Week Four
The Early Giants

Sergei Rachmaninoff
Josef Hofmann
Leopold Godowsky
Benno Moiseiwitsch
Artur Schnabel
Josef Lhévinne
The Early Giants

Sergei Rachmaninoff

1873 - 1943
One of history’s most accomplished musicians, Sergei Rachmaninoff was a composer, pianist, and conductor—and indisputably world-class in all three areas.

He focused on piano performance after the Russian Revolution took away his family’s estate, thus requiring him to change his outlook from a country gentleman with sufficient income to pursue music, and become instead a working musician with a concert schedule.

His playing has been captured for posterity by a long series of meticulously-made discs for RCA Victor, including many of his own compositions.
Sergei Rachmaninoff

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18: III

Sergei Rachmaninoff, piano
Leopold Stokowski, conductor
The Philadelphia Orchestra
Recorded 1929 by RCA Victor
Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto was his first important composition after treatment for severe depression. It brought him world fame and remains among the most beloved and popular piano concertos in the repertory.

There’s just nothing like hearing Rachmaninoff himself play it, with his favorite orchestra (The Philadelphia Orchestra) conducted by his esteemed colleague, Leopold Stokowski.

We’ll hear the last half of the finale, starting with that wonderful second theme.
The Early Giants

Josef Hofmann

1876 - 1957
Hofmann was on the stage as a prodigy so early that he aroused the attentions of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and a New York financier provided money for Josef to stay off the stage and study privately until he was of age. As a result, Josef went to Berlin and was trained by the great 19th century pianist Anton Rubinstein.

He was one of the most powerful musical minds around, capable of learning a complex piece of music on one play-through and with a repertory that encompassed just about everything from Mozart through Brahms.

He was the first director of the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, starting in 1927, and held the post until 1938.
Frederic Chopin

Waltz in C-sharp Minor, Op. 64 No. 2

Josef Hofmann, piano
Recorded 1912
The bulk of Hofmann’s best recorded legacy dates before the advent of electric recording. He resisted offers from RCA Victor to become a regular recording artist, and made no commercial recordings after 1923. A number of later captures of broadcasts do him a disservice, since by the 1930s alcoholism and other issues had taken a devastating toll on his pianism.

This performance of the Chopin C-sharp Minor waltz, put down on a single side of a 12” disc in 1912, gives us Hofmann at his luminous best: elegant, refined, and perfectly measured playing that avoids even a hint of coyness or blandness, so often the case with the most polished players.
The Early Giants

Leopold Godowsky

1870 - 1938
Was he the greatest technician in piano history? He has a valid claim to that distinction.

It’s hard to tell in some ways given the paucity of his recorded legacy, and his tendency towards stage fright—a problem that extended to his recordings.

However, once in a while he relaxed in front of the microphone …
Franz Schubert-Leopold Godowsky

“Morgengruss” from *Die Schöne Müllerin*

Leopold Godowsky, piano
Recorded 1926
Godowsky recorded two of his transcriptions of Schubert songs in the mid-1920s; they’re both among his finest performances that we have.

His extreme care and meticulous voicing is very much in evidence, as is his nobility and warmth.

Tidbit: Godowsky’s son Leopold Jr., the co-inventor of Kodachrome film, married Frances Gershwin, the younger sister of George and Ira Gershwin. That gave Godowsky père a Hollywood connection—illustrated in the slide show that accompanies the performance.
The Early Giants

Benno Moiseiwitsch

1890 - 1963
In the late 19th century two piano teachers attracted most of the ambitious young pianists in Europe and America:

Franz Liszt and Theodore Leschetizky

Each had their most famous pupils: for Liszt, those were Hans von Bülow and Carl Tausig. For Leschetizky, those were Ignaz Paderewski and Artur Schnabel.

Moiseiwitsch studied with Leschetizky from 1904 to 1908. He taught at Curtis for a decade, and settled in England starting in 1937.
Maybe he was never a headliner like Rachmaninoff or Hofmann, but he was as good a pianist as you’ll hear—and he was remarkably consistent from concert to concert, and from recording to recording.

He was equally at home in concertos, in chamber music, and in solo repertoire.

For anyone who admires fine piano playing, this is a pianist to admire.
Frederic Chopin

Fantasy-Impromptu in C# Minor, Op. 66

Benno Moiseiwitsch, piano
Recorded 1957
Moiseiwitsch kept on recording right into the early stereo age.

As of 1957 he was in glorious form (well, he was always in glorious form) as this superlative performance of a familiar and well-beloved piano piece shows.

The Chopin *Fantasy-Impromptu* is written in *one-part rondo form*, in which two statements of a Reprise flank a middle, contrasting Episode, which in this case just happens to be one of Chopin’s best-known melodies.
The Early Giants

Artur Schnabel

1882 - 1951
The inimitable, irreproachable, incomparable Artur Schnabel.

OK. So he wasn’t all that great of a technician.

OK. So he didn’t bother doing re-takes on some of his epochal Beethoven recordings, even when he got lost in the finale of the *Hammerklavier* sonata.

OK. He was Schnabel. Here he is playing the first movement of Beethoven Op. 110.

You just can’t do it any better than this.

OK?
Ludwig van Beethoven


Artur Schnabel, piano
Recorded 1932
Exposition: Primary

Piano, con amabilità (soft, with amiability)

With sixteenth-note accompaniment

Crescendo (get louder), to sforzando (accent), then fade to ...

Piano, leggeramente (lightly); shimmering arpeggios

Slow crescendo, begins a modulation (key change)

LH-RH dialog, descending; molto legato (very connected)
The Early Giants

Ignaz Friedman

1882 - 1948
Like Godowsky and Rachmaninoff, Ignaz Friedman was a virtuoso of virtuosos, a pianist of such titanic technical accomplishment as to dwarf most pianists before or since.

A composer as well as a pianist, he toured extensively over a 40-year career, but left us only a few recordings. After WWII he settled in Australia, where he died.

This performance of the Chopin “Revolutionary” Etude, with its infamous left-hand challenges, is glorious — free, passionate, and apparently not the slightest bit concerned with the work’s daunting difficulties.
Frédéric Chopin

Étude in C Minor, Op. 10
No. 12 “Revolutionary”

Ignaz Friedman, piano
Recorded 1925
Josef Lhévinne

1874 - 1944
An astounding hyper-virtuoso, Josef Lhévinne was blessed with a poet’s touch, as well as a well-known fascination with astronomy. He was also one of the great teachers of the 20th century, together with his wife Rosina.

Although he was a fine musician with a strong sense of form and structure, his recordings are all of short *morceaux*, stuff that could fit on 1 or 2 sides of a 78 rpm record.

But at least we have his legendary recording of the incredibly over-the-top arrangement of Strauss’s *Blue Danube Waltz* by Adolf Schulz-Evler. To hear Lhevinne play it, you’d think it was just basic Czerny exercises, and not one of the supreme physical challenges of the repertory.
Johann Strauss, Jr.-Adolf Schulz-Evler

Blue Danube Waltz

Josef Lhévinne, piano
Recorded 1928