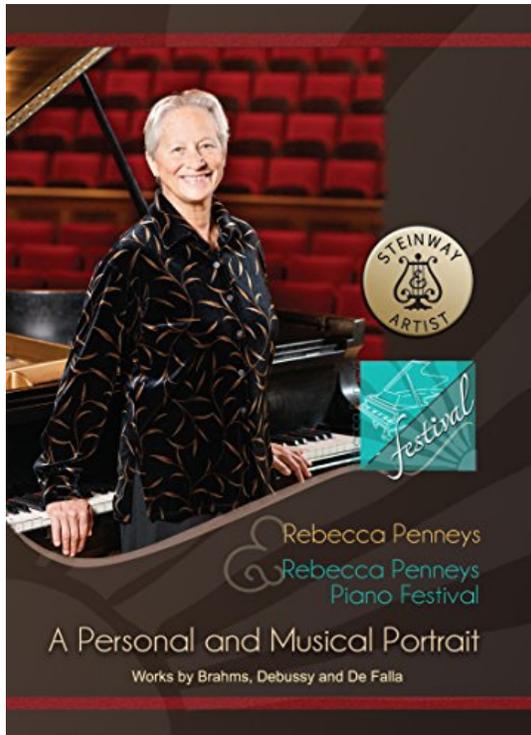


Feature Article by [Christopher Brodersen](#)

## A Conversation with Pianist Rebecca Penneys



### [Rebecca Penneys: A Personal and Musical Portrait](#)

[DVD; NTSC](#)

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In preparing for this interview, I discovered that I had an old CD of yours on the Fleur de Son label titled All Brahms.

Oh, really?

I must have received this over 20 years ago, when I was writing for Continuo. Back then, of course, our game was period keyboards—harpsichord, fortepiano, and so on—and so it never got reviewed. But I've always enjoyed that disc, especially your performance of the Brahms Hungarian Rhapsodies.

Those are a lot of work! They're very un-pianistic.

Are they? What about the first piece on your DVD, the Sonata No. 3? Even though I'm not a pianist, that one strikes me as an even tougher nut to crack.

It's really a symphony for piano. Brahms's piano works were written either in the early part of his life or in the later part, and the sonatas fall in the early part. There's no question that Brahms was quite a pianist—his first fame came as a concert pianist, not as a composer—and all of these works were written for his own performance.

The concept and structure of these sonatas, the Third Sonata in particular, is orchestral in dimension. Every composer has his or her own fingerprint, and what makes this sonata so special is the architecture; not one

note is wasted or superfluous. The textures are so specific. For that reason, it's such a challenging, uplifting work. It's an amazing piece.

My whole life as a performer has been about sound and bringing a sense of history into the modern world. The All Brahms CD as well as the DVD were both recorded on my own instrument, an 1891 Steinway D, an instrument that Brahms could have played, although of course he didn't.

In effect, a historical instrument.

Even though it's been rebuilt, it's a historical instrument because the hammers haven't been lacquered—they're "aged" Steinway hammers that go way back. When Ted Kostakis of A.C. Piano Craft in New York rebuilt the piano, I asked him to strive for a mellower sound in the treble. I also had the shift pedal set up so that the hammers can strike either one, two, or three strings, almost a "moderator" kind of effect.

The treble of that instrument is quite lovely.

I wanted to have a piano with a warmer, darker sound, one with a wider range of easily accessible colors. My piano is special in that sense; it just doesn't have the modern German Steinway sound.

Agreed. It definitely doesn't have that glassy Steinway sound.

My intent in recording these DVDs was to give a gift of sorts to the younger generation. I want them to be aware of color and nuance, of a more "loving" kind of sound. While I enjoy playing fortepiano and harpsichord, I feel that you can still do a great deal with modern piano. I want to bring the past into the future; I don't want students to lose sight of that.

