

The Cottage on the Hilltop

By Wang Junting

It was a wooden cottage, situated on top a small hill, on the outskirts of Southern Illinois University main campus in Edwardsville. The coffee-colored cottage nestled against the hill, with entrances to the upper and lower floors. On the roof reposed a chimney. They called it “The Piano House.” From the music building, it took about ten minutes to stroll to the small house. The little hill was dense with towering maple and old pine trees. In the harsh winter, thick snow covered the whole area.

Shivering slightly in the knees, I trudged up the stone steps leading to the upper level of the wooden cottage. Music books clasped tightly in both arms, heart pounding and apprehensive, I wondered how I should voice my request.

“She’s a very, very strict teacher.” Chris told me solemnly. He used to be her student. After getting his degree, he went to Rice University at Houston for graduate study.

Fall 1979- that was when I first came to the United States. I started the first semester at Rice University in Piano Performance, hoping to transfer a semester later to the Midwest, at SIUE. I looked at Chris gravely, not comprehending completely. “Is strict not good?” I nearly blurted out. Perhaps the situation is different for everyone. To me, my purpose for this journey to America is the hope to unravel the doubts that have harbored in my heart for a long time. A strict teacher must have her reasons. Perhaps she might be able to help me.

From the warmth of the South to the cold of Illinois, my arrival unfortunately coincided with her triennial concert tour overseas. In the first quarter, I had to take the class with another professor while awaiting her return.

Pushing aside the wooden door, I felt a blast of warm air. A petite and slender lady stood by the table in front of the window. Though forewarned, the first time I beheld her- Ruth Slenczynska, I was shocked by her height- slightly more than 140cm. Then, her dark, luminous eyes caught me. What a pair of warm but piercing eyes!

Faltering, I put forth my request. She bade me play my prepared pieces. After I had finished, she said, “You have to put in absolute hard work. Then- I can take you.”

Happily and vigorously I shook my head. Hard work was not a problem. The problem was hard work not producing the ideal results. There must be a reason in this, and for this reason I have pondered in vain. She seemed to understand my doubts completely. Before I had a chance to ask, she told me the practice method for the present time, and instructed me to get a set of music scores in urtext edition.

Thus began my slow and extensive musical training with Prof. Ruth Slenczynska.

Before I relate this musical training, I should talk about my numerous flaws in piano at the time. My brother used to describe me as making music through gritted and ground teeth. Next, it was easy for me to have breakdowns and memory lapses in performance. Once I slipped, it would be impossible to get back, no matter how much effort had been spent practicing and memorizing the piece. Some people said that was because of nerves, but at the back of my mind I believed there must be a reason behind the flawless renditions of accomplished performers when they are on stage. The biggest dissatisfaction with myself was the failure to project the intensity and tone color of my imagination. I knew that might be due to the amount of force in my fingers and the degree of relaxation in my body, but within my limited knowledge and practice method, I was not able to achieve this. For this, I was deeply suspicious of those who assured me strength would come in another ten years.

After the first lesson, I knew my doubts would be cleared. Prof. Slenczynska had me start my practice from slow speed, as slow as an old cow dragging along a cart, from hands alone to hands together. The metronome was used- only five speed increments were allowed in two weeks. She allowed me, with the stipulation, to “crawl” in the process of absorbing the music. This was something inconceivable to me in the past. According to legend, the talented or gifted must be able to grasp a piece of music in a week, and memorize a whole sonata in two weeks. I had always tried hard to advance in the path of the gifted. Alas, my endeavor had not been successful.

At the stage of trudging, because the speed was slow, I had sufficient time to relax in the polishing of each note and rest in the piece. Polishing the note is to strengthen the fingers, so they will not collapse under nervousness, and can still produce beautiful tone. Polishing the rest is a peculiar form of description, but that is so in reality. Previously, I would willfully neglect and ignore the rests. When I started the new method, I paid

attention to them, their meaning in the composition, and the correct length of each one. After polishing the notes, I had to observe, rather like speech, the articulation of the musical phrase, and indication for the mood and feeling. I had to breathe in between phrases, to know how to sing, to bounce, to use the weight and force. In the expression of the composition, there is a specific purpose in choosing when to use the force of the fingers, the force of the arm, or the force of the whole body. I must repeat if there is an error, no matter how slight, in the quality and position of the note. In this, no sloppiness is permitted. Melodic lines buried in the music should not be disregarded, especially those in the left hand. As it turned out, the left hand also holds tremendous responsibility- it can help bring out the essence in a piece. Then do I realize it is not easy to understand thoroughly all the indications in a composition. One must have a full grasp of musical sense, knowledge and experience before one can truly comprehend the intent of the composer. Perhaps one of the reasons I had so much trouble with memorization was because of negligence and lack of understanding in the details.

