MASTERS AND MENTORS OF THE PIANO:

An account by Claudia Stevens of her piano study with major piano teachers and leading performing artists of the second half of the twentieth century, 1966-1981

In the summer of 1966, right after high school, I came to San Francisco to study piano with the Hungarian virtuoso and recording artist Istvan Nadas, then a professor of piano at San Francisco State College. I had just turned seventeen. My first teacher had been my mother, followed later by a teacher in my home town of Redding, California. I was used to learning pieces by ear, imitating recordings, and improvising fingerings. I had not yet acquired discipline, either in accurate reading of a musical score, solving of technical problems, or in efficient use of practice time. I was also quite rough technically, playing pieces far too difficult for me. Mr. Nadas told me, quite correctly, that I would need to abandon those pieces (such as the “Waldstein” Sonata and the Tchaikovsky Concerto) for the time being, and he chose a number of contrasting works for me to study and prepare. I remember thinking these would be too easy, but soon discovered otherwise. The repertoire included Beethoven's Sonata Op. 31, no. 1, several Brahms Intermezzi and Bach Preludes and Fugues. Mr. Nadas did not assign etudes, insist on scales, or suggest a technical regimen, but he emphasized that, at this level of study, one must practice at least three hours a day. This was my first experience with a teacher who took me seriously, and did not merely indulge me. It served me well. Rather than attempt to change or improve my technique over one summer, or work in much detail on individual passages, Nadas’ method was to teach by demonstrating. His extraordinary playing, especially of Bach, was inspiring and helpful to me at that stage; I did not, however, perform later any of the repertoire I had studied with him.

After my summer with Nadas, I enrolled at Vassar College, where Earl Groves became my teacher for the next three years. Groves had studied under Bruno Seidloher, and his playing was characterized by a rich tone and warmth of feeling. I studied a wide variety of solo and chamber works from the standard repertoire and performed in many student recitals. Mr. Groves often allowed me to choose my own repertoire. He had discovered, apparently, that I would practice most diligently, and often derive my own solutions to technical problems (some extremely “creative”), if inspired to perform a particular work, however daunting. As a sophomore I performed “Kreisleriana” with success, and the following year I performed all the Prokofiev “Visions Fugitives” and gave a full recital that included the Berg “Sonate,” Schumann’s “Humoreske” and Brahms’ “Variations on a Theme by Schumann,” as well as a chamber recital, including the “Archduke” Trio, with the cellist Louis Garcia-Renart and a student violinist.

While at Vassar, my summers were spent studying with other teachers, with Mr. Groves’ blessing. In summer of 1967, I was accepted by audition, and received a scholarship, for private study with Martin Canin at the Congregation of the Arts at Dartmouth College. Mr. Canin’s class mostly hailed from Juilliard, where they were studying under Rosina

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Lhevinne (Canin was her teaching assistant at that time; he was already, and remains, a highly regarded and sought-after teacher in New York and nationally). Mr. Canin's teaching, like Lhevinne's (she had been his teacher), was informed by the aesthetic and pedagogical approach of the Russian school of piano playing, emphasizing dexterity and brilliance. Among the most proficient young pianists at Dartmouth were Blanca Uribe, a fully mature and successful touring artist (Blanca later joined the Vassar College piano faculty), Rita Sloan, Jonathan Purvin and Leonidas Lipovetsky. Mr. Canin insisted on my practicing technical studies, including Pischna - which did not do much, I think, to improve my digital facility - and assigned to me sonatas of Haydn, the Schumann “Blumenstuck,” and English and French suites of Bach. He was generally encouraging and kind, and I enjoyed the lessons, at which he would demonstrate beautifully. One night, walking home from a concert at Hopkins Center, I was impressed and touched to overhear him practicing pieces his students were working on. I did not perform as a soloist that summer, although I accompanied the master class in opera of Hans Heinz and also played some chamber music. Among the composers at Dartmouth that summer were Frank Martin, Aaron Copland and Hans Werner Henze. Mr. Canin was a teacher and musician of integrity, but I found his emphasis on technique, often separated from the musical context, not to be a good match for my abilities and needs at that time. I also felt intimidated by the virtuosity of his students, all of them older than I, and many already entering competitions.

