 1937 — ticket prices began at \$.83.

Captivating America

Totenberg was invited to tour in the United States and vividly recalls playing at the White House for President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936. Having recently performed for Italian royalty, with the most formal protocol observed, he was especially struck by the contrasting atmosphere at the Roosevelts' soiree. "The elevator was broken and people were running up and down stairs," says Totenberg with delight, "and Eleanor served us dinner herself." America's free spirit and informality charmed the young violinist.

Heeding the intensifying danger signals in Europe, he immigrated to the United States in 1938, becoming concertmaster of the New Friends of Music Orchestra in New York City and, during World War II, director of live chamber music concerts for the *New York Times* radio station, WQXR. Totenberg flourished as a concert soloist and chamber music performer in his adopted country and was one of the first virtuosi to appear in Germany after the war.

Praise came from all quarters. "Such firmness of melodic line, of rhythmic pulse comes only from someone who is totally sure both of his bowing technique and of his musical

purpose," wrote a critic in the *London Times*. Composer and music critic Virgil Thomson wrote that Totenberg "is the smoothest bow arm of all and, in consequence, has the most evenly sustained legato line. He has the temperament, the ability to put himself inside a piece, which is valuable, and the stylistic understanding of how one piece or period differs from another, which is indispensable."

Totenberg takes special pleasure in playing the "three Bs — Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms" — and also has championed contemporary music, giving world premieres of violin concerti by Milhaud, Samuel Barber, and William Schuman, *Capriccio* by Krzysztof Penderecki with the Berlin Philharmonic, sonatas of Hindemith, Honegger, and Martin^u, and works of BU colleague Lukas Foss (Hon.'03). Totenberg commissioned Leonard Bernstein to write his *Serenade for Violin Solo, Strings and Percussion*.



Totenberg with his students at the Boston University Tanglewood Institute in July 1968.

Generation to Generation

"He could have dedicated his life to performance only, but he decided, 'I will teach,'" says Ludmilla Leibman, a CFA assistant professor, who has arranged for Totenberg to teach master classes in Russia in recent years through the Educational Bridge Project, a school of music program fostering the exchange of music and musicians between Boston and St. Petersburg. From the outset, Totenberg blended performance with teaching. He is fond of pointing out that his first teaching job — at age eleven — was giving lessons to an eight-year-old. By midcentury, his summers were a sequence of festivals, where he both performed and taught: the Salzburg Mozarteum; the Music Academy of the West; the Aspen Music Festival, where he was a founding associate and collaborated with Milhaud; and later at Tanglewood, as director of the Boston University Tanglewood Institute (BUTI) strings from 1966 to 1974. Since 1975, he has spent every summer teaching at Kneisel Hall in Blue Hill, Maine, a scholarship program for gifted string students from all over the world.

"What is very striking to me," says pianist Seymour Lipkin, Kneisel Hall director and Totenberg's longtime colleague, "is that young people come in, a little raw, and how much they mature over the years as they return. He is very devoted to these kids in an unusually fine way. He stays with them long



At Commencement 1997, Totenberg with daughters Amy and Nina Totenberg (COM'65), Amy's daughter, Naomi Green (COM'97), and Naomi's father, Ralph Green. Not in the photo is daughter Jill Totenberg (CAS'69). Photograph by Kalman Zabarsky

after they are out of his teaching purview; he works to get them engagements."

Totenberg joined the Boston University faculty in 1961 and was longtime chairman of the string department. Wilbur Fullbright, former director of the school of music and a professor emeritus, says Totenberg "created the kind of environment in which students could be happy and thrive. He would discuss the music with them; he never forced his interpretations on them. He takes a remarkable interest in his students and they love him." Winning the University's highest teaching honor, the Metcalf Cup and Prize for Excellence in Teaching, in 1996 was very meaningful to Totenberg: "It was quite thrilling to have students and faculty come to my class" to participate in the selection process. He also headed violin departments at other music schools and was director of the Longy School of Music from 1978 to 1985. In 1981 Totenberg received the Artist Teacher of the Year award from the American String Teachers Association.

His students play around the globe. Acclaimed Chinese virtuoso Mira Wang (CFA'89,'92), touring in Europe since performing at Totenberg's ninety-fifth birthday concert this winter, furthered her studies at BU under Totenberg's sponsorship. Eva Svensson (CFA'68,'73), violinist with the Montreal Symphony, first met Totenberg at the Salzburg Mozarteum, where she came for summer study from her native Sweden. She went on to earn bachelor's and master's degrees at CFA, supported by scholarships that he facilitated for her. Totenberg, who speaks Polish, Russian, German, French, Italian, English, Spanish, and bits of other languages — initially taught her in German because, she says, "I had terrible English." She recalls times in Boston when her funds ran out. "He took me home, fed me, and found little extra jobs — always in a very classy way. He's absolutely my mentor. He's always displayed this generosity to his students." Totenberg and his late wife, Melanie, who managed his music career, were noted for taking in students, especially international students, who needed a touch of home. Even today, alumni from around the world correspond with their former professor and often stay at the "Totenberg Hotel" when visiting Boston.



Daniel Han (CFA'98,'00,'02) at a lesson with Totenberg in April 2000. Han now plays in the first violin section of the Minnesota Orchestra in Minneapolis. Photograph by Fred Sway

His teaching influence reaches from his students to their own pupils. Ikuko Mizuno (CFA'69), who worked on a master's degree with Totenberg, is a teaching associate at CFA and at BUTI, which Totenberg helped develop. Mizuno was the first woman violinist to join the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and she has been a member for more than thirty years. "When I teach my own students," she says, "I remember he would never say, 'You must,' but instead ask a question, 'How about trying this?'" They are regularly in touch and occasionally travel abroad together. "Everybody in the symphony says how lucky I am to still have a relationship with my teacher."

Dazzling the Crowd

At Totenberg's ninety-fifth birthday concert in February, the Tsai Performance Center overflowed with well-wishers. His daughters and colleagues paid tribute; his students, including Kutik, performed solos and duets; Wang dazzled the audience with *Rondo Capriccioso* by Saint-Saëns with the Boston



Totenberg performing Szymanowski's Fountain of Arethusa at his ninety-fifth birthday concert on February 7. Photograph by Fred Sway

University Symphony Orchestra, conducted by David Hoose, a CFA music professor. A film montage highlighted Totenberg's recent visit to Poland, his homeland, which in 1988 awarded him the Polish National Medal of Cultural Achievement.

The evening was jubilant, but the most anticipated moment was when Totenberg stepped onto the stage to play. He had chosen *Fountain of Arethusa* by Szymanowski. "It is one of the most poetic compositions that I know," Totenberg told the audience. His performance moved the crowd to its feet.

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