Some of the colors of my piano are part of its basic nature, some of them are a result of the shift pedal. I just finished giving a seminar at the end of the most recent Rebecca Penneys Piano Festival, RPPF for short, about all the different uses for the soft pedal. Once you have the proper tool—a piano with a soft pedal that allows you to hear the effect of playing on one or two strings, then you can go to other pianos and quite easily produce the same result. You now have a sound source. I keep telling my students: It's so important to play Mozart or Beethoven on a fortepiano. Only then will you be able to hear what these composers were hearing when they composed the music.

At the seminar we got into a discussion about the right pedal—I call it the crescendo/decrescendo pedal. I showed them how you can keep a bass note reverberating, while at the same time just "dusting" the upper strings with the dampers. Also, how you can make it decrescendo.

One of the great joys of the fortepiano is its relatively rapid decay. In the slow movement of the "Waldstein" Sonata, for example, you don't have to change the pedal all the time. But you can create exactly the same effects on the modern piano if you know what you're doing, if you learn to "massage" the piano in a certain way. While my piano is very sensitive to these nuances and has an unusual clarity, I can still do much of this stuff on a regular modern Steinway. This is what my life is all about, and these DVDs are an attempt to leave a footprint or legacy, so that this knowledge doesn't fade away.

RPPF is also about trying to give students a pathway, a way of following their passion, so that they can turn it into a successful profession. For some students, RPPF is an opportunity to choose the right teacher and school. We have 19 different teachers on our faculty; the students can have as many lessons with as many teachers as they want. Or they might participate in the Professional Development Seminar, or Mini-RPPF, which helps them find their "voice." We try to show them how they can contribute and make the world a better place. I'm proud to say that all of this is completely tuition-free. Now that I'm retired from academia, this is what occupies my time.

I imagine that you know the name Kristian Bezuidenhout.

Of course—a fabulous fortepianist.

He's a former student. I'll never forget when he played my piano for the first time. He said, "How is this possible?" He was amazed at the clarity—he thought at first it was straight-strung, which of course it isn't.

I thought we might talk a bit about your background. How did you get started with the piano?

I started the piano just because it was there, in the house. I had the ability to sing any tune I heard, and to play it back on the piano. I was born with the "gift" of perfect pitch. I also loved to dance. I was always dancing around the house. Because of that, my parents arranged for me to have dance lessons even before I started on the piano.

Of course, it's the typical story. When one has talent, it's always a delicate balance between being pushed too much and not enough. I did win competitions as a kid. I also trained professionally as a ballet dancer. In the end I had to choose between music and dancing, and that was a tough choice.

Who was your most influential teacher? Was it somebody early on, or somebody during college?

That's really an impossible question, because there were so many.

Well, give me the top two then.

There's a huge difference, of course, between who shaped you when you were a child, and who shaped you when you're older. My first piano teacher, whom I didn't like at all, used to play me the recordings of Bartók—this was Bartók himself playing. There was something about the sound—these were 78s, of course—that had a huge impact. It was so emotional.

Then there was Aube Tzerko, who was a Schnabel disciple. The next big, big influence for me was György Sebök, a Hungarian pianist and my teacher at Indiana. I might also mention that I had some lessons with Arthur Rubinstein, even though he didn't actually teach—he just played for me. These were invaluable. For chamber music I was lucky enough to study with János Starker and Josef Gingold. Both of those teachers were very special to me.

What all these teachers have in common—for example Rosina Lhévinne, with whom I studied at Aspen when I was 12 or 13—was the sound. With all of these people that I've mentioned, in the end it's all about sound. Everyone approaches technique—which is really about control—a little differently. But for every great pianist, it eventually comes down to the sound. The sound is the carrier of so much emotion.

One of the nice things I got out of your DVD is a sense of how you play. It's always fun to watch a pianist at work, especially if there are some good shots of the hands and arms. Is it too much of a stretch to say that your early love of dance has benefitted your piano playing?

I've always taught technique with this idea in mind. I don't call it technique; I call it "motion and emotion." As a dancer, of course, you're using bigger muscle groups. My dance training was better in many ways than my early piano training. When I decided to give up dancing and concentrate on the piano, I made a promise to myself to always "feel" like I was dancing at the piano, with the same kind of ease and fluidity. I always try to use minimum effort to achieve maximum results.