Like the way she guided the other students, Prof. Slenczynska very patiently guided me, step by step. Slowly, my ears started to sharpen. Nuances in tempo, tone color and mood became meaningful language. The weight in my fingers got more focused, my body became more relaxed, and the tone colors I could imagine in my mind began to emerge. Though they have not reached the ideal state, I knew how to strive towards my goal.

After climbing steadily and showing some results, I was allowed to “walk.” I must first memorize each hand alone all the notes, rests, and details, then memorize with both hands. The process started from very slow speed, with tiny gradations to faster tempo. At that stage, the music was very similar to slow motion film. All was in slow motion- but the feeling and emotion was expressed. The elasticity in the music was exaggerated, musical phrase had direction, and there were breathing spaces in between melodic lines. The speed was increased slowly, to ensure there would be no tension in the muscles, and good balance integral to the music had to be maintained throughout.

In the Spring quarter jury, the two pieces I had were still at the walking stage. As a result, the pieces that were supposed to be fast, became slow in my hands. But I played with ease, with the details worked in, and without any slips. Even though my grade at that

jury was moderate, I was quite satisfied with my performance. I knew I was doing something right; I knew I was progressing.

Having built a firm foundation, she started to encourage me to “glide” or “flutter” on the piano, like a young bird about to soar into the sky and be independent. She employed various imagery, with descriptions and demonstrations of mood and feeling, to guide me in my playing. Once I succeeded in creating the mood of a piece, she would say immediately, “See! You can do it!” On the occasion where I was unable to get hold of the feeling or comprehend the mood, she would try again and again to stimulate my mind, using a multitude of images to impress upon me vividly the feeling of the piece, until I could perceive with my heart, and my hands could convey the message. Sometimes the incapacity to portray the moving force and direction of music can be due to obstacles in technique. She would hand to me a metronome, tell me an alternative way to practice, and instruct me to go down straightaway to the practice room downstairs to work on the piece. After I had finished, I could then come back and play the piece for her. Frequently, these methods have helped to solve my problems at the time.

I remembered something she said at an interview with a reporter, “If you limit yourself to be a second-class pianist, you will always be a second-class pianist. I am not willing to be second-class; neither do I wish to compare myself with others. I only compete with the best in myself. If I do well this time, I must try to be better the next.”

With this belief she demanded of herself, and with the same belief she demanded of her students, to keep surpassing new heights. To say “I cannot do it”- how easy is that? Transversing between “very good” and “excellent” is an extremely thin line. You only have to work a bit harder, go a bit further, feel a bit deeper, and add a little more imagination, to cross over the line. With her whole heart and her entire will, to reach the pinnacle of art- this was what she sought in performance and teaching.

Awaiting the close of that Fall quarter, the pieces in my hands finally had a chance to fly. I managed to catch the mood of the music, and got very good comments in my second piano jury. Till today, I am still immensely grateful to all the professors there, because they gave students time and space with which to grow, without the harsh rigidity that can impede real progress.

Though strict, this teacher did not specify how many hours students should practice per day, but the unique method imparted by her requires time and patient polishing, to discover the profound mystery and wonder hidden inside.

At that time, Prof. Slenczynska had seven graduate students. Apart from me, there were two Korean students. The rest came from different parts of America. Amidst the American students, only Janice and Molly were whole-hearted in their practice. Besides their studies, most of the others had part-time jobs or their own teaching to do. So, there were only five or six of us who frequented the practice rooms. The two Korean students, especially, practiced from morning till night. Maybe because they had been eating ginseng since they were young- somehow they could practice up to ten or twelve hours per day. Sigh!

Once, I prepared two meals of sandwiches, got everything ready, and also practiced straight for twelve hours. At the end, I was very proud. Ha! We Chinese are not too bad either! On the next day, my two arms were sore, all the way from the shoulder to the fingertip. I couldn't even raise them, much less go for practice. It was necessary to rest a couple of days for the muscles to regain their movement. From then on, I dared not compete in stamina with others.

For this, I was curious, and asked my teacher why some pianists only need to practice two hours per day to produce brilliant performances, whereas the rest of us need so much time.

She replied, "When I was a child, my father always told the media that his daughter, a prodigy, only practiced two hours per day. In actual fact, I had to practice nine hours daily."

This cleared my innermost suspicion.

Other than individual piano study with Prof. Slenczynska, graduate students could also take another course under her, in Piano Repertoire. This was conducted as a seminar, held in the wooden cottage up the hill.

