
LEGENDARY LESSONS – STUDIES WITH MARIA CURCIO

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A personal view of the life and teaching of renowned twentieth century master teacher, Maria Curcio. Herself a student of Artur Schnabel, Curcio became a legend in her own time, a remarkable pedagogue who was the ultimate artistic 'door opener' for a generation of internationally acclaimed pianists.

A former student of Curcio, Wendy Lorenz discusses her approach to technique and interpretation, and explores the outstanding legacy she left to the world of pianism.

The choice of topic for this address was very much influenced by the conference theme – 'Opening Doors'. When looking back over one's musical journey, several events – or 'door opening' experiences inevitably stand out. But for me, the one incomparable door opener was my time spent studying with the great teacher Maria Curcio.

As do many young aspiring Australian musicians, I left our shores as a recent graduate in the early 1970's, in search of expanding musical horizons. Little did I know that my journey would lead me directly to a teacher who would literally change my life – opening to me a world of pianism and music making beyond my wildest dreams.

Maria Curcio – distinguished pedagogue to a generation of world class pianists, passed on in 2009 at the age of 89. She never visited Australia and is consequently not so well known here. So I thought that this address would be an ideal opportunity to share with you something of her inestimable contribution to the piano world.

This paper begins with an overview of her influence and standing within the musical world during the second half of the twentieth century, then moves to a brief account of her quite extraordinary life, and finally shares impressions of her teaching style and technical approach as experienced in my lessons.

Although not especially well known beyond the music world, within that world her reputation was legendary. Awarded the 'Services to Music Award' in 2009 by the International Piano Magazine for her 'immeasurable contribution' to the piano world, she was teacher and consultant to a stream of the world's most eminent pianists – Martha Argerich, Radu Lupu, Mitsuko Uchida, Alfredo Perl, Leon Fleisher, Anthony Goldstone, Ian Hobson, Rafael Orozco, Claude Frank, Pierre-Laurant Aimard and Barry Douglas being among the many who benefitted from her tutelage.

Alfredo Perl describes Curcio as the teacher who 'polished' him (*Telegraph*, 7 April 2009, Obituary: Maria Curcio), whilst Rostropovich sent Alexander Solzhenitsyn's son, Ignat to

spend three years studying with her in London (*ibid*). Internationally renowned British pianist Barry Douglas writes of her:

Maria Curcio was an extraordinary human being, musician, teacher, cook and friend. She clarified music and technique and, to this day, I benefit from her wisdom. She told me she had worked out all these answers while lying in a hospital bed in Holland; she was recovering from TB. Apparently Otto Klemperer was in the same hospital and flirted dreadfully, managing to spill her orange juice over her. Maria's lessons lasted for hours and I would go every day. She never stood still, but continually renewed and relearned her craft and passed it quickly on to her students. Once she showed me a particular muscle at the top of the arm of the right hand which enabled her to play with more of a singing tone, and I use it to this day (*The Guardian*, 14 April 2009, Obituary: Maria Curcio).

She was held in such high regard that even seasoned professionals frequently sought her musical advice. Carlo Maria Giulini likens this to a type of 'tune-up' in the following words: 'Very well known pianists – sometimes they go there to have one hour with her just to discuss a few things – like you go to the doctor – but it's not only physical, it's also a psychological and musical problem – with Maria it's friendship also..' (BBC Scotland television documentary, 1989).

On one occasion the 79-year-old Konrad Wolff, with whom she had shared a class with Schnabel in the 1930's, consulted her, joyfully declaring afterwards that the lesson had been the highlight of his visit to Britain (*Telegraph*, 7 April 2009, Obituary: Maria Curcio).

One is led to ask – what exactly did she have that proved so inspirational and liberating to so many? In exploring that question – I'll first look at the impact of her eventful and at times severely challenging life and then at her teaching as experienced by myself and others.

LIFE

Whilst the extent and nature of her reputation would suggest an imposing physical presence, she was in fact petite and fragile, once described as: 'a tiny, birdlike woman who moves with care as though her limbs might snap' (*ibid*). Her frail physique was no doubt partly the outcome of the difficulties faced during her life.

