

National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy

Wednesday, July 18, 2001
Hyatt Regency Oak Brook

Oak Brook, Illinois

TEACHING DEMONSTRATION BY ELVINA TRUMAN PEARCE

Report by Robert Wyatt

Elvina Pearce studied piano with Isabelle Vengerova and pedagogy with Frances Clark. She is one of the founders of The Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy and serves as Editor-in-Chief of Keyboard Companion magazine. Presenting recitals and workshops in over forty states, as well as in Canada, the Republic of China, and Australia, Ms. Pearce has displayed excellence in the sharing of music with every expression of her creativity.

The presentation also included her excellent and equally adorable student, Carolyn Chang, a nine-year-old pianist with excellent skills and ability, although not falling into the category of “wunderkind.” Bruce Berr, an Associate Professor of Piano and Pedagogy at Roosevelt University and a former student of Ms. Pearce, facilitated the post-demonstration discussion.

Should one wish to invest three days and several thousands of dollars to attend a top-drawer management workshop, three main tenets would be revealed: 1) create a safe space in which to operate; 2) honor the process (i.e. allow the learning to proceed at its own pace and course); and 3) stay on-task. This writer would prefer to spend 2 hours in the presence of Elvina Pearce, for during that time she modeled those three principles—unwittingly or not—within a structure that seemed both spontaneous and effortless.

Children immediately sense the safety of the environment they walk into, although conscious acknowledgement varies widely. What was important to observe in

the teaching demonstration was the way in which Ms. Pearce allowed Carolyn to “acclimatize” to being the object of hundreds of eager pedagogical ears and eyes. Certainly Ms. Pearce’s genteel ways are nurturing, yet there is much more contained within her personality that contributes to an environment of maximum learning potential. She is kind but firm, demanding yet fun, and continually adds touches of her own style of humor. Results are gained by a masterful combination of accumulated skills, advance planning and a persona which is imbued with warmth and compassion. In addition, she sculpted a lesson that was paced to allow optimal learning and assured success. With the safety net strongly aligned for support, the lesson unfolded.

Ms. Pearce utilizes a pedagogical approach that is student-centered rather than teacher-oriented. Her questions required careful listening and independent thinking, resulting in feelings of empowerment, participation and confidence. Since Carolyn was invited to make her own musical decisions, she was required to focus her attention on each particular musical element, requiring her to listen honestly to the sound she was producing as it related to the composer’s intentions. She was engaged more in cognitive thought processing than fact retrieval.

Questioning was also used as a tool for evaluation as well as discovery. For a student to process an answer and then hear their own response reinforces the concept presented for consideration. All questions had the intention of creating discovery, yet without the tedious “leading” that reminds one of dragging a horse to the trough with its bridle taut. Carolyn’s answers required imaging—aural, visual and tactile—which connected language, sight and sound in a way that reinforced the concepts being introduced. And all of this was spun into a web of movement which flowed gracefully between specific modules of the lesson, prohibiting lapses in Carolyn’s concentration or excitement level.

Many attendees reported that they were excited about the requests for

improvisation during the lesson, and especially the original composition presented as a warm-up exercise. Other teachers noted the way in which Ms. Pearce took the time to thoroughly preview newly assigned material, a process which eliminates mistakes before they are able to crystallize into incorrect habits. And when one considers that all of this—plus the time needed to incorporate technical discussions and drilling, logistics, new repertoire, analysis, performances of in-progress pieces, rhythm drills, tone production and musicianship examples, pedaling exercises, and enough chit-chat and humor to make the relationship personable—occurred within a forty-five minute lesson span, the result was and is phenomenal. From this writer’s perspective, Ms. Pearce is a secretive but seasoned alchemist.

The most consistently used word attributed to Ms. Pearce by the teacher and group leader evaluations was “intention.” She brings her intention to the lesson within a form of incredible richness: she offers a master plan for pacing and content; a sensitivity for the personality of the student; her own artistry and obvious worldliness; and especially, a sense of calm but insistent cultivation of the musical spark.

My hat goes off to the brilliant break-out discussion leaders whose summaries form the bulk of this report: Brad Beckman, Carol Ann Bell, Carol Lamb Booth, Mary Dobrea, Vivian Miller Dula, James Goldsworthy, Virginia Houser, Rebecca Johnson, Wilma Machover, Mary Sallee, Susan See and Carmen Shaw.

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