When I was studying with György Sebök, who had such an easy, fluid way of playing in the Liszt tradition, I managed to organize these concepts into a logical framework, so that the physical motion of playing the piano would convey the human emotion that I wanted. If you want to make a beautiful sound, as a pianist you need to learn the correct way to do that.

My entire life as a pianist and teacher is about teaching people to play with ease and fluidity. It's not as if you have to relearn technique with each new piece; the piano is the piano and it's not going to change for a very long time. There are efficient ways of using your body that don't create pain or strain.

It's also true of the fortepiano and harpsichord; you can't play those instruments the same way that you would play a modern piano. They're not made to take that kind of weight and arm movement.

So if you noticed the dance influence in my video, that's wonderful—that's really part of my essence.

How long has RPPF been around? What gave you the idea to create a festival like this?

Well, we just finished our fifth season. RPPF started in 2013 as the result of many different forces coming together. One aspect was the pressing need for free education of this kind. I really believe in free education—I just think it would be great if we had more of that in this country.

Another aspect was ending my long involvement with the Chautauqua Festival, as head of the piano area there, and looking towards my retirement from Eastman—I just retired from the latter in June 2017. My husband and I started looking for places to spend our retirement, but being native Californians, we really didn't want to stay in the "cold" any more. Florida was very inviting for that reason.

Understand that I'm not knocking conservatories or universities—they're good at doing what they do. But for me, I wanted to step outside the usual academic format; the hope was that this would foster more creativity on the part of the students. My idea was to nurture these young musicians but without the pressure of a competition, to show them new and different pathways.

If you'd asked me years ago if I was interested in running a program like this, I would have looked at you with disbelief. But everything sort of fell into place naturally, of its own accord. I'm really surprised at that. It's my new life, and things are going surprisingly well.

I'm guessing that a workshop—or whatever you want to call it—that is free tuition and not competition-based must attract a slightly different breed of pianist than the kind that goes to all the big competitions. You know—if they win, it's another item they can add to their resume.

So far, I can tell you that at RPPF—last year we had over 140 applications—we attract people who are all uniquely gifted. It might be the way they turn a phrase, or the personal touch they bring to their playing. It's not just about dexterity.

We also attract kids from all over the world. Americans, for example, have quite a bit more money than someone coming from, say, South America. So the free tuition is a very important aspect, thanks to our donor base, and I'm hoping that this DVD will attract more donors.

In any case, many of them do want careers and are interested in going to competitions, but they see competitions as only one part of launching a career. Even if you win a competition, you know, that's no guarantee of a career. You still have to have something to offer that will distinguish you from the rest. Playing louder and faster than the next person just isn't going to cut it.

These kids somehow have that sense; they know that attending another three-week summer course with competition isn't what they need to develop as artists. We actually talk about this—the problem with competitions is that only one person wins! At RPPF, everyone wins because they all go out into the community and play on what I call RPPF Ambassador Concerts. That way, they all get valuable performance experience. We also talk about this as another important aspect of building a career.

Everyone eventually will have a job of some kind and will survive; the question is, how creative can they be? What skills will they have that will enable them to further their excellence and passion at the piano? Many of our students are in between degrees, either bachelor's, master's, or DMA. Should they get a performance certificate, or should they perhaps try their hand at a competition? We help them sort this out.

With our large faculty, it means that students can have as many lessons per week as they can manage. If they want, they can even play the same Beethoven sonata for 19 different teachers! They might hear 19 wildly differing opinions on the same piece, but this is desirable. It will enable them to see the possibilities. I describe RPPF as a Turkish bazaar for the piano.

Maybe it's not an exaggeration to say that RPPF builds better musicians, and not just better pianists.

Yes, and we attract students who are also more culturally aware. We offer a "legacy" course at RPPF. In it, we show videos of pianists from the past. We also invite older artists to come and perform, such as Blanca Uribe, Thomas Schumacher, Barry Snyder, and Jerome Lowenthal. Lincoln Mayorga, who is perhaps best known for his piano transcriptions of Hollywood music, is coming to share this legacy with us. The students just love it.