Curcio was born in 1919 in Naples, daughter of a wealthy Italian business man and a Brazilian pianist who taught her the piano from a very young age. Her extraordinary musical gifts were quickly apparent, and she gave her first public concert at the age of 3. In order to allow the maximum time to develop her talent, she was home-schooled and taken to study with the finest teachers including Alfredo Casella, Carlo Zecchi and Nadia

Boulanger (the latter in Paris). At the age of 7 she was invited to perform in Rome for Mussolini – an episode that demonstrated that even at this tender age she knew her own mind. Having made the trip to Rome, when it actually came time to leave her hotel and go to the performance she could not be found. In her own words – ‘I had heard many conversations about Mussolini, about how he killed people, and I hated him. So on the morning when I was supposed to play, I got the waiters to hide me under the dining-room tablecloth’ (Church, 2009).

The rigorous practice and performance routine left little time for normal childhood pursuits, and Curcio has described her childhood as ‘not a happy one’ (*The Guardian*, 14 April 2009, Obituary: Maria Curcio).

At the age of 15 she was taken by Zecchi to play for Artur Schnabel, who – despite almost never accepting children – immediately accepted her as his pupil, describing her as ‘one of the greatest talents I have ever met’ (*ibid*). The time studying with Schnabel at his Lake Como home was a very happy and inspiring period for Curcio. As well as her lessons with the master, she also accompanied students of his wife, the famous singer Therese Behr, who was also a formative influence on the young Maria. A further lasting legacy from this time with Schnabel, was her acquaintance and subsequent relationship with his secretary Peter Diamand, later to become her husband.

A brilliant future for Schnabel’s young protégé seemed assured – but with the outbreak of the second world war everything changed, bringing her and so many others’ careers to an abrupt halt. Schnabel went to America and Curcio decided despite strong parental opposition, to go with Diamand to his home in Amsterdam, where she stayed with him and his mother. At first she did a lot of performing there, but ceased giving concerts as a means of protest when Jews were banned from playing in public.

The Diamands were Jewish, which placed them – and Curcio by association – in considerable danger. Eventually the Diamands were forced to go into hiding, managing to survive thanks to Maria, who risked her own life to keep them supplied with food and even managed to get them false identity papers. The constant stress and malnutrition took its toll on her however, and she contracted tuberculosis. Told by her doctor that she would have to spend a year in hospital if she wanted to survive, her reply was typical – ‘How could I do that, with people dying here?’ (*ibid*)

Her severely weakened condition after the war left her no choice, and she was forced to spend many months in a sanatorium. As described in the quote by Barry Douglas above (p. 2), it was during these months of enforced inactivity that Curcio pondered in depth

the task of rebuilding her technique, arriving at an extremely cohesive and well considered technical approach, which was to become so useful in her later teaching. It is interesting how some artists of outstanding natural talent never really feel the need to analyse the technical side of things, which can sometimes be a limiting factor in their teaching. This otherwise dormant period in Curcio's life could well be considered a blessing in disguise, given her future focus on teaching.

She and Diamand were married in 1947. Despite her somewhat precarious health she nonetheless started to work to rebuild her technique and began performing again when her health allowed. During this time she collaborated with such artists as Benjamin Britten, Carlo Maria Giulini, Szymon Goldberg, Otto Klemperer, Joseph Krips, Pierre Monteux and Elizabeth Schwarzkopf. Persistent health problems however soon ruled out an ongoing performance career, and it was then that she decided to focus her talents on teaching – an area with which she had always felt a strong affinity.

During the 1960's the Diamands moved to the UK, where Peter was appointed director of the Edinburgh Festival. The Diamands divorced in 1971 and with the help of her good friend Benjamin Britten, Maria eventually settled in London. It was here that her phenomenal teaching career really became established, lasting right through to 2006 when she moved to Portugal to spend her final few years.

TEACHING STYLE

Curcio was a very private person, totally devoted to her students' development. She carried out her teaching for some 40 years from a small, basement flat in London, where she greeted each student with a strong espresso, before applying her penetrating attention to the music at hand. Lessons often went for hours – the artistic result rather than the minute hand setting the boundaries.

