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Ruth Slenczynska, the pianist who took her future in her hands

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AFTER THE ACADEMY:
Memories of Teaching and Learning in the Land of Lincoln

Edited by
Larry LaFond, William Retzlaff
and Aldemaro Romero

Ruth Slenczynska,
THE PIANIST
Who Took Her Future
in Her Hands

I n t e r v i e w b y
A L D E M A R O R O M E R O

Ruth Slenczynska is an American pianist who some consider the first real child prodigy since Mozart. Born in Sacramento, California in 1925, her father imposed a severe and abusive discipline on her since she was three years old. At the age of six she had her debut in Berlin and by the age of 7 she was performing at the Salle Pleyel in France with a full orchestra—the Paris Philharmonic. When she was 15, she stopped performing in public, and it was not until 1951 that she resumed a concert career and established herself as a pianist of flawless technique and incredible musical sensitivity. In 1964, she accepted a full-time position at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) as Artist-in-Residence, a title she retained until 1987. Ms. Slenczynska married Dr. James Kerr, a professor of Political Science at SIUE, in 1967. She published a book of memoirs entitled, *Forbidden Childhood*, which deals with life as a child prodigy, and a book on piano technique entitled, *Music at Your Fingertips: Aspects of Pianoforte Technique*.



Ruth Slenczynska at age four.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KATHLEEN DOUGAN.

AR: Your father was a strict disciplinarian who abused you both verbally and physically while financially exploiting your musical talent. When one looks at your story as you told it in *Forbidden Childhood*, one thinks of those parents that insist in pressuring their kids into following career paths, whether in music, sports, or whatever, with little regard to their personal well being. Do you have any words of advice to those parents?

RS: Yes, I would recommend that those parents look far into the future, as far as they possibly can, and decide what might be appealing and useful to the world that their children could do because only in that way can they hope for their children to succeed. I came from parents who believed that their children have to follow in what the parents did. Consequently, my father thought because he was a musician, I had to be a musician, and thought only in terms of the way he was taught, that's the way I should be



Ruth Slenczynska publicity photo ca. 1955.

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taught and I don't think that that is the way to go. I think that parents must look ahead, as far into the future as possible and try to direct their children to have dreams toward that future.

AR: If one of the people reading this right now is one of those kids being pressured by their parents to follow a particular career path, what would you say to him or her?

RS: Well, I would tell them that they should listen to their parents but that they should not upset their own dreams; that their own dreams are something that have great value and that could lead them further than possibly their parents could even expect from them. I believe that every individual is entitled to dream and to think and to wish for himself what he would like to do and to try to follow that path.

AR: I am wondering if your father ever modeled his ambitions for you after the case of the Mozarts where Leopold, who was a musician in his own right, also put this very strong discipline on Wolfgang?

RS: Well in those days, there was no question that every son, every daughter, had to follow in the footsteps that their parents indicated. The children had absolutely nothing to say about it, and it is possible that my father, who came from Poland, and from the old way of thinking, probably thought he had the right to do that with me, but I don't think he did have the right to do that. He pushed as hard as he possibly could, and he was very well meaning for a while, but when he found out what I did in the way of concerts could lead to a money situation that he liked, I think that he modified his thoughts toward money and that was the bad thing that happened and caused me to run away from home eventually.

AR: In your book you wrote that you played as a child not because of any special gift but because of training, and that goes against the conventional wisdom of people who think that geniuses are born. What do you have to say about that?

RS: Well, I don't think that geniuses are born, definitely not. I think that a person who has wonderful training as I had had—that's the one thing my father did get for me, he got me the very best training possible—and because of that training I was able to become a pianist and live up to his dream of what I should do. But I think that nobody had to tell him, "Well if you can make money out of this dream its okay," because he certainly did what he could to squeeze whatever he could from my work for his own well being and for the well being of his family.

