

From Studies with Rubinstein To Teaching at Eastman An Interview with Rebecca Penneys

*By Marcella Branagan
Clavier Magazine, October 2001*

The musical life of Rebecca Penneys is a wonderful blend of international solo recitals, chamber music performances, and teaching piano students through masterclasses and individual lessons in the United States and abroad. During the school year Penneys teaches at the Eastman School of Music, a professorship she has held since 1980; and every summer since 1977 she has been a resident artist and teacher at the Chautauqua (New York) Institution, where in 1985 she became chairman of the piano department. This year she will present concerts and seminars at the St. Petersburg (Florida) College as the school's visiting artist, and this month the first Penneys Alumni Conference will take place in Rochester, New York where former students from around the globe will gather to perform.

At age 11 Penneys debuted with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and at 18 she received the Special Critics' Prize at the Seventh International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw; she was Top Prize winner in the Second Paloma O'Shea International Piano Competition in Spain. Over the years she studied with such musical giants of the 20th century as Artur Rubinstein, Gyorgy Sebok, Aube Tzerko, Rosina Lhevinne, Gregor Piatigorsky, and Janos Starker. She danced professionally with the San Francisco Ballet as a teenager but finally decided to pursue the piano as a career.

In 1974 Penneys founded the New Arts Trio that twice won the Naumburg Award, and since 1978 the ensemble has been trio-in-residence at the Chautauqua Institution. For public television she has appeared on the Musical Encounters series, *The Piano: Its Sounds and Moods*, and was guest editor of a special issue of *Seminars in Neurology* on music and medicine. Her article "Motion and Emotion" appeared in the 1992 issue of *Clavier*, and in 1994 she co-authored a book with Ray Gottlieb, *The Fundamentals of Flow in Learning Music*

What specific technical skills are absent in undergraduate and graduate students?

Many students do not have a thorough general foundation, technically or musically. They have an idea as to how the music should sound, but the picture is very fuzzy because their musical perceptions lack definition. I find that most students need to study form and analysis to help interpretation, so they learn how to develop and formulate expression on their own and not just follow a teacher's way. The practice habits I see are generally mechanical and over-repetitive, which leaves the music with too little emotion. Practicing should always include communicating the music.

How have students at Eastman changed over the years?

Eastman has always attracted achievement-oriented students who often have visions and dreams that are not always realistic. Graduate students usually have a good foundation on which to build a career, especially those who earn an undergraduate degree from Eastman, which offers a broad-based education that will help them when they apply for jobs and face competition in the music world.

Times have changed. The one thing that all students suffer from now is a lack of space, or what some of my colleagues refer to as a lack of free time. I prefer the image of a lack of space because it better describes the jam everyone feels in this world of fast technological change. Advanced students are under more pressure than ever, especially doctoral candidates. I hope that all people will find more space in their lives for peaceful reflection and thought.

What is your approach to teaching?

When students play I hear and see a combination of technical and musical problems; as we work on resolving these problems students become fluent and comfortable playing anything, not just a handful of studied pieces. I focus on what I call motion and emotion – the relationship between physical motions, technique, and human emotion, interpretation, while taking into consideration the inherent properties of the piano.

I try to teach students to play the four basics of piano technique – scales, arpeggios, chords, and repeated notes – in a balanced way without excessive strain or pain. This concept grew from my training as a dancer, when I learned to understand my body and to figure out what caused stress or pain. It is a process of guiding students to observe, diagnosis and treat, and trust so that each one becomes independent. Some people think I teach a relaxation method, but this is not true, although pianists who have tendonitis or some kind of overuse problem consult with me.

I spend a great deal of time helping each pianist to develop a distinct sound or style in the same way that signatures are distinctive and recognizable. It is one thing for students to listen as they play, but it is quite another to learn how to produce magical sounds using the vocabulary and language of color, inflection, and nuance. I believe the relationship between composer, instrument, and performer grows and changes over time.

Part of my job is to open students to combining technique and music making. I also devote time to helping them find employment after they graduate, because the future of music depends on how well they succeed in their musical careers.

Which 20th-century works should students play?

David Burge's book, *20th Century Piano Music*, has a good list of music to start with. Music of the 20th-century, and now the 21st century, is the music of our time and we should play and teach it all, regardless of which works ultimately become classics. Commissioning and performing new music is an exciting part of my life. It is wonderful to work with composers, and I encourage my students to do so. Just this season I premiered a piano trio that was written for me by Lorenzo Palomo.

Do you teach only college-level students?

I teach students of all ages. The Chautauqua Institution, for example, attracts talented junior high and high school students, some who have prodigious gifts.

At Chautauqua I combine traditional teaching with more innovative and holistic concepts for the precociously gifted. I designed the program to try to understand each student's special talents and career goals. Having been a prodigy, I believe that I understand the joys and the problems of being talented at any age.

What are your thoughts on early music study for child prodigies?

There are pros and cons to starting children at an early age. I believe one thing strongly: the genes, background, and the environment, including the parents' outlook, all have to be wholesome. It is important that both parents and the child are content; parents should not put too much stress on their child's talent because emotional and psychological patterns might develop that can be problematic. Initially early development may open doors if the musical talent continues beyond the years of childhood. This is a tricky issue because as the child grows, future goals have to be reevaluated.

