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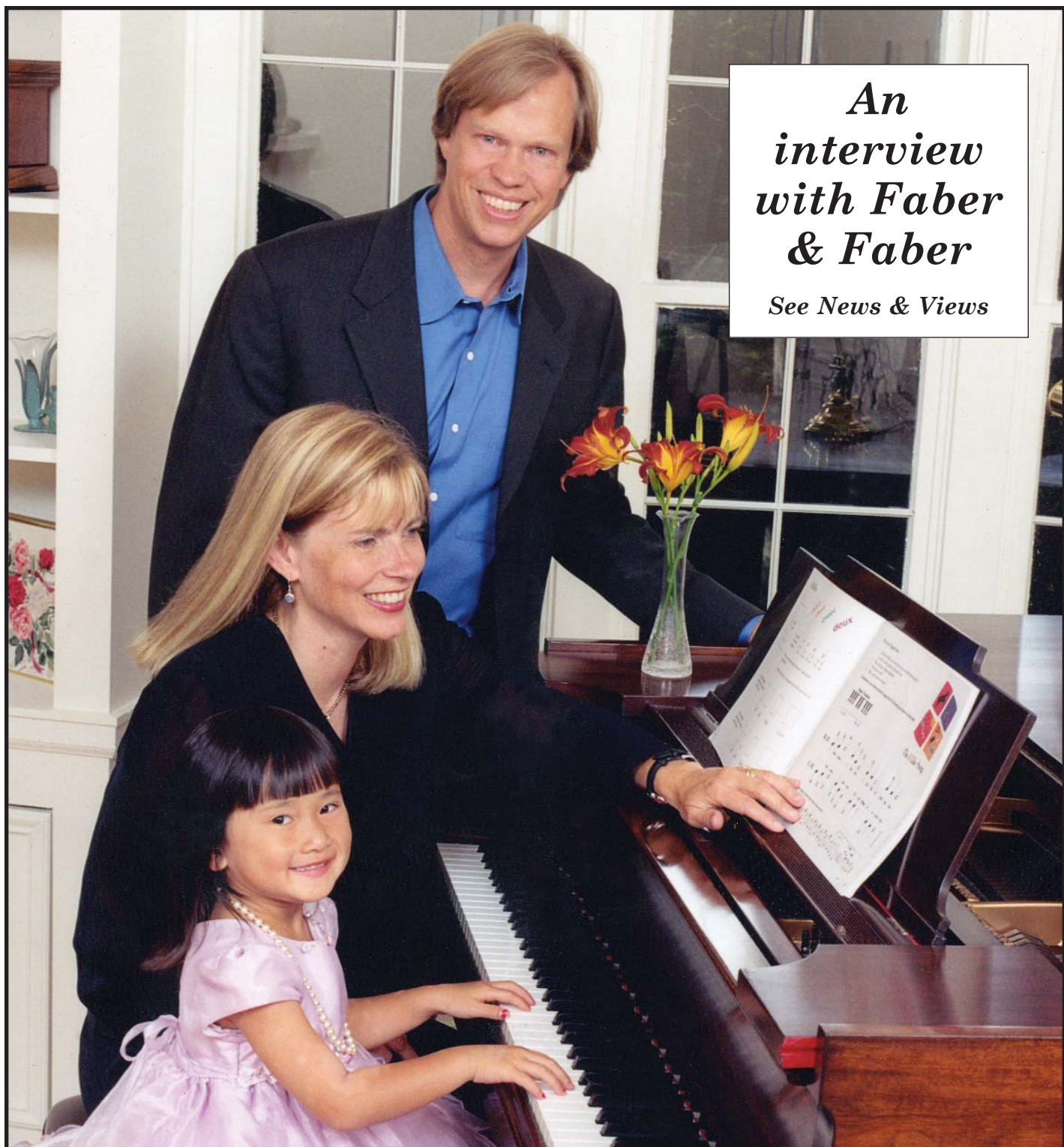
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A Practical Magazine on Piano Teaching

*An
interview
with Faber
& Faber*

See News & Views





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The World Around Us: News & Views

Helen Smith Tarchalski, Editor

An interview with Faber and Faber

In 1977, a talented music major went home for summer vacation. Her mother, a piano teacher, coaxed her into attending a workshop that she would have preferred to skip. (She thought it sounded worthwhile, but she was too tired after her spring semester.) The student's name was Nancy Trihart. Thanks to her mother's urging, Nancy attended the workshop where she met another talented music major.

