Mr. Fishbein: The Legacy of a Master Teacher

By Penny Prince (BM ’74 / MM ’76)

It’s actually amazing that I stuck with piano lessons when I think of the way my first teacher treated me. I was playing by ear at age four but teachers in those days were reluctant to begin formal lessons that early, so finally, when I turned seven, I was taken to Mrs. Cohen’s perfectly manicured home in Brooklyn. The one thing I found difficult to master those first years was rhythmic notation: dotted eighths and sixteenths, thirty-second notes. When I didn’t understand a rhythm, Mrs. Cohen would say, “You work on that, lovey,” and she would go have coffee with my mother in the kitchen while I sat with tears streaming down my face, not knowing what to make of those insidious marks on the page. After two years, Mrs. Cohen had to change my lesson time to Saturdays and that posed a problem since we were observant, so we changed teachers.

My second teacher was a delightful young Canadian woman, Julie Holtzmann, on the upper Westside. She wore shawls with fringes and strawberry blonde hair scooped up in a sloppy bun. Her apartment was much messier than Mrs. Cohen’s, with stacks of literature on every surface, and her smile and love of music made the lessons sheer joy. She sang as she played, and I did the same. After two years, Julie announced she was moving to New Jersey, so again we had to find a teacher.

Mr. Shiraga, the choral director at our synagogue, was the man who had recommended both instructors, and now he told my parents he had the perfect teacher for me, Zenon Fishbein, a young Argentinian pianist. On West End Avenue, in an apartment filled with exotic paintings, oriental rugs, and two grand pianos, I met Mr. Fishbein, and my life was changed forever.

I was totally in awe of him from day one. He had elegance and charisma, an air of confidence and sophistication, yet always soft spoken and kind. He had a heavy accent, and there were many words I did not understand, yet he always made their meaning known. He would hum a line, or demonstrate a passage on the piano. To introduce me to impressionism, he took the side of his pencil and rubbed it on the paper and instantly, I understood what impressionism was: not straight lines, but an expression, a reflection. Mr. Fishbein always made me feel I could do anything if I worked hard. I left every lesson feeling I wanted to do better to please him. He always gave me a choice of two new pieces, and when he’d say, “This one is more difficult,” that was the one I would choose. When the summer came, he would say, “You might take some time off, but the summer is a good time to do intensive work,” so of course, I chose to take lessons all summer, often twice a week. He believed in total relaxation of the shoulders, arms and wrists, “There should never be pain connected to piano,” and so I learned to keep my shoulders down, bounce my wrists, and to play for hours on end with no physical discomfort.

Mr. Fishbein was completely devoted to his students and we all loved him. He held playing classes in which each of us would perform. One time when many of us had made mistakes, he
said, “There may have been wrong notes, but there were no ugly sounds here today, there was beautiful playing,” and he invited us to stay for a spaghetti and meatball dinner he had prepared.

After two years of private lessons, Mr. Fishbein encouraged me to enter Manhattan School of Music Prep Division where I would spend each Saturday (now music had become my organized religion), taking a piano lesson, chorus, and classes in theory and ear training. I loved every moment of those Saturdays. I stayed on at the Manhattan School of Music for my Bachelors and Masters degrees. I studied with Mr. Fishbein for 11 years.

Manhattan School had inherited a house in East Hampton from the mystery writer Dorothy Quick, and professors could invite groups of students out for a week each summer. I was lucky to be invited twice along with other Fishbein students. These were the first weeks I’d ever spent away from home. The house on the beach was called Mostly Dunes. It was glorious, filled with Quick’s beloved porcelain elephants, and pianos everywhere: in the living room, garage, shed. We practiced and played duets and two-piano music for hours. Mr. Fishbein taught me how to play Chinese checkers, and there were high powered Scrabble games and pun making way into the night. He cooked gourmet meals of roasted peeled peppers, tossed salad, garlic bread, and marvelously aromatic coffee. Even a Ouija Board appeared one night just as lightning struck and we’d lost power. I can swear the letters DQ were formed by the roaming hand, thrilling every one of us.

Mr. Fishbein, (forty years later I still call him that) passed away this August. He was 83, a father, grandfather, beloved professor, beautiful pianist. Many of his pupils came to the memorial. All that he gave us is being passed on to our students and audiences on a daily basis: respect for the highest standards of playing, hearing the story behind the notes, making every note beautiful, each phrase convincingly faithful to the composer’s intent, loving the music. Thank you, Mr. Fishbein. Rest in peace.

Dr. Penny Prince is a professor of music at Lehman College, City University of New York.