That's a great word—legacy.

I do talk about legacy during the interviews on the DVD. It's not just the legacy of people, it's also the legacy of sound, of instruments. We need to understand history and bring it into the present.

Of course, the problem with music is this transmission of style, the "non-notational" aspect of music. Before we had recordings, all there was were the notes. What did it sound like? I suppose that's the biggest challenge to the creation of a legacy: How do you transmit it across the generations?

Exactly. At RPPF we also have a big improvisation component—or ornamentation, either one. We're leaning more towards improvisation, because it's harder to teach true Baroque ornamentation. In any case, we play them a tune, or in some cases we write it on the blackboard. Then we ask them to create a piece using the tune. Again, we're emphasizing the aural component.

What kind of improvisation are we talking about?

It was really open-ended. Last year we gave them three themes and asked them to produce a three-minute piece, using the themes in any way they wanted. Most people opted for something serious; others played in a lighter style. It was very interesting for them, because they got freer and freer as we went along. We decided to group the students in pairs at the piano; singly, it didn't work because they were too self-conscious.

Group improvisation—that's impressive. Improvisation, of course, is the basis for all music. How much of this sort of thing goes on in regular academia?

Not much! They might get some of that, but once you have courses and tests and all the other stuff that goes along with college, it all changes. Judging from the comments we get, one of the things that the students love most about RPPF is the non-competitive atmosphere. They feel like they're part of one big family. The Ambassador Concerts are a good example. Three or four students might play on one concert; they support one another, help each other to get through it. You would never find that in regular academia. Some kids love RPPF so much that they've attended for three of the five summers.

I had a look at the list of faculty and there are some pretty big names there. How do these teachers, who've spent their entire lives in rigid academia, fit into a festival like yours, which obviously has quite a different set up?

Well, they seem to adjust. Each one teaches anywhere from five to six, sometimes seven hours a day. They give a masterclass—every day we feature a different teacher and masterclass. Every day there's also a "special topics" class, where we can talk about whatever we want. It changes from year to year, depending on what the kids need. We might have a special class on the pedals of the piano or aspects of technique. Everyone is saying the same thing, only in different ways. So it's a very intense three weeks, because there are so many lessons and so many classes....

It's almost as if you're reinventing piano pedagogy.

Maybe. We don't call it that, but another way to look at it is that we're providing all the stuff that doesn't get enough attention in the academic world, because there just isn't time! Some people would say that these kids don't need a lesson every day, but I think for a short period of time it's great. It opens so many windows for them, especially the issue of how to practice more efficiently. How do you make different interpretations? How do you tap into your inner creativity? They spend a lot of time dealing with these topics.

It's not all hard work at RPPF. For recreation, we go on a dolphin cruise. Every year we've been lucky to experience a terrific dolphin performance, with all the jumping and turning. We visit the wonderful Chihuly glass collection in St. Petersburg. Last year, in celebration of our fifth anniversary, they made a glass bowl for us, and the kids got to watch that. We also schedule a day at the beach.

Of the students who have come through your festival in the last five years, and there any who really stand out, any who are about the "burst upon the scene"?

Oh, I think there are several. But I wouldn't want to mention any names, because I wouldn't want them to think I'm playing favorites. They're all special.

Fair enough.

I think the secret to successful mentoring is not to play favorites—I don't do that. My faculty would say the same thing; we support our students equally. You never know who's going to end up where. Someone might not have the performance career that you were expecting; it might be something entirely different and potentially even better. And that's great.

Or the person who becomes the mega-performer in 10 or 15 years may not have been all that obvious when he or she attended RPPF.

That's right. Development is so up and down and erratic. As you know, it's seldom a steady, upward climb. There's a lot of variability in a career.

And unpredictability.

Especially in the modern world that we live in, which can be so chaotic. Another nice thing about RPPF is that for a brief time the students have a safe, secure environment. It's a nurturing, supportive atmosphere....

Again, the non-competitiveness.

Right. I think that they really profit by this kind of atmosphere. At the same time, there's also a big dose of reality in it.