That chance meeting changed the course of piano teaching history when the two students later teamed up to become husband and wife, better known as Faber and Faber, creators of the celebrated *Piano Adventures*, one of the best-selling piano methods in the world today. Thus far, Nancy and Randall Faber have produced more than 200 publications and their books are published in English, Mandarin, and Korean. Millions of piano students experience the Fabers' magic every day!

The Fabers, have diverse musical backgrounds and interests that are reflected in their compositional styles. Lauded by both piano teachers and students for their appealing and thorough pedagogical development materials, the Fabers' compositions run the gamut from "serious" instrumental concert stage repertoire to music

found in the pop culture. ("Willow Tree Waltz" was included in a recital episode on the NBC TV series, *Major Dad*.)

Nancy was named "Distinguished Composer of the Year" in 1998 by Music Teachers National Association for her award-winning *Tennessee Suite for Piano and String Quartet*. Her flute quartet, *Voices from Between Worlds*, was the winning composition for the 1994 National Flute Association Professional Chamber Music Competition.

Randy and Nancy represent a well-balanced, inspired blend of being like-minded on most important matters in life and music while having quite different tastes as well. In music, Randy is drawn to Chopin and Debussy — Nancy prefers Bach, Beethoven, and Schoenberg.

Vision, chemistry, and "working like dogs" are

some of the obvious ingredients in their formula for success, as well as their commitment to the importance of human interaction and philanthropic attitude as a foundation for everything they do. And, in the spirit of their genuinely "student-centered" approach, you will see how the Fabers "walk the talk" as they describe the beginnings of *Piano Adventures*, and when Randy credits a student with being a major influencer on his teaching. ▲



The newlyweds, riding in the back seat of a convertible.

The interview

How did the Faber and Faber team get started?

Nancy: We met in the basement of a music store, King's Keyboard House in Ann Arbor, where we attended a Robert Pace teaching workshop. I was home for the summer from college. My mother was a Pace teacher, and she said, "I think you should go." I attended reluctantly, groaning to her, "I just want to stay home and relax. I just finished my finals."

Randy: Nancy was the only teacher there under 50, and I was the only guy. I was teaching Pace group piano at the store on Saturdays. Nancy remarked disparagingly, "Look at that guy, he runs around here like he owns the place." (I knew where to turn everything on since I was working there — the lights, the AC, etc.) After the class was finished, I waited at the corner while the traffic light changed three times until Nancy came by. For her, it wasn't exactly love at first sight.

Nancy: The instructor frequently put us together for the projects. She was *definitely* matchmaking!

We met in the basement of a music store where we attended a teaching workshop.

Randy: Nancy had told her mother that she would never marry a musician, definitely not a pianist, and would never marry someone from the University of Michigan. (She was at Michigan State at the time.) She got all of the above! (Nancy had had a steady boyfriend for many years and so I had to really work to get him out of the picture!)

Her mother was very supportive. After the workshop where we met, her mother asked me to teach some of her students. I accepted, primarily because I knew that I would be able to see Nancy more often! We were engaged within a year.

What are your recollections about your early years as a music student?

Nancy: My mother started me with mini lessons at the age of three. She sent me to another teacher for formal piano lessons. My mother encouraged me to experiment with my own compositions.

Randy: We found a family file with a first written composition labeled "Nancy — age four."

Nancy: We later moved to Tennessee. I continued piano lessons, and was thrilled by the idea of playing percussion with the sixth grade band. I was so disappointed when the teacher informed me that girls did not play percussion! My best friend played flute, so I chose the flute, too. Playing in the school ensembles was a great experience.

I was admitted to the Eastman School of Music as a composition and performance piano major. Believing that strong performance skills sharpen one's tools for composing, I chose performance, and totally immersed myself in practicing.

Randy: I began piano lessons at the age of eight, and my first ten years of study were with Lucille Dinsmore in Grand Rapids. I had lots of opportunities to perform, including concerto performances. Ms. Dinsmore was a serious disciplinarian who taught me the value of routine and hard work.

