

Clavier  
January 2003 \$2



Nancy and Randall Faber





## The Partnership At the Piano Of Nancy and Randall Faber

BY SUZANNE GUY

Husband and wife Nancy and Randall Faber are known to many teachers as the authors of over 200 books, from piano methods to theory and technique, from popular arrangements to editions of piano literature. The Fabers believe that a fundamental problem in America is that "too many people view music as merely an extracurricular activity, not a noble subject that develops both skill and character through self-discipline and working artistically with others."

Nancy Faber urges that to change this attitude teachers should seek the help of community leaders who are passionate about the arts and will work with schools, businesses, and parents to give young musicians an opportunity to perform. "A law or medical firm, for example, could sponsor a high school chamber group or an attorney might help young players with contracts for performance engagements. An electronics store might sponsor a junior high rock band or pop musicians. In the years ahead some of the students will teach music, perform on concert stages, and fill the seats in symphony halls, all of which continues the legacy of Western music."

Randy Faber believes that music teachers don't have to turn to public education for ways to perpetuate music study because help can come through private studios. "With cuts in the money for arts education, schools are cutting the introductory music classes that are the feeder programs for ensembles and music classes in middle schools. Community support and student enthusiasm for music programs are both influenced by the proficiency of the high school band, choir, or orchestra, making the contributions of private music teachers important for the music education of students."

"Times have changed," Randy contends. "Private teachers should not try to duplicate the way they were taught. The old paradigm of selecting students on the basis of talent meant that those who didn't measure up failed, and many students fell by the wayside as a result. This is largely responsible for many adults believing they have no musical talent, which is usually untrue." The teaching style and attitude of a teacher make a big difference. With good teaching most students progress step by step and are not overwhelmed by being expected to give a polished performance at every lesson. "The

teacher's belief in students is paramount. Self-esteem develops as students work for and reach difficult goals; it invariably gives students a sense of accomplishment whenever they do more than they thought possible."

Timing is everything in selecting music, which takes knowledge and good judgment to find just the right piece for each student at any time. Part of the mix should include adding a certain amount of excitement and fun. "All too often students tackle music that is too difficult for them to master and instead of giving a beautiful performance, they are disappointed. What might have become a favorite piece suddenly is instead a source of discouragement if it is assigned too soon," says Randy.

In the accelerated pace of the 21st century, music study gives people a chance to slow down, which may partially explain the current popularity of keyboard lessons. Both Fabers believe that young people will continue to study piano for the pleasure it gives them. "It is also an outstanding way to develop the work habits and confidence that will be valuable in any field. Opportunities for future teachers abound in music education; I know of a number of middle school music programs that suffer not from a lack of money but because they cannot find qualified teachers. Piano lessons for adults is a booming field, in part because adults who work under stress seek music study as a way to find repose and artistic satisfaction," Randy comments.

Nancy Faber notes that "few other adults have as much time alone with each student as private music teachers, who have an extraordinary relationship that can develop in students a sense of industriousness, an appreciation for artistic beauty, and ultimately a sense of self worth. In every lesson teachers should show their deep love for music and teach students respect for their contributions to music."

The Fabers share the goal of bringing joy to every lesson. For very young students Nancy suggests including singing, rhythm instruments, and improvisation in lessons. For students in fourth or fifth grade she recommends teaching chamber music in cooperation with string and wind teachers. "The collaboration becomes a big event for students and one that improves listening and sightreading skills. Piano students who study another instrument can play simple arrangements from a method book or an easy classical work that has a soprano and bass line."

Randy focuses on having lessons with elementary students be fun. "A spirit of enthusiasm, upbeat adventure, and discovery are the secret to having students look forward to seeing the teacher week

*Suzanne Guy is a member of Clavier's Board of Advisors and regularly contributes to the magazine's "Questions and Answers" column. She is a private piano teacher in Norfolk, Virginia.*



*The Fabers, including a youthful Nancy and her mother, on page 9.*

after week. A spirit of play is not frivolous or incompatible with progress, especially if there are specific goals for each lesson. As part of piano study teachers should explain that it takes time to develop the technical skills to perform well, but it is a recurrent problem for teachers to cope with the reality that progress on the piano often seems painfully slow to students."