In summer, 1968, I was admitted by tape audition for private study in the class of Leon Fleisher at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara. This would prove the most important of my musical experiences up until then. Mr. Fleisher, having won the Queen Elizabeth of Belgium competition and recorded the Beethoven and Brahms concertos with George Szell, was already one of the most sought after teachers in America. Fleisher had studied under Artur Schnabel and, like other Schnabel disciples, including Leonard Shure, approached the teaching of technique in a way I found ingenious and convincing. The approach, perhaps too simply described, was to marry the physical with the musical gesture, somewhat as would a conductor. Rather than digital strength and independence, emphasis was placed on subtle movement, rotation and direction of the hand, as well as larger movements of the arm, a sort of “choreography,” carefully worked out and repeated consistently in practice. Such motions were never to be perfunctory, always to be correlated with musical inflections, whether local (e.g., slurs), or at the broadest level, to convey the larger imperative and direction of the musical line. Mr. Fleisher had recently injured his right hand, which would impede his own performance for years to come; but his masterful use of the left hand in lessons struck his students with awe. In teaching, as well as in coaching of chamber music, Fleisher often sang, roared and conducted to illustrate the phrase and the greater sweep of the music. This emphasis on musical direction came as a great revelation to me, especially when applied to Beethoven and the Romantic composers. That summer, under Fleisher, I studied the Beethoven first concerto, the Chopin Ballade in F-minor and the lengthy Schumann “Humoreske,” which Mr. Fleisher did not know and thanked me for bringing to him. (I would perform “Humoreske,” as well as other large works of Schumann, including “Kreisleriana,” the Fantasy in C and the very challenging Sonata in F-minor, on future recitals.) I also participated in Mr. Fleisher's chamber music class, where he assigned me to perform the Bartok “Contrasts,” one of my first experiences of twentieth-century chamber music.
And, I performed the Brahms “Variations on a Theme by Schumann” in the master class of the Canadian pianist Reginald Stewart. Brahms became another favorite composer, and I would perform Opus 119, the “Variations in D Major on an Original Theme,” and the Sonata in F-minor, Op. 5, on future programs. Among Fleisher’s students at Santa Barbara, a number from his class at the Peabody Conservatory, the pianists Claudia Hoca and Ellen Wassermann stood out as particularly gifted and accomplished.

After working with Fleisher in summer, 1968, I resolved to devote myself even more seriously to piano study. When I returned to Vassar, I began to conduct research on piano works by Schumann and the creative connections between Brahms, Robert and Clara Schumann. I would continue to pursue this topic later at UC, Berkeley, and then at Boston University, as the subject of my doctoral research (I received the DMA in piano at BU in 1977). These endeavors would lead to fruitful communications about Schumann piano music later on with the pianist and author Charles Rosen, the pianist Malcolm Frager, and the author William S. Newman, who was helpful and generous to me in editing my article about Schumann’s “Impromptus,” distilled from my doctoral thesis, for publication in Musical Quarterly in 1981. I also would give lectures for music teachers about revisions of piano works by Schumann, problems they posed to performers in selecting editions, and related aspects of nineteenth century performance practice.

