**The Precious Gift of Music**

**By Noreen Wenjen**

**Written in 1997 as a teaching assistant in the Joanna Hodges Piano Studio in Vancouver, Washington**

Joanna Hodges, my mentor and endeared friend once told me, "You must create your own world of music around you, wherever you are." With her esteemed credentials as the founder and Artistic Director of the Joanna Hodges International Piano Competition, as well as having endured a brilliant concert career and distinguished teaching career, I held these words in my hands as if they were made of gold.

I began my study of piano at the age of six with Nancy Rohr, one of the eight teaching assistants to Joanna Hodges in Long Beach, California. Nancy was still a teenager, still discovering the depth of music, and getting her first taste of the miracle of teaching. Little did I know that I would be following her footsteps, twenty years later.

Although I am still a fledgling when it comes to teaching, I feel that it is a path that I have been walking towards my entire life. My experiences of music through the studio have led me to realize the importance of performance for all ages and levels, the gratification of the completion of recitals, the importance of discipline, and the need to revive the art of music in a fading culture.

Being a part of the Joanna Hodges Piano Studio was not something one could take lightly. All of the students, whether they studied with Joanna or a teaching assistant, followed the same program. The demanding standards didn't intimidate those who wanted "the best" and were willing to work, as the waiting list to become her student grew and grew. It was five years before I would have this long awaited opportunity. Yes, the program was intense, but the rewards were more than fulfilling. Performance workshops were held once a month in which a new piece would gradually mature from a new green to a richer, deeper shade. Concerto recitals were held every winter, and even the very young beginners were introduced to the Haydn Concertos.

Joanna just about gave up her own life completely when the summer recital season began. I can remember as many as twenty-seven recitals that were held in a period of three months, sometimes twice in one day. Yet, each performance held an importance of its own, down to the last cake decoration for every reception. The beginning students shared recitals. This was a time to revive all of the works from the performance workshops and present them in a formal and professional setting. The parents beamed with pride, as confidence and determination exuded from each child. When and if you finally earned your right to a solo recital (and not one day sooner!) the glory and the responsibility of fulfilling a solo recital was handed to you on a silver platter. This always felt like a mixed blessing, as this recital always felt like the final exam of the year. However, upon completion, only the good feelings remained, leaving you ready and willing to face even greater challenges.

Now that the recital season was over, the real fun was just about to begin. The Annual Awards Workshop was always a sort of "judgment day" for all of the students. When it arrived, every student secretly wished they had practiced a little more than they did during the school year. Yet, when it came right down to it, one was always rewarded for the endeavors, rather than dwelling on what *could have* been done.

In between this rigorous schedule of events were competitions, competitions, and more competitions for all who were interested. Competitions were not mandatory for all of the students, yet almost everyone indulged in their benefits. The studio consisted of a diverse group of kids and young adults. Some were extremely musically talented, and others may have had only had an "average" musical ability. However, it was always fascinating to see how the child with "average" ability could often grow much faster and even surpass a more innately talented child, with the sheer strength and determination of discipline.

Joanna managed to create *a musical refuge*, a home to those whose only ailment was a yearning for music and culture. The studio represented the California "melting pot," as almost every ethnicity was represented and respected. However, the blood of the Asian ancestry did not flow only through the veins of those who were strictly Asian. The discipline and importance of treating the musical art form of the piano with the utmost respect was indeed prevalent throughout the studio. Joanna certainly fulfilled her part as highly revered "Sensei." She was indeed a wise and honorable teacher and the parents savored every word of her advice, musical or otherwise. The importance of music and culture could not be replaced. Sometimes school dances had to be sacrificed and other times sports events were left unattended, as music took precedence over everything outside of academics. Music and academics went hand in hand, as one embraced the other.

As a young student, I always looked forward to the packed studio schedule of events, as there was always a warm camaraderie between the students. Unlike most schools, in which "gifted" kids were often made to feel a little bit misplaced, all of the students in the piano studio excelled in one area or another, while sharing a common love for the piano. Other talents always surfaced during the annual Christmas workshop, where everyone shared talents *other than* that of the piano, and the ethnicity of every student was celebrated by consuming desserts from each international origin. The close camaraderie among the students carried over to the competitions as well. You could always count on a warm congratulatory hug from another student on a performance well done, regardless of the results on paper. Of course, there was always a little friendly rivalry, which always helped to motivate students to reach for the top, but the support you felt in the studio was loyal and steadfast.

What was the result of all of this? Did she produce an onslaught of concert pianists? No, that was not the goal nor the intention. She did garner some pianists who went on to experience wonderful concert careers, but that was just a handful in the fifteen years that I was in the studio. What she did help to create were bright, confident, intelligent, well rounded, and diligent doctors, lawyers, road scholars, scientists, teachers, engineers, musicians.... and the list goes on and on. It was no accident that most of her students were "straight A" students. New students and families seemed to rise to the level of excellence that prevailed, once acquainted.

The question of competition is always filled with whispers of concerns from the parents. What if he doesn't win? Is my child "good enough" to compete? How can an "average" child compete with one who is "gifted" musically? In general, life is competitive. No child is going to excel at absolutely *everything* that they do. The rewards of success, not focusing in on the material aspects of awards and trophies, but the true rewards of fulfilling an important goal, is enough to benefit any child. It is usually the parent that is more likely to be affected if the child does not "win" first place. Often, it is the parents' fears that are often instilled upon the child. However, when that child gets older and is "competing" for a job or entrance into college, it is the child, not the parent who awakens to a world of disappointment from having been sheltered from "competition" his entire life. Teachers and parents alike should support all performances, whether it be in a recital, a school talent show, or in the form of a competition. The student can always use these experiences to grow in their music, learn how to accept both favorable and unfavorable criticism, and come to the realization that one person's evaluation may not reflect the voice of everyone.