Who and what are your greatest influencers?

Nancy: Certainly my mother, Eleanor Trithart, who always encouraged me. She taught piano and led all the choirs at church.

Randy: Nancy's mother was the quintessential piano teacher — giving to the community, always busy, lots of students.

Nancy: Yes, all the way into her seventies. Even after she had a stroke and had moved in with my sister, she was saying, "I can go

Excerpt from "Willow Tree Waltz" — Nancy's first published work with FJH which was aired by NBC on a recital episode of "Major Dad." Reprinted courtesy of the FJH Music Company, Inc.

Willow Tree Waltz

By NANCY FABER

Flowing (♩ = 160)

mp

mf

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back to the house — I can take the dining room table out. I've never liked that table anyway. I can put four digital keyboards in there, I can start a class using MIDI disks, and I can give piano lessons on the Steinway in the living room!" Even as she was losing her energy and her clarity, *this* was clear as a bell — it was music and teaching that were the driving forces behind her reason to keep going.

My piano teacher during my high school years in Ann Arbor was Estelle Titiev, a *wonderful* musician and teacher. My composition teacher, Joan Tower, really stressed finding one's own creative voice and William Albright and Nicholas Maw helped me with structure and with developing the craft.

I was sixteen when my father died. We had just moved from Buffalo to Ann Arbor. My father was president of the American Dental Association. He had been the principal researcher for water fluoridation when we lived in Tennessee. When he died, my mother and I had to teach piano to support the family. My mother was back in graduate school as well, so in addition to helping support the family, I found myself in a nurturing role for her.

Randy: Because of Nancy's heavy responsibilities when she was young, I think that she had to pull away from the social world somewhat, and she became more intimate with music. I think that music became the world for her because her responsibilities were so tied to music.

I owe much of my motivation to Lucille Dinsmore, the Grand Rapids teacher I mentioned before. I was also influenced by my grandmother, Lena Kooistra, who was a classical pianist. She gave up playing concerts when she married my grandfather, a minister. Years later, using her photographic memory to remember the music she had played in concerts many years before, she gave recitals at her retirement community when she was elderly and blind. I have very fond memories of playing a joint recital with her.

My father was an electrician. I am very grateful that he was so supportive of a career in music which was so far removed from *his* world. Early on when I was in music school, I began to worry: "How does one make a livelihood in a music career?" My father really made an impact that I have always carried with me when he said, "Well, there's *always* room at the top!" He impressed on me that I should never settle for mediocrity.

The two summers I spent at Interlochen helped me to decide on a career in music. (Nancy attended Interlochen as well.) Charles Fisher and Eugene Bossart at the University of Michigan helped transform my playing to a much higher artistic level. They opened my ears and taught me how to play much more expressively.



I played with a rock band when I was a teenager. Maybe it was my identity crisis. I remember one evening playing the Schumann *Piano Concerto* with the Grand Rapids Youth Symphony, and then running off to a bar gig with my rock band! It was kind of a wild time. I also recall being in the recording studio with my band until 5 a.m., and then sitting in a college music theory class at 8:00!



Nancy at age nine living in Nashville and Randy at age five living in Grand Rapids, MI.

The transition out of the band and going on to the conservatory training was very difficult for me because we were still under a recording contract. Some of my band members already had a couple of hits with Capitol Records. We had Decca Records and another label in England very interested in moving from our minor deal to a major recording deal.

A bit of irony in today's society, because on many levels, what you are doing now probably far

surpasses anything that would have happened with the rock band, however exciting that may have been at the time. I'm sure that you had no idea that you would become so influential and well-known through piano teaching.

Randy: It's kind of ironic indeed. I think you're right that it was hard to foresee what the teaching influence was going to be. But, I should say that at the age of sixteen, when I was looking through

Hanson House and Columbia Pictures publications on the music store shelves, I could actually imagine my name imprinted on the covers. There's a sense of foreshadowing there, because another irony is that I ended up being published and working so closely with Frank Hackinson, the founder of Columbia Pictures Publications, which is now the FJH Music Company.

