

Chautauqua Music Festival Piano Programme, July 2005

Established in 1874 by two idealistic men, Lewis Miller and John Heyl Vincent, the Chautauqua Institution is a secure community centred around the arts, education and recreation. Like part of a set of Russian nesting dolls, Chautauqua's unique seven-week piano programme fits into this remarkable community.

Over the four days I was there, I heard Elmar Oliveira play the Brahms Violin Concerto with the Chautauqua Symphony; sat in on parts of James Douthitt's elevating four-day pedagogy workshop, attended Rebecca Penneys' illuminating presentation on what the piano can teach the performer about sound; heard Robert Schwartz's lecture and ravishing recital on Debussy's Etudes, Book II; relished Raymond Gottlieb's mind-expanding sessions on finding and overcoming stress points in learning; and enjoyed the performers' competition. Despite that tightly packed schedule, I still missed much of what Chautauqua has to offer.

Marty Merkley, vice president and director of programmes oversees 1,000 activities – orchestral concerts, recitals, theatre performances and lectures – over the 65-day summer season. About 170,000 visitors float in and out for varying durations, with about 7,000 in residence at any given time. Each summer, a timely issue is chosen as a theme for lectures and classes: ethics was the topic for 2005. Guest speakers often play at the national and world level and the list can be eye-poppingly impressive for a first-timer.



Chautauqua Institute

The Piano Programme

Rebecca Penneys, a remarkable pianist and long-time faculty member at the Eastman School of Music, has headed Chautauqua's piano programme over the last 20 years. She is assisted by pianists Joel Schoenhals, Nicola Melville, Steven Laitz and John Milbauer (all performing pianists on US college faculties), and behavioural optometrist Raymond Gottlieb. This entire support system shepherds 25–30 advanced students through an intense journey intended to develop their self-sufficiency as musicians and pianists.

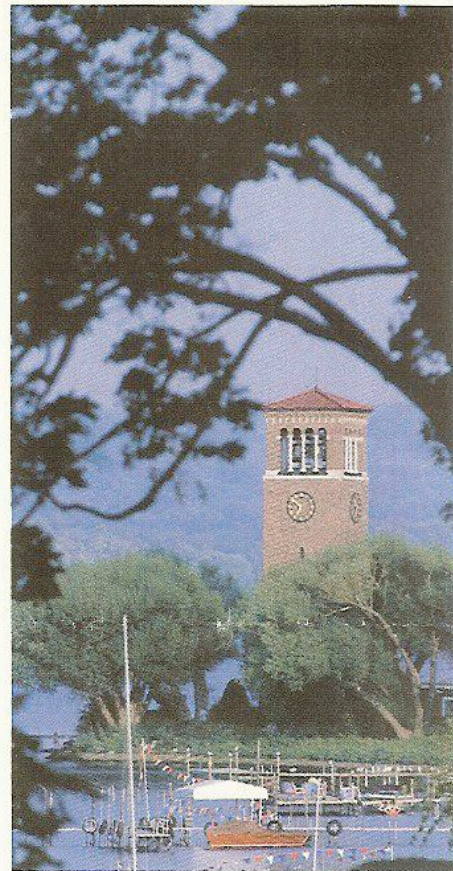
Although the brochure states the lower age limit as 16, exceptions have been made for younger gifted students. ('Talent is talent,' Penneys explains.) Auditions draw from around the world. Those chosen are divided into two groups to study with Schoenhals and Melville, who are in residence throughout the entire term. After three weeks the students switch teachers. All the students also study with Laitz and Milbauer, both of whom are there for only part of the season. Penneys keeps careful charts, teaching every student either privately or in open lessons or masterclasses.

Everyone is expected to play in the competition, held in three rounds over three days. At stake are cash prizes and performance opportunities. The first day each played a virtuoso etude and a lyrical piece chosen from five set works. Twelve advanced to the second round to play 20 minutes of varied repertoire. In the final round, six played a 35-minute recital. No first prize was awarded this year, but Emily Fan was presented with second place, and Rebecca Choi third.

The idea of a required lyrical piece reflects Penneys' observation that many of today's pianists do not know how to make the piano 'sing'. That observation provides a clue to what distinguishes Chautauqua's piano programme from others. The shape of the programme has evolved out of a vision Penneys has of piano-playing. She speaks of a motto she and the staff have developed over the last few years: 'Building a Sound Future for the Future of Sound'.

She had always been interested in historic recordings of great pianists. In a lesson she had with Artur Schnabel, he insisted that three hours' practice was the maximum needed. Any more was wasted time and energy. In other words, capitalise on focused attention. Her ideas also began to come together when she first had access to a Pleyel fortepiano, one of the forerunners of the modern instrument. Directions in many works, such as the long pedal marks through harmony changes in the opening of the last movement of Beethoven's 'Waldstein' Sonata, suddenly made sense in the light of the instrument's sound qualities – in particular the rapidity with which sound decayed. She took this new understanding as an invitation to reconceptualise composers' works in this light.

Teasing out distinctions among types of practising (learning and memorising the score, dealing with physical and mental stress points, practising performance), Penneys speaks of unleashing imagination by becoming attuned to the vibration of strings and of sound decay – by tone and by feel. Through that feedback, the instrument can teach the performer about piano sound. Playing becomes an interaction of the pianist with the music, the composer and the instrument.



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Dr Raymond Gottlieb brought an innovative way of confronting anxiety in performance, drawing from an improbable source: behavioural optometry, where the key to improving eyesight or alleviating sight problems is sought through behaviour rather than surgery. When he says, 'nobody talks to you about how to practise,' he means that rarely does anyone teach how to stay in the moment; how to analyse and work through technical problems; where to focus one's attention. The aim is to achieve a 'flow state', where the performer can anticipate well enough to avoid derailing as he plays, and, if necessary, to recover easily from any mishaps.

Because the programme is small, the high degree of coordination among the staff works to the benefit of both students and faculty. Students see that the staff 'as pianists' are willing to explore, change and grow in public. Melville says, 'Most people find a voice and they're done – that's it. Here the approach is more personal, more holistic yet traditional.'

All the teachers refer to the importance of making the room to be 'in process': each sees himself as a person who is still growing and not as a finished product. For Schoenhals and Melville, it means feeling an obligation to serve as role-models for students. As Schoenhals expresses it: 'The only reason I'm a musician is because it feels honest, and that feeling goes right into performance.' Judging from the consistently high quality of expressive piano playing heard over those four frenzied days, he speaks for staff and students alike.

Margaret M. Barela