Although my childhood and adolescent years were different and difficult, they were stimulating, interesting, and exciting; and as I look back I increasingly appreciate the good points. I had the benefit of learning from so many distinguished performing artists and teachers, from Jascha Heifetz, Gregor Piatigorsky, Arthur Rubinstein, and Janos Starker to Gyorgy Sebok, Menahem Pressler, Josef Gingold, Annie Fisher, Rosina Lhevinne, Abbey Simon, Emil Giles, Aube Tzerko, and Leonard Stein as well as Carmelita Maracci, the renown dance instructor in Los Angeles at the time I studied ballet

What were some of the important ideas from each person?

Great teachers say similar things, yet their personalities and temperaments are so varied, each expresses artistic and pedagogic concepts in very different ways. For instance, from the time I was 10 until I reached 18, I studied with Aube Tzerko, the foremost teacher in Los Angeles, who passed on Artur Schnabel's legacy, and Leonard Stein, Schoenberg's assistant and the director of the Schoenberg Institute at the University of Southern California. Tzerko's teaching was intense but with little structure. He was never on time. For a 4 p.m. lesson he would start at 5 or 6 p.m.; at 8 p.m. we might take a break for dinner and then the lesson would continue.

Stein's teaching was structured, intellectual, and packed with knowledge. We covered theory, history, counterpoint, orchestration, 20th-century music, score reading, transcription, and ethnomusicology. Sometimes the lesson was two hours long, and he might invite me to come back again later in the week. This happened on a regular basis; life was spontaneous. The old-fashioned way to study was to spend an entire afternoon at the teacher's house.

My introduction to chamber music was through Gregor Piatagorsky, the renowned cellist who decided I needed to play chamber music. My first lesson was at age 11 in his home where he told me an hour-long story about the Beethoven A Major Cello Sonata. He explained how the cello started, then discussed Beethoven's life and the concept of thematic transformation. Finally we played the piece, even though I could barely sightread the music. Afterwards he played two or three different recordings and gave me the assignment to learn the piece. That type of teaching is more personal than the typical teaching of today.

Despite differences in teaching styles and even technical ideas, the long-range goals of freedom, flexibility, expression, and accuracy were the same with all my teachers. Another common thread was the notion of always being creative and stretching yourself in practice as well as in performance – and always staying fresh.

What are your memories of studying with Artur Rubinstein?

After I won the Chopin Competition, he wanted to hear me play. Eventually we met in the Presidential Suite of the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Los Angeles. There was a concert grand in the middle of the living room, where I had about six lessons. When I came in he was at the piano playing. He looked like a film star as he sat in a red dressing gown with a glass of cognac nearby.

After I played the Chopin Barcarolle, he remarked that it was very good and asked if I would like to hear him play it. As I listened and watched, I learned so much about what he did physically. This was the first time I was so close to a concert artist. Next he played the Chopin Bb Minor Sonata and several pieces he would perform in coming recitals.

After about an hour and a half, we talked about his favorite writers, what it was like to live in Paris, and his philosophy of life. The following week we went through the same routine. I received wonderful images from him, and my sound started to change. He told me to sit down in a room alone and figure out what I wanted to say with the piano and how I wanted to say it.

How did you come to study with Gyorgy Sebok and Janos Starker?

While driving in Los Angeles I heard a radio broadcast of Janos Starker and Gyorgy Sebok playing

the Chopin Polonaise for Cello and Piano. The opening piano run was so beautiful that I had to pull off the road to listen more closely. The artists captivated my imagination, so after learning that both men taught at Indiana University, I decided to go to Bloomington. Starker heard me play, then introduced me to Sebok. They emphasized playing with ease and efficiency, and both shared a wealth of information with me. The great lesson from each was that a musician could teach, perform, communicate, and educate in a kind and intelligent manner. They were never overly emotional or intimidating, rather music making came by way of simple conversations, beautiful demonstrations, and tremendous patience. Their love of teaching and music was obvious and enormous.

There was always enough personal time. These teachers were performers who allowed students to get close and see how they worked. I went to their rehearsals and often turned pages. Those were truly golden years at Indiana, from 1969 to 1972. William Primrose, Josef Gingold, Abbey Simon, and Jorge Bolet all taught there then too. At Indiana I also studied some with Meneham Pressler and had composition with Iannis Xenakis.

Why did you form the New Arts Trio?

I was on the faculty at the North Carolina School of the Arts, when the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music in Milwaukee asked me to create a chamber music program around a resident piano trio. After the pressure of my childhood years, which included a lot of solo playing and competitions, the idea of working with a trio was a welcome change. As with most ensembles the members have changed many times. Now the trio includes Jacques Israelievitch, concertmaster of the Toronto Symphony, and Arie Lipsky, music director and conductor of the Ann Arbor Symphony. This fall we will begin to record a series called New Arts Trio in Recital at Chautauqua (Fleur De Son Classics) that will combine standard trio repertoire with wonderful 20th-century trios.

Do you think of yourself more as an artist or as a teacher?

I think of myself as both. At Indiana I discovered the joy and balance of combining playing and teaching. Now I can't enjoy doing one without the other. It is a good balance because this way I don't feel either unimportant or too important. In the coming months I will be performing and teaching in many other places – Montana, Washington, Florida, and Canada– alone and with the New Arts Trio. I find great happiness in helping students develop and do well, while at the same time I continue to learn and set new performing goals for myself.