



# Teacher, Mentor, Father, Friend



Above: Gary Graffman in 2018

Top: A lesson with current piano student Daniel Hsu. Mr. Graffman often teaches in his New York apartment, filled with Asian objets d'art collected during his travels as a performer, teacher, and adjudicator.

PHOTOS: Charles Grove

Curtis celebrates the 90th birthday of its past leader and beloved piano faculty member, Gary Graffman.

**Gary Graffman's rich history with Curtis** stretches back more than eight of his nine decades. He enrolled at age seven as a student of Isabelle Vengerova, graduating at 17 in 1946. His professional debut the next year, playing with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, kicked off a whirlwind career that sent him touring continuously around the world for over thirty years. During this time he performed and recorded the most demanding works in the literature to critical acclaim.

In 1979, an injury to his right hand limited Mr. Graffman's concert activity to the small body of repertoire for left hand alone. But he continued to perform, inspiring several new works for left hand commissioned for him. And with more time to explore new avenues, he renewed his connection to Curtis, joining the piano faculty in 1980.

His decision to become a teacher has profoundly affected the lives of dozens of gifted artists whom he has mentored over the years. Celebrated for his ability to bring out the unique voice in each student, he kept giving lessons even as he took on the artistic leadership of Curtis for 20 years between 1986 and 2006, with his beloved wife Naomi at his side. While heading the school, he drew on deep friendships with major artistic figures like André Previn, Mstislav Rostropovich, Isaac Stern, and Galina Vishnevskaya, bringing them to Curtis to pass along their wisdom to students in all disciplines.

In the following pages, *Overtones* offers a 90th-birthday tribute to this legendary figure through images and testimonials from his piano students and colleagues.

## A CONCERT TRIBUTE

The first Curtis Symphony Orchestra concert of the 2018-19 season celebrates Mr. Graffman's 90th birthday, as alumnus Haochen Zhang performs Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3. For details, visit [Curtis.edu/Performances](http://Curtis.edu/Performances).

Below: In the Bok Room with two friends, Isaac Stern and Mstislav Rostropovich, in 1990.

Both were frequent visitors to Curtis, and Mr. Rostropovich served on the cello faculty and conducted tours of the Curtis Symphony Orchestra. PHOTO: DON TRACY/CURTIS ARCHIVES



Gary and I have been colleagues for 38 years. I have the utmost respect for him as a teacher and performer, and I am proud to call him my friend.

*Eleanor Sokoloff (Piano '36), Curtis piano faculty*

Gary is more than just a teacher and mentor to me. He has helped me to see and believe my talent and strength, and shared with me his extraordinary wisdom, wit, artistry, and passion for life and music. I'm forever grateful to him.

Happy birthday, Gary!

*Natalie Zhu (Piano '97)*

It goes without saying that Gary Graffman is a world-class artist. He's a man of impeccable taste and endless wisdom. A master craftsman, his attention to the minutest of details and turns of phrase continues to challenge us as musicians. His approach and respect for the music serves as inspiration for us all. And if you're lucky enough, he'll sit you down, with a twinkle in his eye, and tell you stories of the golden days, brimming with adventure, friendship, and sometimes a hint of mischief. I have been so privileged to call this man my mentor and teacher.

*Daniel Hsu (Piano), current student*

To me, Mr. Graffman's uniqueness as a teacher is not only about all the valuable insights he has given me throughout the years. Even more important is his fundamental belief that an ideal teacher should never impose his/her own shadow onto the students, but rather try to make them realize their own artistic selves. Never departing from this principle of teaching, he always treats us like independent beings rather than students, and encourages us to be self-critical rather than relying on what he has to offer. The feeling of equal respect I received in my lessons was one of the most pleasant experiences of my time at Curtis. It also inspired me constantly to look deeper and deeper into how I was personally relating to music and what I really wanted to pursue for myself.

It would be every child's dream to receive an immense amount of knowledge from a teacher while at the same time an equal amount of freedom, and I am so fortunate to have experienced this reality.