The Fabers believe that the music is the principal source of motivation for students. From years of teaching the Fabers know that high school students enjoy a variety of music, including contemporary styles. "It helps if students enjoy music socially to offset the discipline of daily practice," comments Randy. "Music education should be for everyone, not only those who excel. Many students really enjoy music, even if they do not make rapid progress."

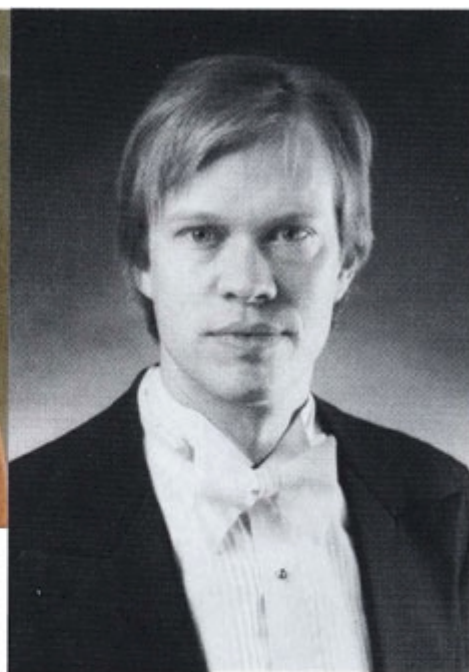
One of the Fabers' students wrote a set of songs, organized a band in college, and recorded a C.D. but majored in a subject other than music. "The lesson is that teachers should avoid forcing students into a set curriculum because not everyone who comes to the studio door will want to learn Clementi Sonatinas. Adult students often come to lessons to learn to play a particular style of music and just want some help from a teacher on troublesome passages. Music history has many composers, such as Scarlatti, Debussy, and Chopin, who did the same."

Of these two musicians, Nancy is the principal composer, and Randy is the recitalist. Both arrange music, perform duets, and they jointly present clinics

and workshops that are as polished as a concert performance. Nancy grew up in a musical family and learned to read music before she could read English. Her mother, Eleanor Trithart, was a student of Robert Pace and a second-generation piano teacher who also taught her three daughters. Nancy's biography states that she composed music at age eight, but an old family file includes a composition in a child's handwriting with her mother's notation, "Nancy - age 4." She grew up in Nashville and as a young girl studied classical music at Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music. Her family moved frequently, and spent short stints in Helena, Montana and Buffalo, back to Tennessee, and eventually to Ann Arbor.

Nancy spoke with a southern accent until a New York teacher interpreted her polite "Yes, ma'am" as being sassy. Her undergraduate study was at Eastman followed by graduate studies in composition at the Milton Avery Graduate School of Fine Arts on the campus of Bard College. Her father died when Nancy was in high school. At age 16 she helped her mother go through graduate school in Ann Arbor. Both mother and daughter gave piano lessons while Nancy was a full-time student. She also played flute and toured Europe and South America as principal flutist in the Youth for Understanding Wind Ensemble. She studied with Estelle Titiev, a former faculty member of The Cleveland Institute; Maria Louisa Faini at Eastman; composition with Charles Ruggiero at Michigan State University; and William Albright of the University of Michigan. At Bard her teachers were Joan Tower and British composer Nicholas Maw.





Randy's musical family included his pianist grandmother, Lena Kooistra, who stopped performing to marry a protestant minister at a time when it was improper for married women to appear on stage. Many years later, however, elderly and blind, she gave recitals for the retirement community where she lived and played note-for-note from a photographic memory. Randy fondly remembers performing a joint recital with her.

In high school he won the Grand Rapids Symphony concerto competition and was selected by his high school to attend a summer political camp, Boys State, but chose instead to accept two scholarships to Interlochen. The choice of going to music camp was easy after he was assigned by lottery the political position of drain commissioner. Nancy also went to Interlochen for band camp, but the aspiring musicians never met there.

Randy credits two summers at Interlochen for his decision to pursue music as a career. "I had a rock band in high school and, fittingly, long shoulder-length hair. During that first Interlochen summer, my counselor couldn't stand it and cut my hair after the first week."