As with any great teacher, arriving at a neat definition of her teaching style is difficult, given the infinite variety of contexts arising from the combination of individual students and the vastness of the repertoire. However the following represents an overview of her approach – assembled from my own experience as well as observations from others of her students.

Former student and well known American pianist, Simone Dinnerstein comments of Curcio: 'For her, music and technique were inseparable. Once you had conceived of a musical idea, your responsibility was to realise it fully, and the more able you were to realise an idea, the more vivid and imaginative your ideas could be' (Dinnerstein, 2007, 'Why my piano teachers struck a chord with me,' *The Guardian – Music Blog*, weblog post, 19 October, viewed 17 August 2012).

This of course is the mantra of any really insightful teacher and is also central to the teachings of the great Russian master teacher Heinrich Neuhaus, whose book, *The Art of Piano Playing* (Barrie & Jenkins, London, 1973) Curcio strongly encouraged her students to buy and absorb. Her respect for Neuhaus was unbounded and one finds many of her ideas reflected in his book mentioned above. Perhaps a small diversion here would not go astray – especially for those who have not before encountered this giant of the piano world. A talented pianist who had studied under Felix Blumenfeld (who was his uncle) and later Godowsky, Neuhaus chose to direct his considerable talents to teaching, joining the staff of the Moscow Conservatoire in 1922 and helping establish the famous Moscow Central Music School for gifted children 10 years later. He was director of the Moscow Conservatoire for several years in the 1930's, a post he relinquished to devote himself entirely to teaching. We can only be grateful for this decision, since his pupils – including Emil Gilels, Radu Lupu and Sviatoslav Richter - number among the greatest pianists of the 20th century – and arguably beyond.

His book is indeed a treasure trove of artistic and pianistic wisdom, dominated, as was Curcio's approach by the essential inseparability of art and technique. Such ideas as: 'The clearer the goal (the content, music, perfection of performance), the clearer the means of attaining it. The "what" determines the "how", although in the long run the "how" determines the "what"' (Neuhaus 1973, p. 2). He summarises his method of teaching thus:

My method of teaching, briefly, consists of ensuring that the player should as early as possible grasp what we call "the artistic image", that is: the content, meaning, the poetic substance, the essence of the music, and be able to understand thoroughly in terms of theory of music... what it is he is dealing with. A clear understanding of this goal enables the player to strive for it, to attain it and embody it in his performance; and that is what "technique" is about....I often tell my students that the word "technique" comes from the Greek word [which] means art (ibid).

This is not to say that Neuhaus neglected the development of technical mastery in the more common sense of the word – in fact far from it, as even a cursory perusal of his book reveals. But the separation of it from the artistic goal was anathema to his approach, just as it was to Curcio's.

The wonderful thing about Curcio's teaching for me however, was her ability not only to inspire and evoke the musical ideal – but to go that all important extra step and show HOW to go about achieving it technically. It was this marriage of the technique with the musical imperative, no matter what the context, which made her teaching truly effective.

After auditioning for Curcio in my early twenties, her response was to commend my musicality, but point out a lack of true technical understanding and development with which to support it. Although this came as something of a surprise, since I had already done quite a bit of professional performing prior to leaving Australia, it didn't take long before I began to understand. In fact it was really a matter of starting at the beginning and rebuilding a strong and flexible technique almost from scratch. At first this was daunting, but the benefits soon became apparent. I particularly recall the sense of excitement and liberation I experienced when I realised that playing the piano could – and should – actually FEEL GOOD - as well as sound good of course!

The technical principles I learnt during my two years with Curcio have remained the basis of my playing and teaching ever since, and have proved a springboard for continued development. Hers was a holistic approach, with a strong emphasis on using the body in a balanced and economical way. She sent her students off to have lessons in the Alexander Technique, (I can still recall my first success in allowing the flower pot to lift itself!) and stressed the importance of alignment and the role of the back in supporting the playing mechanism. Another quote from Neuhaus supports this idea:

To acquire a technique which enables you to perform all the existing piano literature, it is essential to use all the anatomical possibilities of movement with which man has been endowed, beginning with the hardly perceptible movement of the last joint of the finger, the whole finger, the hand, the forearm, arm and shoulder and even the back, in fact the whole of the upper part of the body, i.e. beginning with one point of support – the fingertips on the keyboard, and ending with another point of support on the chair (ibid p. 83).

