PLAY SCHERZO NO. 2

My parents knew something was wrong with me when by age seven I had systematically destroyed the springs in the back seat of the family Chevrolet by bouncing up and down to every song I heard on the radio. Instead of seeking out a child psychiatrist or ADHD medication (which was unknown at the time) they simply gave me a drum. With drum lessons soon to follow the rest is history as they say.

Like a baseball player who might start at first base, I was soon moved to pitcher when I turned 11 years old. That is when the piano was introduced into my life. Unlike many of my students here, when I am asked if “music runs in my family”, I have to say only in smatterings. My grandmother on my dad’s side loved to play organ at her house. But everyone in my family loved to listen to music and I say that is a crucial part of the music triangle (that is, the composer, the performer and the listener are part of the musical process). So, in the end, I basically carved my own path.

I had excellent piano teaching as a tween and teenager. My band directors—where I would still play drums as well as piano—would even give me albums to take home, sometimes their own! My neighborhood piano teacher was quite excellent and I excelled. But then came the perils of high school: basketball, drama and jazz band. Now jazz band certainly is not a peril, per se, but it was enough to bump formal lessons in piano. To this day I still wish I hadn’t quit taking lessons during high school, but I can’t rewrite what happened over thirty years ago.

Jazz band was a big deal at my high school and it brought me numerous times to the Northeast Missouri State University (now Truman State) for a jazz festival. That opened my eyes to that school. More on that later. The summer I graduated from high school, I learned part of
Chopin Scherzo you just heard. I fully learned it in 2000 and performed it on a tour in Malaysia. That is the “veteran piece” on today’s program. I loved this piece so much, I felt compelled to resume piano lessons at my community college during my first year of college. I went to Southeastern Community College in West Burlington, Iowa. I did well and knew that music was going to somehow be a permanent part of my life. Throughout all of this, I received nothing but total support from my parents and sister. That is my first music influence; they not only let the musical doors stay wide open they gave me more than a little encouragement to enter right through them. They’re also here today.

So at age 19 I arrived at Truman State and studied piano with David McKamie. He was a new faculty at the school: brilliant, talented and full of energy. He had full confidence in me and nurtured me. He was a true mentor. He was also a performing artist. I remember hearing him practice the Scherzo you are about to hear over and over, as his office was in the old Baldwin Hall (this hall wasn’t sound proof, in fact, it was sound radiant). Dr. McKamie used to let me have free reign to his office, complete with two 9-foot Steinway grand pianos! Just think about this: if one was out of tune I could just move over six feet! I think Dr. McKamie knew, too, that I kept his window cracked during Christmas break, etc. so when I needed in his office, I would jump on the ledge of the outside window sill to enter his office.

I would like to dedicate the following performance to him and it is with pleasure I note that one of our premier graduates, Justin Calvin, currently studies piano with him. Dr. McKamie was my second major musical influence.

By the way, to prove I can actually teach and not just lecture and perform, when I’m done, I’m going to ask you what you’ve observed listening to the Scherzos… so I invite you to listen actively, being
careful to listen to the correct notes and not the wrong notes you may hear.

PLAY SCHERZO NO. 3

Ok, you’ve heard the Scherzos now (by the way, the plural of the word “Scherzo” is Scherzi …yes Chris, I knew that before my Italian language studies.) Let’s talk – what did you hear in these two pieces? Are there differences, are there commonalities? (there’s actually a method to my madness… I am hoping this will help you through the final Scherzo that I am about to play).

OPEN DISCUSSION

So two degrees later in the fall of 1989, I find myself jogging with my German professor and dear friend to this day, Greg, and I ask him “so what do you do with a Master’s degree in music?” Awkward silence followed. Greg then said, I could come with him and his wife to China to teach English. In an unguarded moment I said “OK”.

I could go into my Chinese teaching appointment for a long time but suffice it to say among the many wonderful trips it impacted me in a unique way; it gave me time to think. I knew I was going to return to the USA and get my doctorate.

Enter UMKC Conservatory of Music. I was elated when the late Joanne Baker accepted me into her studio as a scholarship student. Mrs. Baker was the grand dame of pianist in the state. Her students always seemed to thrive. Her students immediately became my dear friends. Whether it was good fortune on my part or whatever, the closest friends I have to this day are from her studio. Besides being a master teacher (for example, she was the first American professor to teach in China
after China’s opening to the outside world, I learned so much from her students.

There was constant upward lift at UMKC in the 1990’s and I was a lucky beneficiary of that. I fell in love with the school, the students and the city.

The Scherzo you are about to hear was the last piece I actually had a lesson on. This was in 1996. I have never performed this piece in front of a collective audience. I dedicate this piece to the memory of Joanne Baker.

Before I perform I have to tell a funny story about her. Every Friday at 4 PM we all performed for each other. This was called “piano class”. Fellow Baker students and I came up with a chart of what Mrs. Baker really meant. You see, after students would perform for each other, Mrs. Barker would always have the first comment, usually brief. She wanted to leave time for fellow students to comment on one another in a positive learning environment. Anyway, if she said “outstanding” regarding your performance it truly was that. However, if she said “very good” it was “good”, but if she said “good” it was really “bad”. Being such a positive person she couldn’t quite get herself to say “bad”. I know that positivity still impacts me, well positively. For that, I dedicate this final performance of the Scherzo No. 4 to her teaching as well.

Before I play I want to say how much I love you all and this institution. May Flo Valley endure as a positive force in the region for years to come.

PLAY SCHERZO NO. 4