I'm so grateful for those rock band years because they gave me improvisation skills and an understanding of pop styles that help me relate to students in many different ways. Nancy's background is interesting, too. She toured Europe and South America as principal flautist with the Youth For Understanding Wind Ensemble. (**Editor's note:** Nancy's flute performances can be heard on the *Piano Adventures Gold Star Performance* CDs.) She also did a bit of jazz piano playing, and some songwriting. (She was named the Knoxville, Tennessee *Songwriter of the Year* in 1989!)

My big wake-up call as a teacher was from an eleven-year-old student, who was the mayor's daughter. She was not doing very well, and I was losing patience with her. She said something like, "I know I'm not very smart, but you don't have to get mad at me

I remember one evening playing
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with my rock band!

about it.” That’s when I started to be more reflective on my own teaching, and it started to really improve after that.

Regarding personal life influences, Nancy lost her stepfather, we went to China to adopt our daughter, Vivian, and then Nancy lost her mother, all within five months in 1999.

Nancy: We spent a lot of time in Hospice. That was a very tough time. We came back from living in hotels with Vivian for several weeks in China, followed by being home for only a week, and then off to Michigan and living in hotels again for another month. That was the beginning of Vivian’s life with us — hotels, and then more hotels. Losing a mother and



Nancy and Randy after their students’ recital in the early years, with staff teachers Jessica Johnson and Brian Smith and their studio mascot, Curry.

becoming a mother at the same time, I sort of went numb.

Randy: But Nancy had to adapt very quickly just as she had when she lost her father. Back then, she had sisters and a mother depending on her. Now she had this new child depending on her.

Nancy: We adopted Vivian from an orphanage in the small village of Yi-Yang, China, outside Changsha. Vivian has had a profound effect on our lives, not just from the standpoint of building a family, but also on our work. She has not only provided us with the parent’s perspective, but since we are with her around the clock, she has also provided us with a more intimate experience about how children learn.

Excerpt from “**Dragons in the Clouds**” (the 3rd movement of a set of pieces by Nancy Faber called *Chinese Dragons*). This duet is a personal favorite of the Fabers, having been inspired by their daughter, Vivian, who they adopted in China. Reprinted courtesy of the FJH Music Company, Inc.

III. Dragons in the Clouds

Vivace (♩ = 138)

III. Dragons in the Clouds

Vivace (♩ = 138)

When and how did you become interested in composing, and how did the *Piano Adventures* series begin?

Randy: I was drawn into the pedagogical aspect of composition through my own teaching. My first educational writings were a series on improvisation, and Nancy was writing a lot of pieces for the students. After seven years of developing and testing *Piano Adventures*, we published the *Pre-Time to Big Time* supplemental piano series which included pedagogical arrangements of classics, jazz, pop music, blues, and hymns. We continued to polish the method and launched it a few years later in 1994.

Nancy: Our house where we wrote the method was a small, two-bedroom home in Ann Arbor. We had seven pianos and four electric pianos, including one in the bedroom. Our “office desk” consisted of a door lying on top of two filing cabinets next to the washing machine, and this is where we wrote the method! That door was such a symbol to me. I would go down every morning and work at the door.

Our students were so involved in the choice of repertoire. They gave us their opinions about *everything*. I loved that process of the students’ responses helping us to form the curriculum. When they were empowered with passing judgment, they took the work very seriously. If three pieces didn’t work, we’d print up a new version of a book, and we’d put new stickers on everything from the old version. I was at the print shop constantly. We did major re-writes: There were *twenty-seven* versions of the Primer book! We probably threw out three times as much as we kept before any book was ever published.

Randy: We owe a lot to the hundreds of students who provided so much valuable input.

Nancy: And to their parents who didn’t mind our homemade copies. There was no *Finale* music software back then. I was writing things out by hand with black magic marker, and getting it bound at Speedy Printing. There were so many beautiful books on the market, but those parents were OK with our handmade copies. We are so grateful to them for letting us experiment.

Randy: There has to be a sense of humility to being willing to experiment. You write something and you’re proud of what you wrote. You’re tempted to say, “This is the way it is.” But that’s arrogance. In trying to get an educational result for the child, you have to really see where the child is, what’s working, and what’s not. That’s what brings success in publishing. It’s writing with a purpose. You *know* what your goal is because the *students* have taught you.