Vassar College agreed to my request for acceleration, so that I might graduate early and study more intensively at a conservatory. I was allowed to combine my junior and senior years and graduated summa cum laude in Music with the class of 1969 (I had entered with the class of 1970). I was admitted to study at the Peabody Conservatory, where Mr. Fleisher was teaching, but was disappointed to be assigned to another teacher. So, rather than to attend Peabody, I decided to continue my piano studies at the Rubin Academy of Music in Tel Aviv, Israel under Arie Vardi, who recently had won the Enesco Piano Competition and was achieving prominence as a performer and teacher. (Vardi has, since then, become a teacher and contest adjudicator at the international level, dividing his time between Israel and Germany.) Uri Mayer, the Israeli violist and conductor, a friend from New York, had recommended Vardi to me and introduced me to him in Israel. I would study with Mr. Vardi for over a year under a scholarship at the Rubin Academy, where I was accepted into the Artist Diploma class, a two-year graduate program. Vardi took an interest in my piano background and musical abilities, but he was also aware of the need to address a number of technical deficiencies. He emphasized the importance of daily practice of scales and etudes - Chopin and Moszkowski, as well as the Brahms exercises, which I found especially interesting and satisfying. In addition to works in the standard repertoire, he encouraged me to study and perform Copland’s “Piano Variations,” which I brought to him, having heard a recording. Vardi did not yet know this work, and it excited him greatly. I would go on to perform the “Variations” throughout my career, including concerts in Copland’s honor and attended by Copland. During that year I worked on a number of challenging works, including the Beethoven Sonata, Op. 111 (which I later performed frequently), the Schubert Sonata in B-flat, Op. Posthuminous, and the Bartok Suite, “Szabadban.” We also began the “Diabelli” Variations, which I would later study in great depth with Leonard Shure. At that time I usually was practicing five hours daily. Mr. Vardi’s greatest contribution to my musical experience was, I think, his
teaching of Debussy (in particular the Preludes), which was especially inspired, imaginative and thoughtful. His emphasis (rather than on the musical direction that had characterized the teaching of Leon Fleisher and, to a lesser extent, Earl Groves) was on production of multiple qualities and gradations of sound - achieved by use of the arm and subtle varieties of touch - but a sound always to be integrated with the musical thought. He often would discuss with me the depictions of poetry, landscape, or abstract qualities of feeling evoked by the deceptively simple, jewel-like Preludes of the “First Book,” and I would go on to perform and teach them often. While in Israel I also performed recitals with the violinist Ron Porat, including sonatas by Beethoven and Mozart. We were coached by the master musician Michael Taube (once assistant to Bruno Walter in Berlin) and with Porat’s private teacher, the Hungarian violinist Alice Fenives. I also played several short piano compositions of mine on Israel Radio. I had begun to take myself rather more seriously as a composer, hoping to continue composition studies when I returned to America to attend the University of California at Berkeley, where I had already been admitted into the MA program in musicology. In Israel I was studying composition under Leon Schidlowsky, newly arrived from Chile, whose musical aesthetics and teaching were influenced by Schoenberg and Messiaen (we read together his Technique de mon langage musical). Inspired by Schidlowsky’s enthusiastic teaching and passion for Schoenberg, I spent long afternoons at the library familiarizing myself with a wide range of works by German and Eastern European composers. I also met the Israeli composers Zvi Avni and Odon Partos, then the Director of the Rubin Academy, who was generous in his encouragement of my work, both as a pianist and a composer.

I left Israel in summer of 1970 to return to America without completing the Artist Diploma in piano, uncertain whether to pursue piano or composition. On my way home I attended the Festival Tibor Varga at Sion, Switzerland, where Ilona Kabos was giving piano master classes. I did not take lessons with her but was curious to observe her teaching; I knew about Kabos as the teacher of Joseph Kalichstein, an acquaintance whose playing I admired. After observing her quite harsh criticism of one young student, I was glad not to be playing for her class. I then went on to Darmstadt, where I attended seminars of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Gyorgi Ligeti, among others. At that time, Europe, and particularly Germany, had become a hotbed of musical radicalism, and the atmosphere surrounding the various “camps” in composition was lively and dynamic. Stockhausen was advancing techniques inspired by free improvisation and quantum theory (which, for a number of us, tended to produce musical results indistinguishable from free improvisation). Ligeti, whose music impressed me far more, lectured with great animation and humor about his recent works, including “Ramifications.” He also played recorded excerpts, which I found striking in their fanciful and quirky, yet scrupulously controlled and crafted, textures and timbres. Darmstadt also provided my introduction to performance art, which included a writhing nude model suspended above a chamber ensemble. This struck me as ridiculous at the time, but I would take up my own brand of such performance (sans nudity) some fifteen years later.