Curcio likewise often spoke of using the whole as well as the parts as and when necessary, in order to obtain the infinite range of tonal possibilities.

She constantly stressed the use of weight in the attainment of tonal richness and beauty, but since it is the hand - more specifically the fingers - which actually make contact with the instrument, much attention was also given to their role and development. In fact she pointed out the dual roles of the fingers: just like an athlete they need both strength and agility to fulfil their task adequately. The focus of the hand was very much the bridge – or knuckles – and the importance of developing a strong, supportive bridge from which the finger could work as a whole was paramount. In tandem with this was the need to keep the wrist (and other joints) free and flexible, thereby allowing for the unobstructed transference of weight as needed.

Stress was placed on developing both strength and independence in the fingers, which ideally were used as a whole, working from the bridge and generally retaining their

naturally rounded position (ie without collapsed joints). In this natural position the fingers have the greatest capacity both to support weight and to remain active – their two main functions. I strongly recall her likening the fingers to load-bearing arches, bringing to mind the flying buttresses of the Notre Dame cathedral. The approach of the fingers to the keys was one of embracing, as if drawing sound from the instrument – rather than a collision of surfaces. She advocated the feeling of ‘taking hold’ of the key with the pads of the fingers, which gives one a wonderful sense of tactile security and oneness with the instrument. Unlike violinists, flautists or even tuba players, pianists can never really hold or embrace their instrument, for obvious reasons. However this approach to the keyboard certainly helps break down any sense of distance or separation from the instrument for the pianist. This element was of course dependent upon the musical context – but was of particular importance when a singing *cantabile* line was needed. The richer the singing tone required, the more flesh of the finger was brought into play in transferring the needed weight from key to key, resulting in a velvety, warm sound. In this instance it was as if the finger actually started at the top of the arm.

This approach to the keys was taken a step further for passages of very fast, light playing, where clarity and precision were needed. Here the fingers would weightlessly, ‘tickle’ the keys, producing just the clear, sparkling sound desired.

A further application of this active finger element was in the playing of chords. Chordal playing of course requires a strong, load bearing frame, but if the pillars of the frame are sensitive rather than just rigid supports, a much more musically flexible result can be achieved. The benefits of this active finger approach are also noticeable in achieving crisp, clear staccato in both single notes and chords.

In training the hand she made much use of a hand position advocated by Chopin as well as subsequent pedagogues, Neuhaus included – that of placing the 3 middle fingers on the group of 3 black notes, with the thumb and fifth on E and C respectively (RH). This position automatically emphasised the bridge of the hand, making an ideal position in which to work on finger exercises. In so doing she always underlined the importance of freedom and lack of tension in the fingers - or anywhere for that matter. Economy of effort and movement was stressed, and the concept of a natural finger drop from a naturally raised finger, rather than a ‘hit’ from a tight, arched finger was preferred. (Interestingly, at this same time my husband – violinist Andrew Lorenz – was studying with the distinguished Hungarian teacher Bela Katona, who also emphasised the importance of a finger DROP in violin technique.)

Equally important was releasing all tension once the finger had found the key bed – as was the need to keep all tension out of other fingers (and especially the thumb) when

not in use. I found this a particularly helpful aspect of her teaching, and with continued thought and work, was able to rid my hands and arms of much unnecessary tension which so often inhibits and limits the technique.

Her approach to the thumb was also extremely helpful. She would point out that unlike the fingers which work from the bridge of the hand, the thumb works from just below the wrist – at which point it takes up half the hand. This can be easily seen when viewing the palm of the hand. I learnt the incredible importance of:

1. – using the thumb properly when needed, and
 2. – keeping it free when not in use.
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1. She advocated using the whole thumb – ie right from the basal joint – and making sure it was self supportive – and did not pull the hand/wrist down every time it played – such a common fault in many students’ playing. Again the importance of not collapsing its joints was stressed as was the need for it to be active and independent.