AR: It is interesting that you mentioned that your father tried to get you the best training possible but at the same time he tried to convey the message that he was the only teacher that you ever had. He was the one who was really behind you as a child pianist. Why do you think he did that?

RS: Well he had a tremendous ego and he probably believed that he was responsible for whatever I did, whether it was playing well, or if I didn't play well he'd beat me until I did play well in his estimation and he didn't believe in giving credit to anybody else. Oh, he asked everybody else to teach me, but he claimed the credit for himself and he was absolutely wrong of course.

AR: One of the things that comes across in your book, *Forbidden Childhood*, is your frankness, your total openness about the story of you and your family. So, I was wondering what led you to write *Forbidden Childhood*, because it must have been very painful for you to write the things that you wrote about your father and your first husband.

RS: Yes, well it was, it was but it's all behind me and a long, long, long time behind me now. My goodness, I have lived three lifetimes since then.

AR: Do you think that it was kind of a liberating experience to write this book?

RS: Well, possibly, possibly. Although, I ran away from home long before the book came, and I think that was the smartest thing I ever did as a youngster was to have the courage to leave home because that home was just crushing me in every way possible.

AR: It is really revealing, and one of the things that you mention in the book, that at an early age you were mystified by the stories of mythical Greeks and Romans. I am wondering whether you think you were attracted to those stories because they were mythological heroes that in a way became independent from established rules and in some way that conveyed to you a message of liberation?

RS: I think so, because I took great joy in anything that was imaginative and those mythological stories, even to this day I like to think back about Perseus and Theseus all of those wonderful Greek mythological characters and Roman mythological characters. Even the story of Pegasus and flying in the sun is a very, very imaginative sort of thing, I like that sort of thing and I like for music to carry people in that way too.

AR: You said in your book that one of the most devastating critiques that you received while becoming a teenager was that the critics were saying that you were playing as an immature person and one wonders, can you teach maturity to a child?

RS: You cannot, and that is where the critics were so stupid. How can you expect from a fourteen or fifteen year old child to play like a mature artist? It is an impossibility because that person is not mature, that person is very young and you cannot complain that a fourteen year old does not play like a thirty-five year old; this is ridiculous.

AR: One of your teachers was Sergei Rachmaninoff and he mentioned to you and your father that you should stop performing in public until the age of 15 in order to become a real artist, a more mature one. Do you think that he was right in that?

RS: I have no idea. That I don't like to comment on because those were the words of a very, very great musician whom I highly respect; I certainly do not want to comment on that, but I think that the one good thing that did come from all the concerts that I played, the only good thing, was that I had the experience of walking on stage. I was not really afraid to walk on stage. So many adults, people with talent, are terribly afraid of walking on stage and performing but I was not because I started so early. That's the only good thing that came of it.

AR: **Rachmaninoff was obviously one of the great musicians of the twentieth century. What can you say is the most important memory that you have of him?**

RS: That he was a wonderful person, not just a musician! The very first time that I saw him he took from his wallet a picture of a speedboat and I think he loved this speedboat because he kept a picture of it in his wallet. And he said you see this boat, I love this boat, I keep it on a lake in Switzerland and when I am home I go on this boat with my driver and we go all over the lake and go zzzzz all over the lake and we have such a wonderful time. And that kind of calmed me down because I was a little bit afraid of playing for him and he could see that I was shaking. And this got me to laugh and I wasn't shaking anymore, and then he asked me to play. But he was a very wonderful person; in his pocket, he kept little pieces of paper, and on each paper there was a poem cut out from a newspaper or cut out from a magazine. He asked all of his friends to send him these poems, hoping that once he would find a poem and maybe make it into a song, and he very often found inspiration in these poems and he would take one of these poems and he would recite it in his warm Russian way, in Russian, and he would say afterwards, was that not beautiful? And to me of course it was beautiful because he was saying those words but I didn't understand a word of Russian of course.