Speaking of reality, the big topic in musical academia, at least for instrumentalists other than pianists, is that the conservatories have been cranking out scores of accomplished flutists, clarinetists, violinists for years, but there are simply not enough jobs for them all. Where are they going to go? There are only so many orchestral jobs out there, and even if you manage to land an orchestral job, it's no guarantee that you

can make a living doing it, because orchestras are cutting back or closing at an alarming rate. You know the whole story, right?

I know the whole story. That's why we started RPPF: to address these very issues. Too many students are oblivious to this, even DMAs. "Well, I'll just turn in my resume and get a second violin position somewhere." But what if there are no second violin positions? It doesn't seem to register until reality hits them in the face.

I know there's no easy answer to that, but it's something that we should all be aware of.

Well, we need a culture change in this country. We need a culture change and a consciousness change. I'm trying to do my small part, and hopefully there are enough of us doing our little parts that it will make a difference. The world will continue; and along with important things like dealing with climate change and improving education, perhaps the arts will flourish as well. We live in rough, mean-spirited times, but I believe that the arts can make a contribution and effect change.

Perhaps the corollary to that is building audiences—making people more culturally aware.

I'll tell you a nice story. Within the last couple of weeks, I got a letter from a girl who's going to Oberlin, where she's just finishing up her undergraduate studies. She wrote to me about how inspired she was by the Ambassador Concerts. She talked with another RPPF student who attended in 2015, and together they've developed plans for a performance series targeted at underprivileged people who don't have the financial resources to go to concerts. They applied for a grant, which they got, and now they're launching the series. A free concert series for people below the poverty line. It's just great that this is really going to happen!

That seems to be the trend—to be your own concert promoter.

Yes, but you also have to be able to sit yourself down and make it work. Bravo to them. They're both very strong pianists. It gives them a platform to perform; it will build their resumes. It might help them to get into the graduate school of their choice. It gets them outside the cocoon of academia and gives them the experience of connecting with the community.

I assume that the general public can attend concerts at RPPF.

Yes, everything is free. Even the masterclasses are open to the public. Of course, we do accept donations—that's how we function. This has always been a mom-and-pop operation; we don't have a big budget and no one makes a big salary here. It's about the students; if someone is looking for a big salary, they should go somewhere else! I don't take any salary at all; whatever is left over I give back to the students. Sometimes we have to help them with travel expenses and pocket money.

Another important part of RPPF is my husband Ray Gottlieb; he's a retired behavioral optometrist. We met eons ago when I was having some major eye problems. His specialty is awareness through movement and attention memory training. He uses a trampoline to feel time, and he helps kids find where their weaknesses are in learning. It's fascinating, because if you put someone on a trampoline who has a left-right confusion—and they'll have the same confusion at the piano—when they're on the trampoline they're made aware of this problem and can correct it. Later, when they're alone in the practice room, a little light bulb will go off in their head and they know what to do. Ray actually gives individual mentoring lessons to these students, and sometimes it's life-changing.

Two years ago, we had a student—a really wonderful kid—who turned out to have a hard time making change. Of course, reaching inside yourself and making change can be hard for anyone, but it's crucial for any kind of progress. I talked to him and said, "Do you realize that change is hard for you?" He said, "Yes." Ray talked to him before getting on the trampoline, and it turned out that this young man had fallen down a flight of stairs when he was three or four years old. There was still some residual swelling in his brain. Ray, whose specialty is syntonoptometry, or using color to treat illness, treated him for the duration of the Festival, and by the time RPPF ended, the problem was completely gone! He was a different person when he left.

Wow.

We try to address wellness of the whole person. You know, how to take care of yourself during your career as a pianist. But really, it's the stress of the world in general. If you have anxiety, you'll have it whether you're performing the Diabelli Variations or getting ready for a court appearance.

So this kind of attention is a little unusual. We're not the typical summer workshop where students might have one or two lessons a week and spend the rest of the time in class texting one another. [laughs] We're very focused; we try to deal with all kinds of problems.

Sounds like I need to pay your festival a visit.

I wish you would!