The top level of the wooden cottage was a large piano studio. Two Steinways, of completely different tone colors, were placed side by side in the middle. Behind them was the fireplace, with photographs hanging all over. The students would sit in a row at a corner by the piano.

Every quarter, we would concentrate on studying two composers. Sometimes it would be Bach and Ravel; sometimes it would be Mozart and Bartok. Every student would be assigned two pieces to work on. In addition, the student would have to prepare copies for the whole class, with markings in black, red, and blue. Black to mark fingering and details; red to mark the main subject in Bach's compositions; blue to mark secondary subjects. At that time it seemed quite troublesome, but the work proved later to be an invaluable experience and source of reference.

One semester, she assigned all of us to play Ravel's Sonatine. In the second movement, there arose two different interpretations. Some of the students based their interpretation upon the harmony and timbre of the whole movement, and projected an ethereal quality, in a slightly slower tempo. Some turned to the indication "Menuet," and the result was more lively, with clearer rhythmic pulse. After listening to all our interpretations, Prof. Slenczynska refrained from passing an opinion on any of them. She wanted to give students the space to express themselves. She knew the direction of her students' thought, and heard how they conveyed specifically the feeling of the piece. This to me became an important inspiration in the years to come, in my listening and perception of music.

Though Prof. Slenczynska was a very strict teacher, she would tell us about her past experiences. Since I'm from Taiwan, she described an incident fifteen years ago while performing in Taiwan. One night, after a concert, she felt very hungry, and decided to go to the night club on the top floor for some food. Stepping through the door, she was hit by the clamor inside. At first, she was not used to it. After looking around and seeing how people were enjoying themselves and singing along with the singer on stage, she was caught in the atmosphere. The vitality was contagious, and she ended up clapping along with the others, humming along a song without knowing its meaning.

She seemed to enjoy things that have life and vitality. Once, at a student's wedding banquet, we saw her with her petite stature dancing spiritedly with a tall male student. It was a merry scene. Everybody gathered together, laughing and shouting gleefully, forgetting that she was the teacher. She seemed at ease, and even told us she loved to dance when she was young.

The seminar progressed, with its serious and lively moments. Besides listening to and playing for each other, we also gave presentations on the composers. In addition, the seminar provided opportunities for us to perform our individual pieces. Prof. Slenczynska always tried to give students the chance to perform in front of an audience. She instilled in us an important concept, “When you stand on stage, you only have one chance to present yourself. How well you prepare yourself, and how thorough and effective the method is in preparation and practice, will determine everything- success, or failure.” Whenever a performance approached, she would admonish us to practise slow speeds, to widen the range of speeds for practice, to check the score, to....

Wisdom is priceless. Wisdom is also hard to seek. After my study with Prof. Slenczynska, I acquired an extremely clear and distinct musical sense. This musical sense was accumulated through her past years of study with many masters, from what had been absorbed and integrated with her own. This was an attainment of wisdom; also a creation, brought about by many years of performance, teaching, and experience. All these brought out the essence. From actual practice, she let me understand the depth of beauty, and the painstaking process in the creation of its exquisite qualities. The scope of beauty is not limited to tenderness; power is also beauty; so is humor or the bizarre. There is the bold and unrestrained beauty at age eighteen, the subtle and quiet beauty at forty. She taught me to treasure the art that took infinite pains to create, to revere the originality and spirit of the artists. The foundation of these fundamental principles were an insight to me, indispensable in my later development and exploration of art.

In those two years, other than the first year being more difficult as I fumbled in the initial learning, and progress was slower, the second year was much better. I was more adept with my practicing, and my pieces expanded. At my final jury, I thanked her deeply for what she had granted, so generously and richly. Her reply was humble, “I did not give you anything; I was only like a stern nurturer, to push you and guide you along the way. It was your own hard work that brought out the potential in you.”

It snowed heavily on the night of my graduate recital. Under a thick coat, with a white cap on top her head, she wore eyeglasses to protect her eyes, just after surgery. As usual, she was full of energy and in good spirits. Handing to me a small black box, she said, “Every child that flies away from my side, I have a little something for them.” At

the end of the recital, the snow was very deep. With the aid of a friend, she walked for more than an hour in the snow before reaching her home.

Time passes swiftly. It has been nine years since I left SIUE. Nine years. From a naïve student to the teacher my students call me now, the teacher they have called over the years. Nine years have gone by. The people, the place, the circumstances have become hazy in my memory, fading gradually from my mind. Only that cottage up on top the hill, and all that happened there, keep appearing before my eyes, stirring my memories. What is it that pulled at my heart? What is it that forbade me to forget? I believe- it must be a kind of conviction. A simple one, but a conviction so resolute it must be close to religious fervor.

Translated by Chong Ten Wee