For several years he performed both pop and classical music and signed a pop recording contract at age 19 while also accumulating accolades in such classical piano competitions as The Michigan Federation of Music Clubs Collegiate Artist Competition, The Kalamazoo Bach Festival, The Elizabeth Ann Irish Interlochen Competition, The Grand Rapids Symphony Competition, and eventually the Germania Outstanding Artist Competition. Sometimes he was in the recording studio

with a pop music project until 5:00 a.m. and then in a music theory class at 8:00 a.m.

Randy received three diplomas from the University of Michigan, including advanced degrees in piano performance, educational psychology, plus a doctorate in education and human development from Vanderbilt University. "I was drawn to the music of Chopin and Debussy from an early age. Frédéric Chopin composed in such a pianistic way, and his music is extremely satisfying and entertaining to play. His improvisational and compositional skills still teach and inspire me. The subtle colorings of Claude Debussy were a departure from the Romantics and have influenced my arrangements." He often mentions the influence of popular songs, from George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, to the Beatles, country, and jazz. Nancy's favorite composers are Bach, Beethoven, and Schoenberg.

The couple met at a Robert Pace workshop at King's Keyboard House in Ann Arbor at which Randy was the only man and Nancy the only woman under 50. Randy taught group piano at the music store during his senior year at Michigan, and Nancy recalls seeing him walk confidently around the store and telling her mother that he acted as though he owned the place. The two became engaged within a year.

They soon began to write and test teaching materials in their studio. One of the teachers in the Fabers' studio recalls teaching from early drafts of *Piano Adventures* that were hand bound at a local copy



store." Nancy would run into the room where I was teaching and quickly replace my lesson book with the latest version. Revisions were hatched on a weekly basis. One student became upset that a particular piece did not make the cut, and as a result they restored "I Am the King" to Lesson Book 2A, where it remains to this day."

After seven years of developing and testing lesson materials, the Fabers briefly worked at Belwin-Mills. They joined the F.J.H. Music Co. and published a six-level supplementary series called *PreTime to BigTime Piano* that included pedagogical arrangements of popular music, jazz and blues, classics, and hymns. They continued to select, arrange, and compose music for the next releases, *Piano Adventures* and the *Developing Artist Library*.

At one point after taking over the studio Nancy's mother had developed, there were over 100 students, five teachers, and one bathroom. "It was the only room without a piano. We wrote the books on a door balanced atop two file cabinets next to the washing machine in the basement," Nancy recalls.

Since the first books in the *Piano Adventures* series appeared in 1994, they have had only one vacation, a three-day trip to Disneyworld last spring with their adopted daughter Vivian, but it included a presentation for the South Florida Music Teachers. The Fabers continue to write, test, revise, and rewrite every piece for every method. Of Nancy's compositions, the bestseller is "Walk in a Rainbow," with lyrics by Jennifer MacLean. Her

personal favorite is "Chinese Dragons," a four-hand piece inspired by her daughter. Current projects include an early childhood course for four-and-five-year olds for which their own four-year-old Vivian provided the parameters of this age group.

Nancy continues to compose concert works for many ensembles. She is the recipient of commissions for The National Conference on Piano Pedagogy, The Hattiesburg Composer Festival, and her flute quartet *Voices from Between Worlds* won an award in 1994 from the National Flute Association. In 1997 she was named distinguished composer of the year by the Music Teachers National Association for winning the M.T.N.A.-Shepherd award for her composition, *Tennessee Suite for Piano and String Quartet*.

Randy is often on the road, performing for conventions. One of his favorite programs is an all-Chopin recital of Etudes, the B Minor Scherzo, the G Minor Ballade, and the Berceuse, among others. He recently spoke at the World Conference for Piano Pedagogy, was a guest at the Royal Conservatory of Music and a recitalist for the Texas Music Teachers Conference. For three decades Nancy and Randall Faber have worked to bring music and the art of piano performance to others. They hope that teachers everywhere will work to prepare students for a life filled with music, whether they eventually teach, perform, work in music-related careers, or support the arts by attending concerts and encouraging the next generation of musicians. □