 2. Equally important was the ability to keep it released and free when not in action. I spent many hours perfecting this – hours incredibly well spent, as the other fingers – especially the 3rd, 4th and 5th work so much better when not hampered by a tight thumb. (How many of us have seen students crunch up the thumb tight against the hand when trying to play with the upper fingers – in fact making it all that much more difficult, due to the added unwanted tension produced.) Actually, if completely free, the thumb will - thanks to the law of gravity – be RESTING on the keys, and not HELD up, using unnecessary energy and/or tension.

At the other end of the hand is the 5th finger – which was also one of Curcio’s major focuses. Its frequent role in carrying the melodic line – especially in chords and octave work – means that it must be very strong. Again using it as a whole and developing the muscle at the side of the hand as it adhered to the key, was stressed. She advocated special exercises to build the ‘frame’ for octaves – that is the strong bond between the thumb and 5th. She would suggest practising an octave passage with the hand in position – BUT FREE – and just playing the 5th finger throughout. This would then be done with just the thumb. One would then alternate the finger and thumb, always very quietly, with no tension, but working each fully. The idea here was to create a strong, resilient octave framework, ready to accept the weight as needed, but also able to play its part in assisting with articulating, projecting, voicing etc – in much the same way as discussed earlier with chords.

Of course all this attention to the hand – as vital as it was – was only part of the story. The other, equally important side of the equation was how to get the weight through to this well oiled apparatus to produce the infinite variety of tone required – from the rich burnished hues of a Brahms intermezzo to the delicacy of a Debussy prelude.

And here unfolded another vital element of her technical approach – the role of the arm and its joints in distributing the life blood of the tone – ie the weight – to the exact spot, and in the exact amounts as needed. This very much depended on having the arm in the correct position - or alignment – to allow this to happen, and consequently necessitated a constant adjustment as the player moved from note to note. Although it is essentially the whole arm which must be aligned, since the wrist is closest to the 'action', this will obviously be the joint where this adjustment is most observable. Hence she taught a system of allowing the wrist to follow the direction of the fingers, so that a finger would never be out of position – or cut off – from the lifeline which supplied its tonal resource. A by-product of this was also that the playing mechanism was always free and never stiff (and felt good!).

Of course these 'following' movements were very dependent on the type of passage as well as the speed, but essentially they fell into three basic types of movements – all of which were capable of infinite variation:

1. A simple dropping of the weight into a note or chord, with a subsequent release action to allow preparation for the next note/chord. This was obviously most suited to slower tempos. A variation of this movement was also often needed to produce a rich cantabile line – where each note needs to be weighted and produced independently.
2. In quicker tempos, where there were frequent changes of direction, the resulting wrist movement would be a series of arcs, allowing for a seamless distribution of weight. Since our limbs are attached to the body at one point, we naturally move in circular motions – and in fact straight lines are very foreign to us, and inevitably result in 'bumps' as we negotiate the corners and change direction.
3. In passages that alternate between upward and downward pitch changes– eg trills, broken octaves, broken 3rds, alberti bass etc, the wrist would rotate within one position – ie not moving up/down or right/left, but twisting as when opening a door knob.

I'm sure much of this is not new to you – but to realise that virtually every passage one encounters fits into one of these scenarios made a great deal of sense, and demystified

the whole issue of technique, giving a wonderful platform from which to work and explore, and bringing everything into the realm of the technically 'do-able'.

Also highly important to Curcio was the sense of legato which was achieved as all these elements worked together - the ever active, adhering fingers, passing the weight from one to another. She stressed the sense of cooperation from finger to finger and the building up of this relationship between each pair of fingers within the hand. It certainly aids in achieving the sense of a 'sung' line, giving something of the sensation that a string player or singer might have in moving from note to note. Her concept of *cantabile* was memorable - to use the words of Simone Dinnerstein once again: 'deeply lyrical, richly coloured and inflected like the human voice' (Dinnerstein, 2007, 'Why my piano teacher struck a chord with me,' *The Guardian - Music Blog*, weblog post, 19 October, viewed 17 August 2012).

