

Eugene Istomin

US pianist at the centre of a celebrated trio

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The pianist Eugene Istomin, who has died of liver cancer aged 77, was among the most respected American musicians of his generation. Especially renowned in his celebrated piano trio with Isaac Stern and Leonard Rose, he was admired for his rich and singing tone quality, and for the seriousness with which he always placed his virtuosity at the service of the composer.

As well as the Viennese classics and the music of Chopin, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov, he occasionally championed contemporary music by Ned Rorem, Roger Sessions and Henri Dutilleux, who all composed pieces for him. "Eugene was not a specialist in contemporary music," Rorem said last month, "but he played it better than most of the people who were."

Both Istomin's parents were professional singers, Russian immigrants to New York, where Eugene was born; he made his concert debut at the age of six, accompanying his mother. The Russian pianist and teacher Alexander Siloti, a cousin of Rachmaninov and pupil of Liszt, recognised his talent and oversaw his early training, under the guidance of his daughter Kyriena. He also sent him to play to Rachmaninov, but advised against letting him perform as a child prodigy.

In 1939, aged 13, Istomin entered the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia as a student of Rudolf Serkin, whose Germanic influence provided an intriguing counterpoint to the earlier Russian training. Another teacher was the Polish pianist Mieczysław Horszowski, a prime exponent of the pure musicality that became one of Istomin's hallmarks.

Istomin hit the headlines in 1943, when he won both the Philadelphia Orchestra youth award and the Leventritt award, which respectively provided him debuts with the Philadelphia Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic. These took place within one week; he played the Brahms Second Piano Concerto under Eugene Ormandy in Philadelphia, and Artur Rodzinski in New York. He was just 17.

His first recording was the Bach D minor Keyboard Concerto with the Busch Chamber Players, with whom he toured in 1944-45, and in 1945 he made a spectacular Washington DC debut, playing an all-Chopin programme with the National Symphony Orchestra on a barge on the Potomac river. He first visited Europe in 1950, and his solo career subsequently encompassed six continents and more than 4,000 concerts. His conductors included Leonard Bernstein, Fritz Reiner, Leopold Stokowski, George Szell and Bruno Walter.

Chamber music was one of Istomin's greatest loves and, in 1950, he became the youngest musician to take part in Pablo Casals's festival in Prades, France. His first chamber recordings were with the great cellist and the violinist Alexander Schneider, in trios by Beethoven and Schubert. In 1975, 18 months after Casals's death, Istomin married his widow Marta. The president of the Manhattan School of Music since 1992, she is his only survivor.

Istomin got to know Stern and Rose in the 1950s. They played trios for pleasure until 1960, when they decided to make a concert tour - after which there was no turning back. Their

collaboration continued into the 1970s, and their recordings of Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Brahms and Mozart are counted as classics.

The Istomin family settled in Washington in 1980, where Eugene had become a founding artist of the Kennedy Center on its opening in 1971. In 1985, he became director of the University of Maryland piano festival for two years, renaming it after the pianist William Kapell, who had died in a plane crash in 1953.

More recently, Istomin taught at the Manhattan School of Music, but maintained an active performing career. In 1988, he toured 30 US cities, taking his own two pianos and a piano tuner with him, declaring that this would help him "bring the standard of a New York or Paris concert to the most modest venue". The tour was so well received that he repeated it annually into the 1990s.

In 2001, he made the world premiere recording of Paul Paray's *Fantaisie* for piano and orchestra with the Budapest Symphony Orchestra under Jean-Bernard Pommier.

Istomin was much loved for his sociable personality and wide-ranging cultural outlook; he also counted baseball as a passion. He is to be buried in Vendrell, Spain, in the same cemetery as Casals.

· Eugene George Istomin, pianist, born November 26 1925; died October 10 2003.