Joanna Hodges relocated from Long Beach, California to Vancouver, Washington in 1990. I received a Bachelor of Music from University of California at Santa Barbara while studying under the direction of Peter Yazbeck in 1991. I then worked for two years with computer graphics, sales and market for a Japanese company, convinced that I could never find a career in music. After spending some time abroad in Europe, I came to Washington for two weeks in 1993 after Joanna invited me to participate in the first Joanna Hodges Summer Piano Seminar. I never left. The lessons and master classes were inspiring. The hours that we devoted to practicing and *only* practicing the piano were invigorating. The lectures, ranging from piano technique to performance anxiety suddenly awakened a part of me that had been lying dormant for years.

Joanna invited me to reside with her as a live-in student, reminiscent of the apprenticeship living situations popular with European musicians in the 1800's. How could I refuse such a generous offer, during such an uncertain point of my life? I eagerly jumped at this opportunity, invested in some sturdy rain gear, and slowly acclimated to this change of climate and lifestyle.

For the first six months, I practiced constantly, sometimes as much as eight hours a day! The two years of reprieve from the piano left my muscles weak and uncoordinated. Joanna helped me to set goals for myself which dangled like a carrot in front of me. I was hungry with ambition, willing to take all of the risks of failure involved. I had no idea exactly where this would all lead to, but I knew that I was in the right place at last. Each step forward led to the next, like the numbers of a dot-to-dot drawing. When Joanna encouraged me to see if I might enjoy teaching, the picture became clear.

After her relocation, Joanna was just beginning to rebuild her piano studio from the ground up. Joanna set up a small piano studio for me opposite of the main studio, so that we could teach simultaneously. She armed me with a brief outline of her own piano techniques for beginners, and assured me that she would help me along the way, as necessary. However, she wanted my teaching experience to be my own. Her guidance felt like a safety net as I stood staring at the children from a hundred feet in the air. But after I took the first step across that tightrope, I was hooked. Teaching felt as natural of a means of expression as performing, and it has become an integral part of who I am.

Joanna always stresses the importance of performance, especially for a piano teacher. "Performance is a most necessary ingredient for any teacher in order to exemplify all creative examples," she says. I continue to enjoy the rewards of performing as often as possible, and have indulged in performances ranging from playing as part of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra to competitions and solo recitals to monthly performance workshops.

I am currently a teaching assistant in the Joanna Hodges Piano Studio in Vancouver, Washington where I teach private piano and theory lessons as well as “Music Theory and Appreciation” Classes for young children. I am the editor of a monthly studio newsletter which keeps all of the students and parents informed of upcoming events, performances, and the students achievements, musical and academic. In 1995, I was the only pianist nationally to receive the distinguished Artist Diploma from the American College of Musicians. I have also become a member of the National Music Teachers' Association, Washington State Music Teachers' Association, and serve as Secretary of the Clark County Music Teachers' Association. This year, I helped Joanna to create the first annual Junior Bach Festival for the Clark Country branch, which had a wonderful turnout, brimming over with one hundred and four participants.

The methods of teaching that I utilize are those which have been developed by Joanna Hodges during the span of her exceptional teaching and performance career. It is a winning combination of wonderful training which she received from pianists such as Rudolf Firkusney , John Crown, Bruno Seidelhofer, and Mae Gilbert Reese, (whose musical "family trees" branch back to Beethoven and Liszt) as well as her own creative talents, which enabled her to find unique solutions to problems which face many pianists. Her technique system is one which should be utilized worldwide. It's principals are simple enough for young children to follow, yet the same technique benefits students of all levels. Joanna has always had a special interest in memory and the intricacies of the mind. Her memorization techniques assure solid and secure memorization.

It is truly rare for a pianist of her stature to be blessed with such an innate ability to communicate verbally as well as musically, through which her brilliance as a teacher clearly shines through. It has truly been a privilege to experience the benefits of her work from two separate vantage points; as a student and as her teaching assistant.

The fundamentals of music run parallel to and constantly cross paths with the fundamentals of life. The lessons learned go far beyond that of the world of music. The Joanna Hodges Piano Studio in Vancouver, Washington upholds the tradition of musical excellence of the Joanna Hodges Piano Studio in Long Beach, California. The benefits ingrained in every student who have come within arms length with the Joanna Hodges Piano Studio are priceless: self confidence, discipline, self motivation, the ability to speak in public, the yearning for continual growth and challenge. These are gifts that the students will carry with them and utilize for the rest of their lives.

I often remark to Joanna how fortunate I am to have opportunity of working with such a wonderful mentor who has guided me down the path which leads to what I cherish most passionately in my heart.... music. She always assures me that the karmic fates have smiled back upon her, as the piano studio continues to grow leaps and bounds. The footsteps of Joanna Hodges are very large ones to fill. I have no intention of filling shoes that have already found their rightful owner. Rather, I hope that I may take the impressions of her footprints left in the sand to guide me so that I may create my own path on the shore.

I am committed to teaching music because it is as necessary to me as the air in which I breathe. Music is energy and communication in a life form of its own. It is the core from which a thousand dreams are spun. Every time one of my dreams is fulfilled, I become a more complete person, richer in depth with broadened ambitions. How can you really thank someone for a gift such as this? I don't expect to change every child's perspective of life through music, as Joanna has done for me. However, if I can teach every child that comes to me to nurture their inherent need for music and help them to become the best individual they can be, then that is enough.