I arrived at the University of California, Berkeley in fall, 1970 full of excitement about composing in the manner of Ligeti and others of the Eastern European school, to which I had just been exposed. The composition faculty at Berkeley was more conservative than
I had anticipated, and generally unsupportive of my aspirations as a composer, so I turned my attention again to the piano while completing the MA in music history. In Berkeley I studied with Bernhard Abramowitsch, a respected teacher in the Bay Area, whose roots in Germany and feeling for Romantic composers fostered a strong affinity and personal friendship. Mr. Abramowitsch chose not to teach me technique, and he expressed skepticism about the useful application to the performer of analytical techniques such as those being taught in my seminars at UC (he once compared my analytical diagram of a Beethoven sonata to an electrocardiogram). He emphasized voice leading, sometimes very insightfully, and emotional qualities in the music. Among other works, I studied the Brahms first piano concerto with Mr. Abramowitsch, which he insisted I was ready to undertake, and entered a competition to perform it with the UC Symphony Orchestra. I won the competition, and the performance of the complete Brahms concerto with full orchestra was a highlight of my two-year experience at Berkeley (I received the MA in Music in 1972). I also often performed contemporary chamber music, both as a pianist and a vocalist (for the first time), and played two noon concert recitals at Hertz Hall. In 1972, on completion of the MA, and opting not to continue for the PhD in musicology, I was awarded the Alfred Hertz prize for continuing piano study. Another high point of this time was my friendship with the pianist and teacher, Barbara Shearer, and her husband, the composer and singer Allen Shearer, who became lifelong friends and musical colleagues. (After Barbara’s death in 2005 Allen would become my husband.) While in Berkeley, and for many years after, I often performed at their home, either in house concerts for groups of friends, or in preparation for recitals. Barbara, a sought-after Berkeley teacher, had studied for many years with Leonard Shure in New York and in Europe; later she became a friend and musical colleague of Carl Ulrich Schnabel, who would give master classes at her house. I was grateful for her support of my work, and I admired her playing and musical thinking, as well as her grasp of the challenges for the performing artist within academia. So, when in 1972 she encouraged me to continue my piano studies under Shure, rather than with Adolph Baller at Stanford, where I had been admitted for doctoral study in piano performance practice, I heeded her advice and sent a tape to Shure, who had recently come from the University of Texas to teach at Boston University. Leonard Shure would become my last, and most influential, teacher. I was twenty-three.