*Haochen Zhang (Piano '12)*

Clockwise from top left:

Leading a panel discussion with faculty members Orlando Cole, Jascha Brodsky, and Eleanor Sokoloff in 1995 PHOTO: DON TRACY/CURTIS ARCHIVES

With Naomi Graffman in 2006 PHOTO: L.C.K. HART/CURTIS ARCHIVES

Yuja Wang in a 2008 lesson with Mr. Graffman PHOTO: MICHAEL BRYANT/COURTESY PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER



It's hard for me to put into words my huge affection and admiration for Gary. He has been my teacher, mentor, and friend for the second half of my life, guiding me personally and professionally through the warmth in his heart. He has made me a better human, not just a better musician!

Gary and Naomi have shown me such love and encouragement and I will be forever grateful to them.

**Yuja Wang (Piano '08)**

Ever since I started studying music at five years old, I have listened to Mr. Graffman's recordings. Like all the kids studying piano in China, I admired him so much as a legend. When I got to know him in person, I admired him more. He is the most down-to-earth, loving, and caring person I have ever known. He is also funny, and very responsible: Once in a lesson, he asked me if I played a wrong note in Mozart's Concerto No. 17, because he could remember that when he was seven, he played C sharp instead of C in that passage. It turned out to be a mistake in the edition, but I was amazed by his attention to detail.

I've learned from him that being a great artist is not enough. Being a genuine, loving, and honest person is what matters.

**Wei Luo (Piano), current student**



Gary, you are such an inspiration to all of us. You are a teacher, mentor, friend, father, rabbi, and beyond. You not only taught us how to play piano but also how to become human beings, artists, and all-around musicians. Happy 90th birthday to you! May you have many, many more to come.

**Chieh Chang Lee (Piano '91)**



Teaching Lang Lang in 1998  
PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON/CURTIS ARCHIVES

Gary is the best person and teacher I've ever met, as well as the most loving. I remember that when I was at Curtis, he treated each of his students as his children; we were all his kids. His attention to students, especially to me, is beyond words. His music-making still kindles my passion.

Studying with him at Curtis was the happiest time in my life, and I'll always love him as a father.

*Lang Lang (Piano '02)*

Let us be reminded that Gary Graffman is, first and foremost, an extraordinary artist: this is obvious to anyone who has heard him unfold, with exquisite pacing and immaculate control, the Bach-Brahms Chaconne or the Ravel Left-Hand Concerto. Those of us not fortunate enough to have heard Gary in his earlier, "two-handed" years can still go back and listen to his plethora of recordings, such as of Schubert's "Wanderer" Fantasy—assured yet unforced; exuberant yet unhurried: the finest rendition I've ever heard of this misunderstood and treacherous piece.

Gary has profoundly influenced three generations of students through his marvelously understated method of teaching that can only be described as Socratic: by patiently weaving question upon question—relentlessly but kindly—Gary guides students to an ever more cultivated conception of the score, the composer's likely intent, and the pianist's role in bringing it to new life; and, by his consistent focus on voicing, shape, and balance, he instills in them a lifelong commitment to real musicianship that far outlasts the brief shelf-life of superficial flashy pianism.

But it is through Gary's personal qualities that we can best take his true measure. With his incomparable Naomi by his side—a perfect match if ever there was one—Gary has been an invaluable mentor, a generous colleague, and the dearest of friends to my family and to me, and, I know, to countless others: a man whose love of life, music, and fellow human beings reminds us, in the most direct way that, where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

*Ignat Solzhenitsyn (Piano and Conducting '95), Curtis piano faculty*



Mr. Graffman collaborated with two longtime friends to premiere a left-hand concerto written for him in 1991 by composition faculty Ned Rorem. André Previn conducted the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in the 1993 premiere. PHOTO: DON TRACY/CURTIS ARCHIVES

**MORE ONLINE**

See more photos and hear recordings of Gary Graffman at [Curtis.edu/Graffman](http://Curtis.edu/Graffman)