AR: Rachmaninoff was known for exploring to the limits the expressivity of piano music. How do you determine what the limits of expressivity are, in other words, when do you start deviating from the real intent of the composer?

RS: Well there are no limits. One reason why Rachmaninoff was so great as a teacher is that he did not think like a pianist, he thought like a creative artist because he was a creative artist. I am a re-creative artist, there are many like me who play the music of other people, but Rachmaninoff was from a different kind of artist, he was a creative artist, which meant that he could create music as well as perform it and for him there were no limits and, therefore, he dared to do things that mere pianists don't do and

Ruth leading a piano pedagogy class in her former piano studio at SIUE.

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he nudged me in that direction as well, and it was a very wonderful experience. For instance, I played for him one of his own preludes once, and he took me to the window and he said look down at those trees, those are mimosa trees and I want you to play this melody with a golden sound. And I said but how can you make color into a sound on the piano? And I then said the magic words, I said “show me”, and he played the first few bars of this prelude and I knew exactly what to do; from there on I was able to do it.

AR: That’s a great story. In a way this also reminds me of this famous anecdote when Arturo Toscanini conducted Ravel’s *Bolero* and Ravel had figured out that it should last fifteen minutes but Toscanini played much faster and Ravel complained to Toscanini, “why are you performing it so fast, that’s not the way I wrote it.” And Toscanini replied, “Well, if I had played it the way you wrote it would have been very boring.” So I wonder to what extent can you take these kinds of liberties with the original intent of the composer?

RS: Actually it isn’t taking a liberty because if you understand a particular sound to be a certain way you cannot mimic that sound, you have to actually create that sound, and in order to create it, maybe you do have to play it a little bit faster or a little bit slower than the composer expected. There are no limits. One of the things that Rachmaninoff taught me is that there is no tempo that is correct for everybody. For me, I would hear a piece that was at a certain tempo and it would be my way of doing it. For another pianist, he would hear it at a different tempo and play it his way. You can take ten great pianists and not two of them would have the same tempo, and this is the way it should be.

AR: In fact you studied with Samuel Barber, one of the most outstanding American composers of the twentieth century, whose “Adagio for Strings” is quite familiar to many people because of its use in the movie, *Platoon*; but when you listen to Barbers’ music you feel some kind of tension, some kind of gravity. Since you knew him can you tell this was the product of his own demons, his own conflicts dealing with his own sexuality? What was going on in Barber’s mind?

RS: Well first of all I was only five years old when I knew him and he was twenty. He was in the class of Madame Isabelle Vengerova and I was also in the class of Madame Isabelle Vengerova, and it was a class of piano technique. Now in this class there were maybe about ten young people, as I said ranging in age from where I was, age five, to maybe older than twenty, because Barber was not the oldest one in the class. Sam was a wonderful person, and he was particularly wonderful to me because of this story; let me tell you about it. After our class with Madame Vengerova, there was a boy in our class who you all know as Abbey Simon, and he became a famous pianist, and he took me by the hand and he said “do you want to go upstairs and listen to Jorge Bolet’s lesson”, and so we’d run upstairs and we’d listen outside and we’d hear Jorge Bolet, who has turned into a very great pianist, a specialist in Liszt, and he was having a lesson with his teacher, a Liszt etudes, and we all thought this was fabulous. I would say, “When am I ever going to be able to play a Liszt etudes; I’m just playing a little small piece by Bach, a little small sonata by Mozart, a Liszt etude is just impossible for me.” So after a few weeks, Sam Barber noticed that I couldn’t wait for the end of the class, I was so eager to go up and listen. He took me by the hand one time and he said Ruth, “I would just like you to understand one thing, you come back listening to Jorge Bolet, listening to short Tchaikovsky play those Liszt etudes, playing those fancy big concertos and he said “you

have stars in your eyes and I can see you want to be a pianist like that”, and he said “you must not confine yourself to being that kind of a pianist”. And I said, “Why not?”, and he said “well there are other things to music than playing fast and loud”. He said, “people do that to attract attention to themselves, not to the music, and you have to go when you play, you have to see what is inside the music what makes it beautiful”. Is it the melody that makes it beautiful? Is it the harmony that makes it beautiful, and if it is the harmony then you must hug your harmony. You must treat music as a very intimate thing, a very precious thing that you have, and you must think of music that way, not in order to attract attention to yourself by playing loud and fast and that was the most important lesson at that time. And I always had a very special feeling for Samuel Barber.