On the way from Berkeley to Boston, I spent the summer at the Berkshire Music Festival at Tanglewood, where I had been admitted by tape audition as a fellowship pianist, to perform chamber music and participate in the piano program headed by Gilbert Kalish. It was the first of two summers I would spend there. Mr. Kalish, already a leading performer of contemporary and chamber music, was involved in a recording project that included all the Haydn sonatas. In his seminars we discussed and performed some of those, but the atmosphere was low key, and this had a very calming influence on the student pianists inside the “pressure cooker,” as he termed our experience there. Kalish acknowledged and supported the uniqueness of each one of us and quite successfully discouraged competitive behavior within the group. He also had studied with Leonard Shure and gave me useful advice as to what to expect and what works Shure taught with particular strength (e.g., Schubert and Beethoven). Kalish assigned each of us to rehearse and perform chamber works, contemporary music and keyboard parts with orchestra
based on his assessment of our particular interests and strengths – I was given the
Schumann Quintet to prepare. He was unfailingly encouraging and helpful, and exhibited
wonderful musicality, in his coaching of the Quintet. He also chose for me the quirky
new George Rochberg chamber work, “Contra Mortem et Tempus,” in which the pianist
had to speak theatrically (into the piano), as well as play. And, I was assigned to perform
at the last minute - standing in for another keyboardist - the difficult harpsichord part in a
work for harpsichord and chamber orchestra, “Tre Invenzioni,” by Gunther Schuller, in
its premiere with Schuller conducting. I had twenty-four hours to learn the part, but Mr.
Kalish assured me that “I could do it.” In the single rehearsal, I can only remember Mr.
Schuller fixing me with his one good eye (I never knew which was the glass eye),
shouting, “NO, HARPSICHORD!” repeatedly. Mr. Schuller had kind words for me
afterwards, but the episode stands out as the most terrifying of all my experiences as a
pianist. Another feature of the Tanglewood experience was attending master classes by
visiting pianists, usually those performing with the Boston Symphony under Ozawa,
Bernstein, Collin Davis and others. These included Andre Watts, who gave several
classes. His “laid-back” manner, common sense and lack of egotism, notwithstanding his
own enormously successful career, impressed me greatly. But these master classes were,
for the most part, not especially memorable or significant. I did not perform on any of
them, often overwhelmed by the demands of preparing to perform works of chamber and
contemporary music, as well as assigned keyboard parts with orchestra. The conductor
Bruno Maderna, a champion of contemporary music, rehearsed and conducted a very
compelling orchestra piece, “Windows,” by Jacob Druckman, in which I played
keyboard, as well as a new work for large orchestra, “Color Rhythms,” by the composer
Fred Lerdahl (with whom I had just studied at Berkeley), in which I also had a small
keyboard part. The disastrous rehearsals of this overly difficult work, and its cancellation
by Mr. Maderna, became the scandal of the summer, and Lerdahl never forgot it, as he
confessed to me nearly forty years later. He went on to revise and rename the piece,
which was later successfully performed by the New York Philharmonic under the title,
“Chords.” Michael Tilson Thomas, a protégé of Bernstein, was a young and fairly
inexperienced conductor on the scene, and he was generally disliked by performers in the
Boston Symphony Orchestra. I played harpsichord in a combined Boston Symphony and
Berkshire Festival Orchestra performance of the Handel “Royal Fireworks Music,” in
which Thomas struggled to control a wind section deliberately rushing just to annoy him.

One enjoyable experience the next summer would be rehearsing the Schubert B-flat Trio
at the nearby home of Malcolm Frager, the brilliant pianist who recently had won the
Queen Elizabeth of Belgium Competition. Frager also was something of a Schumann
scholar. He discussed with me then, and shared with me later, manuscript materials he
had uncovered in East Germany, and written about in Current Musicology, pertaining to
an unpublished Schumann symphony. Frager, who died tragically early, impressed me
with several deceptively simple comments he made in coaching our trio. One was that
the true tempo of any movement resides somewhere within it, not necessarily at the
beginning; another was that the success of a chamber music performance depends in
large part on the individuals in the group – by which I think he probably meant that ours
was not especially homogeneous or well matched, and not much could be done about it.
During the second summer Gilbert Kalish was away, and Louise Vosgerchian, who
taught musicianship at Harvard, replaced him as head of the fellowship pianist program. Ms. Vosgerchian did not then have a career as a performing artist, but was widely known and admired as an exponent of the teachings of Nadia Boulanger. She tailored her seminars to her own teaching interests, and included exercises in transposition at sight and other such tasks, which were to be approached in her own particular way. This was all quite interesting but not especially useful in the situation; we pianists were practicing six or eight hours a day just to keep up with our performance assignments, and we did not have the time or inclination to practice keyboard harmony. Vosgerchian did not appear to act as an advocate for all of us fellowship pianists within the Tanglewood hierarchy, nor did she extend moral support or mentoring as Kalish had done. Perhaps she was put off by the intensity of our focus on “mere” piano performance, and usually kept company with the young composers and conductors, rather than with us. Her coaching of chamber music (I prepared the Mozart G-minor Quartet under her) exhibited musical intelligence and awareness of style, if few practical insights. Later, when I was having some difficulty preparing in just a week the important piano part in the Stravinsky “Symphony in Three Movements” for a performance under Tilson Thomas with the Berkshire Festival Orchestra (a group comprised entirely of other fellowship musicians), Ms. Vosgerchian, rather than provide useful advice or help to me, boasted that she had learned and performed far more difficult parts than this in just a day or two. Things were not going well; in the first rehearsal the piano had been placed at the very back of the orchestra, and I had missed some cues. Soon after, I overheard another pianist, not one of the fellows, practicing my part, likely at the request of Tilson Thomas. Ms. Vosgerchian had not communicated to me that I might be taken off the part. (Similar things were done, quite unfairly, to other players in other situations.) I protested, was reinstated to perform the part, and the performance ended up being successful. Mr. Thomas went on to a brilliant career as a conductor at the international level. Ms. Vosgerchian went back to Harvard.

