

# Joanna Hodges

## A LIFE IN MUSIC

by Leonne Lewis

**T**his article explores the teaching philosophy of American concert pianist Joanna Hodges, in her own words, taken from an interview, with recollections of Noreen Wenjen, who served as associate instructor at Hodges' private studio in Vancouver, Washington (read her convention-presenter biography in this issue), and concert pianist Dimitri Zhgenti.

"I used to be more picky about the students I would choose, but that's not the real reason for teaching. I now feel that every student has something to offer, and sometimes it's the least talented that make the

most progress because they work hard and have the right attitude," said Hodges. Joanna Hodges had a respected international career with a knack for attracting young artists, who studied with her at colleges in Southern California, or at her studios in Long Beach, California and Vancouver, Washington. Highlights of her illustrious career are mentioned in this issue's *Tribute to Julien Musafia*, along with her reflections of the Romanian-American concert pianist.

Noreen Wenjen observes that her mentor's approach to teaching was demanding, sometimes unconventional, uncompromising, and comparable to training received at music conservatories. This approach required students of all levels to participate in monthly performance workshops that covered such topics as technique, theory, performance anxiety, memorization, music appreciation. She also attracted international students to her summer seminars. "Joanna Hodges created a cultural refuge in her studio, but high standards didn't intimidate those who wanted the best. During the lesson, music and academics went hand in hand, and she stressed the importance of self-discipline and self-motivation. Her workshops had the atmosphere



~

*She never missed an opportunity to turn a performance into a teaching experience.*

of professionalism, and she never missed an opportunity to turn a performance into a teaching experience. I would never have become a teacher if it wasn't for Joanna Hodges. She had a special charisma that made you want to be a part of her world of music," says Wenjen. Zhgenti adds, "Hodges lived for her students, and the atmosphere she created had a great influence on my life."

Zhgenti mentions his studies with Hodges began in 2004. "I was plugged into the busy schedule of monthly workshops, concerto recitals, solo recitals, and under the guidance of Ms. Hodges, was able to audition for Alexander Toradze's studio at Indiana University, where I received a Master of Music degree. I returned to her studio often, became an associate instructor, and now teach the students she left behind." Hodges' performing career became a source of fulfillment, which was reflected in her approach and attitude towards teaching. "It's impossible to ignore the fact that many people have their most satisfying, significant musical experiences as performers. Music becomes a source of life's deepest reward for

these students, and I think individual performance on an instrument has a valuable effect on personality, development and self-confidence," observed Hodges.

She explained that students need to feel a sense of accomplishment while studying, which could be achieved by learning and memorizing at least ten pieces of varied repertoire (both solo and concerto)

~

*It's very exciting to see how students react to and enjoy playing really way-out music.*

throughout the year, which would be performed at studio recitals. In this regard, Wenjen says that Hodges developed innovative solutions to solving issues of technique, memorization, stage fright, touch, sound production. "Hodges was relentless about slow practice, and attention to details such as posture, hand position, movement of fingers, relaxation, sound production, voicing, phrasing, among others.

Regardless of a student's level or talent, she would hold everyone to a certain level of expectation, and I intend to keep teaching in this same tradition," says Zhgenti. Hodges would offer beginning students guidance in posture, hand position, proper etiquette, then assign them pieces of Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, Kabalevsky's *24 Pieces for Children*, Op. 39, Schumann's *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, rather than method books. "With more advanced students, I use etudes of Chopin, Liszt, and exercises of Dohnányi or Brahms, but my whole philosophy is to study the technique in the music," commented Hodges. She continued, "The repertoire itself is a great challenge because one can take sections of pieces and practice them in different ways, different rhythms, and I think this is more beneficial than spending time learning exercises of Cramer or Czerny." When studying repertoire, Wenjen recalls her preference of using the Henle edition for Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, the Paderewski edition for Chopin, and Peters for many concertos. Hodges' varied repertoire

*continued on page 45*

## JOANNA HODGES

*continued from page 35*

included concertos of Tchaikovsky, Khachaturian, George Crumb's *Makrokosmos*, Alan Hovhaness's *Bardo Sonata*, and premieres of works of Junsang Bahk (a South Korean-born composer), and Ernst Krenek, a personal friend. "I feel it's an obligation of anyone living in the 21st century to know what's going on musically, and that's why I support contemporary composers. I introduce young students to modern music, and more advanced players to avant-garde and prepared piano techniques. It's very exciting to see how students react to and enjoy playing really way-out music," explained Hodges.

Noreen Wenjen remembers asking Hodges about the dynamics of a Schubert *Impromptu*, and it was suggested she chart out the dynamic markings of the entire piece on graph paper, from high to low points, which subsequently clarified the harmonic structure for her. Wenjen explains that she often discussed the mechanics of playing, which involved relaxed arm weight into the keys, using the entire body with support from the back, not just arms and fingertips, while often exclaiming: "In music, never say the same thing in the same way twice; make it different each time." Hodges gave workshops on performance anxiety, and Wenjen observes that her theories were based on scientific evidence of how the brain functions. One solution was to practice a fragment of the problem passage numerous times, with a few seconds rest for arm relaxation, then add the

surrounding measures, little by little, until the phrases or sections were complete. Another idea was to have students use meditation to visualize the entire recital in their mind, from walking on stage to taking the final bow. "Preparing for public performance gives students a feeling of personal satisfaction, because they learn how to improve a piece, gain self-confidence, overcome stage fright and memorization fears," said Hodges. Wenjen benefited from these innovations, and observes, "When we went on stage, we already



*In music, never say the same thing in the same way twice; make it different each time.*

learned how to tap into the alpha waves and enter into an almost dreamlike state. Sometimes I was able to feel so relaxed during a performance, I would completely forget there was an audience. Ms. Hodges also gave me the book, *A Soprano on Her Head* by Eloise Ristad, which deals with performance anxiety."

Hodges produced many competition winners of MTAC, MTNA, WSMATA, among others. Wenjen recalls her belief that having a successful career is not dependent on first place wins, but rather a personal choice between student and parent. "If a student is psychologically prepared to produce the best at every

moment, then competitions can be a valuable experience," explained Hodges. Wenjen aspires to her teacher's belief that music has a positive effect on human nature, and helps students pursue goals based on aesthetic principles. "You must create your own world of music, wherever that may be. For me, each student is a challenge and a special project," said Hodges. ■

---

*Joanna Hodges founded and directed the Joanna Hodges International Piano Competition, of Palm Desert, California (now called the Virginia Waring competition), and was the first American woman to tour Romania. Her career included appearances as soloist and with orchestras throughout Europe, Russia, Asia and the UK, as well as concerts at Town Hall and Carnegie Hall (New York). Hodges studied with such luminaries as Mae Gilbert Reese (Los Angeles Conservatory of Music/CalArts), John Crown (USC), Rudolf Firkusny (Aspen School of Music), Bruno Seidlhofer (University of Music, Vienna). She taught at Long Beach City College, California State University, Long Beach, College of the Desert (Palm Desert, CA), and at her studios in Long Beach, California and Vancouver, Washington. Hodges received a Master Teacher Certificate from the Music Teachers' National Association, and became the type of instructor whose guidance inspired many students of whom are winners of national and international competitions or hold faculty positions. Joanna Hodges, artist and personality, will be missed.*