We worked like dogs, and still do. We used to work until midnight every night. We would promise ourselves that if we met our writing goals for the evening, we’d watch a rerun of one of our favorite old sitcoms on Nickelodeon at midnight as a little reward! Our goal was to stop working an hour earlier every year until we could get down to more reasonable hours, but so far, we’ve never managed to get it earlier than 11 p.m. And 11 p.m. begins my practice time. Nan takes a brief nap, and then she often works until 2 a.m.



The Trio, with Nancy on flute, Randy on piano, and David Moulton on cello. Their Christmas recording from 1985 is scheduled to be re-released in 2007

Tell us about the Faber Institute.

Randy: The Institute is our physical base where we continue to develop and test materials and conduct teacher training. It is also a virtual base in terms of being able to harness multimedia to share thoughts and to webcast master classes and performances.

(Editor’s note: To read more about the Institute, go to www.faberinstitute.org.)

Nancy: In the early years, we had four teachers working at our home studio, 100 students, and one bathroom! The cars would start swinging in around 7 a.m., and were there until all hours of the night. The only way that we could get some focused time for our writing was to get an office

downtown away from the house.

In many ways, that’s how the Institute got started. Teaching is how we get into the students’ heads in order to figure out how to make our publications work, so we certainly continue with our own teaching.

Excerpt from “Our Detective Agency,” which was written for two students in Nashville who teamed together to form a neighborhood detective agency. Reprinted courtesy of the FJH Music Company, Inc.

Our Detective Agency

Mysteriously

1 2 1

p

f Come to us to

1 2 3 4 5

4

2 3

solve a mys-ter-y. *p.* We take cas-es of com-plex-i-ty.

Randy: Of course one wants to leverage time and influence. Some of our activities provide a small influence to a great number of people. But teaching is the bedrock of everything else that we do, and at the same time, it gives us the opportunity to provide great influence on a small number of students.

Part of our philosophy is that a piano student *should* understand that meaningful learning requires hard work. One of our research issues that I followed through with my PhD research is the matter of *Nurture versus Discipline*. When is the teacher to be the nurturer? When the disciplinarian? What are the pros and cons and trade-offs? To condense five years' worth of study down to one minute, it's not "either/or." We nurture discipline. If students develop a sense of accomplishment, then they clearly feel good about themselves. It's a concept that's so self-evident, yet so easily missed.

Nancy: Students encounter brief introductions to other competencies. Piano is often their only long-term, self-reflective study. Piano study provides continuity and long-term development, and there's so much they can learn just from that.

What's next for the Fabers?

Randy: We're just now releasing our course for five- and six-year-olds called *My First Piano Adventure*, so we're excited about seeing that take off. We're hoping to immediately follow with our Preschool Piano Course which has been ready for some time. We plan more teacher training sessions at the Institute, and of course, to continue developing and testing materials.

We're really looking at the issues of how one teaches our materials. It's the interaction between teacher and student that is of vital importance. So, no matter what we do with publications, the critical point is how the materials are implemented.

Nancy: A long-term goal for us is to work with orphanages in China to set up music programs. We hope that perhaps the Institute can be a focal point for this. Most orphanages currently just want toys and clothes for the children, but the develop-

mental benefits of music study are so well documented now. Of great interest to us is the possibility of perhaps funding or facilitating some kind of a scholarship for a



Randy in recital at Rackham Auditorium at the University of Michigan in 2004.

music student to go over to an orphanage for a summer and work with the children through music. This could be a really wonderful life event for the children in the orphanage as well as for the music students and teachers going there.

It is impressive to observe how you continue to find many meaningful ways to share the joy of music as well as your good fortune.

Randy: Thank you. We do try to use our unique position to share our educational philosophies and passions in as many ways as possible. One of the things we feel strongly about is that we have to be able to take a person and help him to be everything that he can be, to really sharpen the person's sense of personal skill. But one can't jump the gun and move right into contributions to society without having first sharpened one's own skills. Personal success is important. There's a sequence in developing personal success. It's OK to be somewhat self-centered during those developmental years in terms of developing one's skills, showing off, and discovering what one can do. But then you must find it's not all just about you. That developmental process is true for students *and* teachers. ▲

For additional information about the Fabers' publications and activities, visit www.PianoTeaching.com.

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