My study with Leonard Shure, at Boston University and at his home on Nantucket Island, extended from 1972 through 1975. Shure made the greatest impression on me of any teacher, and it was mostly very positive. This was because, unlike some younger students in his class, I had by then achieved a certain level of confidence in my own abilities, and attained sufficient experience and maturity to inure me to some of the more destructive aspects of his teaching. I realized that this person was possibly the greatest teacher of his time, and the task before me was to receive from him whatever he had to give – not to attempt to prove myself or to compete with other students. I was not intimidated by the requirement that every work brought to a lesson had to be memorized, or that editions provided for study had to be the most original ones possible (although Mr. Shure was not always consistent about that). I remember asking him at the first lesson, having played rather badly several movements of Beethoven’s Sonata, Op. 101, whether I needed chiefly to improve my technique. He replied insightfully, albeit vaguely, that I needed to “learn more.” Shure lived up to his reputation as a hard taskmaster, devoting the first three or so of my lessons to the first several phrases of Op. 101. It was clear that he had a point to make: to play the first few phrases of such a work with thorough understanding was to understand the whole movement. And so it went.
Leonard Shure’s class at that time included an array of American and foreign students, including the highly talented Beth Levin and Anthony Tomassini, who later became the chief music critic of the *New York Times*. In addition to private lessons, Shure had adopted an arrangement whereby students could sit in on a number of each others’ private lessons. This actually proved very useful, exposing students to additional repertoire and approaches to problems other than their own. Many Shure students, myself included, later became piano teachers at the college level, and we would benefit greatly by having observed the teaching of others’ playing and repertoire. Leonard Shure’s ability to demonstrate was one of the marvels of his teaching. Plagued – as are we all – by nervousness in performance, he was absolutely in his element when performing in class, clearly priding himself, somewhat childishly, on outshining the student before a group of onlookers. Some of these “public” lessons were memorable also for his demonstrations of impatience and deliberate cruelty. I remember actual shouting matches with certain students and the shedding of tears. But my relationship with him was always respectful and amicable – we liked each other. In addition to Op. 101 of Beethoven, I studied the “Diabelli Variations,” the Brahms Sonata, Op. 5, the great Schubert C-minor Sonata, Schumann’s “Humoreske,” and “Fantasy in C,” and numbers of shorter works. I did not bring Chopin or Debussy to him, and only the occasional “modern” work, such as “Quaderno Musicale di Annalibera” of Dallapiccola, about which he had only rather general things to say. Shure only occasionally taught fingering, but he took to a new level the realization of musical structure in equivalent physical/technical terms that I had experienced first in Leon Fleisher’s studio: the natural “grouping” of the musical material conceived also as a “technical unit,” whether small or larger in scale, that one could practice organically by connecting one such group to another, musically and technically.