AR: Well no wonder you became also a great teacher because certainly you learned these lessons from the great masters that had such a depth. I am wondering, what was your experience here at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville as a teacher?

RS: Oh I had the honor of teaching so many wonderful young people, so many. Many of them have gone ahead to win prizes with their music, to earn their living through their music. Many of the organists and pianists in the area were my students. I was so amazed when all of them got up and came on stage for a picture, there were more than twenty-five of them in that picture and that was just in a certain period, I had many, many more than those. There are those that have gone ahead, when I went to Korea I found four who had been my students, who are now professors in various universities in Korea. When I went to Australia I found two who had been in my classes at Southern Illinois University who are now teaching in Australia and I had the honor last month only to listen in concert to three people who had been my students.

AR: That's a great reward for you, and I understand that you are still teaching, right?

RS: Yes.

AR: So what drives you to teach at an age when most people feel like retirement is due?

RS: Well, I love music and I love being able to see other people grow a flower just the way I was taught to grow a flower. Maybe Samuel Barber is the person who inspired me there, but his love for music itself was the all encompassing thing, and that is what I try to instill into my students, that music itself is so beautiful and so deserving of attention, and I like to dream of music as being the important thing in people's lives. It is less important in the United States than it is in Asia right now, and that it is in Europe right now. But music is the kind of art that eventually will satisfy more people than any amount of noise, or money or success in any other form. I don't like bombastic movies, I like romantic movies and I think that romance and the beauty of music and that sort of thing will conquer the world eventually.

AR: In your book, *Music at Your Fingertips*, you wrote, "A good teacher will use as many different approaches to instruction as he has students, for two students are not alike." How did you come to the realization that you shouldn't be following a strict method but that this is actually adaptable to different students?

RS: Well, every person is different. Every person's ideas are different. I try to listen to the students' ideas. I try to show them how to follow their particular ideas. No two students have the same ideas about the same piece and when a student tells me, I have an

idea how to do this, then I say “Show me, show me, show me. Alright continue this idea, continue, use the pedal over here; it will help. Use these fingers over here; it will help”. And in this way I try to get each student to follow his own dream about what the music should say. Not my dream, because my dream belongs to me and his dreams should belong to him, and not have another person impose an idea.

AR: I want to finish with a question that to some people in the audience may sound a little bit macabre, but it is not unusual among musicians, and being the son of a musician myself, I know it is normal talk. The question is, what music would you like to be played at your funeral?

RS: Oh my lord, I’m not even thinking of my funeral (laughter).

AR: Well that shows to you are really still very young at heart and providing a great example to so many people around the world. You are really an outstanding person, and I’m sure that after this interview many more people will want to learn more about you. So do you have a final word for people who want to get into music, for the youngster who wants to get into music?

RS: Well, yes, I would say that the most important thing that you have to do is follow your dream. Follow your dream as far as you can and try to find other people that will help you to follow your dream, because your dream is personal, it is intimate, it’s the most important thing that will happen to you, so follow your dream, good luck along the way and believe in yourself. This is very, very important. It may take time before you have other people believing in you but if you believe in yourself and you follow your dream you will have something individual to say, and that’s very important.

For Further Reading

“*The Ruth Slenczynska Collection.*” Lovejoy Library, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. The collection may be accessed at the following Web address:
http://www.siu.edu/lovejoylibrary/musiclistening/special_collections/title/slenczynska/slenczynska.shtml .

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