Shure’s reputation as a chamber music coach drew an audience from all over Boston to the public evening sessions in the Marshall Room at Boston University, where students labored to perform such works as the great Schubert Quintet with two cellos (particularly memorable and beautifully taught), German lieder, and a variety of chamber works with piano; I performed in class the Brahms Quartet in G-minor, which I found very difficult, my group somewhat incompatible, and his coaching rather brutal. Independently, I also was concretizing with the talented young violinist Ronan Lefkowitz, who I had met at Tanglewood, performing Beethoven and Brahms sonatas in the Boston area. Our coach was his teacher, the BSO concertmaster, Joseph Silverstein (whose career as a conductor had begun its ascent). Silverstein was mindful, and always appreciative, of the role of the piano in those sonatas. He remarked that in, such works the piano was never merely an “accompanying” instrument; in fact, especially in early Beethoven violin sonatas, the piano often dominated the action, while the violin functioned more like an obligato. I took special pleasure when Silverstein demonstrated the violin part by playing together with me. It was remarkable how much he was able to communicate to both Ronny and me about nuances of phrasing and tone quality, merely by taking his violin in hand, rather than in words.

A very contrasting experience was my composition class at Boston University under David del Tredici, also a pianist of exceptional talent and accomplishment - he originally had planned on a career as a concretizing pianist. The atmosphere of the class often was
light-hearted. Del Tredici’s assignments, while quite fanciful on the surface, also encouraged economy of means and experimentation with such devices as palindrome (employed in his own recent work “Syzygy”). Del Tredici could play with facility any newly composed piece put in front of him, and one day he playfully announced my entry into the room with the opening of Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” sonata. For his class I composed two short piano pieces, “Widmung” and “Le Regret Souriant” (later titled, “A Reflection: Copland at Eighty”). Both pieces were later published in Perspectives of New Music, and I would perform them widely.

Coming away from such rigorous piano studies, experienced over three years with Leonard Shure, I needed time and perspective to assess what I had gained, as well as lost: likely some of the freedom and spontaneity with which I had performed in earlier days. It was clear to me that this level of study could not be equaled or exceeded, were I to study with any other teacher. Shure was, in fact, my last teacher. I did continue to be advised by artist colleagues and composers whose works I performed, including Aaron Copland, who invited me to his home to play his “Piano Fantasy” for him in 1981, having just heard me perform it in Washington. Mr. Copland, although then feeble and forgetful, made several comments which stayed with me long after and were perhaps significant as an antidote to Shure’s perhaps overly literal approach to the score. Copland reminded me that musical notation, with all its symbols and markings, particularly in such a work as his “Fantasy,” should be understood only as an approximation of the composer’s idea, rather than as directions etched in stone; and that the performer (that is, I) might best realize and convey the idea by a freer use of my own imagination.

After study with Leonard Shure, I felt able to prepare and perform on my own virtually any work in the piano literature. In fact, some staples of my subsequent repertoire would be pieces I chose and studied on my own, rather than ones I had worked on with Shure. This was quite typical of his students, many of whose careers would take unusual and creative directions, often in the area of new music performance, writing, composition and conducting. Indeed, I heard Mr. Shure say once that his teaching, with its emphasis on total commitment to “study,” would arm us with techniques and strategies sufficient for us to achieve independence from him; and that this was his true purpose as a teacher. My later self-studied repertoire would include major solo works ranging from Mozart to Carter and Sessions; concertos from Bloch to Schumann; piano chamber music of Ravel, Debussy, Shostakovich, Brahms and many others; and a repertoire of contemporary piano works with which I established a career in new music performance over the next ten years. The experience of having met Shure’s exacting standards, at least in part, also helped to instill in me the confidence to undertake major projects, such as commissioning many established composers to contribute new piano works celebrating Roger Sessions, Aaron Copland, and Elliot Carter, and the performance of high profile recitals in their honor at venues including Carnegie Recital Hall, the National Gallery and Jordan Hall. And I believe, also due to that experience, that I would feel empowered, in the late 1980’s, to embark on another career, performing an eclectic repertoire of self-created multi-disciplinary solo works, from which I would derive continuing satisfaction.

Written at Berkeley, California, August, 2012