Although I have spent a considerable amount of time discussing the technical aspects of Curcio's teaching, these were more than matched by an innate and compelling musicianship. As another former student, Niel Immelman recalls: 'A "beautiful" sound was of little interest to her - what she searched for was a sound that would convey the essence of a work' (*The Guardian*, 14 April 2009, Obituary: Maria Curcio).

Her ability to take you inside to the heart of whatever work was under discussion was remarkable and thoroughly inspiring. In fact I well recall - in those early months when I was totally absorbed in rebuilding my technique as fast as possible, she would frequently say - 'never forget the music darling - you must always keep playing music'!

This deep insistence on delving beyond sound to the underlying musical message comes through very clearly both in the text and title of a book written about Curcio: *Music Beyond Sound, Maria Curcio, a Teacher of great Pianists* by Douglas Ashley (American University Studies, Peter Lang Publishing Inc, New York 1993) and also in interviews and teaching clips contained in the BBC documentary previously mentioned, where she works with students on repertoire by Beethoven, Schumann and Chopin. Curcio felt that Chopin was an indispensable part of the pianist's repertoire and emotional palette. She frequently pointed out that, as with Mozart, his inspiration comes from the long vocal lines of *bel canto* singing, which combine with the crisp Polish rhythms and marvellous polyphonic episodes to give his unique voice. She once explained in a masterclass :

His inspiration comes from many things: love, war, death, his religious feelings, his love for Poland, and his homesickness in exile. Often the piano and pianissimo passages are

memories of the past, of his life in Poland. They must have intensity, but sound as if they come from far away. Chopin's music has great strength (Ashley 1993, p. 61).

There are also detailed interpretive insights by Curcio for the four *Ballades*, the *Sonata in B flat minor*, the *Fantasy* and 4th *Scherzo* included in the Masterclass section of Ashley's book.

Her strong belief in the spiritual dimension of great music also comes through in the book. She felt that there was a strong affinity between Beethoven and the great Italian artist Michelangelo, saying in an interview: 'They are very close in their religion, humanity, and response to the human tragedy' (ibid p. 27).

Developing further this idea of Beethoven's reaching toward the spiritual she continues: 'Already in Opus 2, Numbers 2 and 3, the slow movements are the elevation of the soul as it reaches toward God. And of course, the late sonatas of Beethoven are noted for their transcendental quality. They speak of deep religious feeling and closeness to God' (ibid).

She also emphasizes the necessity of studying works from all three periods of Beethoven to better understand his music and talks of the essential directness of his approach, commenting that 'these sharp contrasts in his music are the sharp contrasts in himself. He always keeps his intensity of feelings or expression' (ibid).

Given her profound influence on the piano world of the late 20th century, it is surprising that more has not been published on this remarkable woman. No doubt this is partly due to the fact that she was essentially such a private person, devoted to her students and not seeking to bask in reflected glory. To my knowledge there has only been one monograph devoted to her, and that is the abovementioned volume, *Music Beyond Sound*, written in 1993 by former student, American pianist and university lecturer, the late Douglas Ashley. The book is no longer in print, but can be obtained via rare book sites on the internet. It includes a biographical section as well as several chapters of Curcio's thoughts and advice on a number of aspects of piano playing and teaching, collected through interviews and reminiscences by Ashley himself and other former students. There are also detailed chapters on her approach to and thoughts on several composers, including Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Chopin recorded during masterclasses she gave in Spain and Caracas, Venezuela. She also conducted masterclasses in Berlin, Paris, Sao Paulo, Tokyo and the USA.

In reading Ashley's book recently I was reminded of her strong belief in the importance of studying the Bach Two and Three Part Inventions. As quoted in the book she says: 'The Inventions of Bach are so difficult because pianists are not accustomed to play the left hand as a soloist....We must have the feeling we are playing several instruments.... The inventions are an incredible school of piano playing. If a student learns to play the two and three-part Inventions well, then he knows how to play Bach' (ibid p. 26).

Interestingly Neuhaus shared this opinion on the importance of Bach, both from the musical and technical viewpoints, saying in his chapter on Technique: 'For the highest example of the type of teaching method I have mentioned – the complete coordination of musical and instrumental teaching (with the former prevailing) – we have to go back to the great Bach' (Neuhaus 1973, p. 89). After lamenting the 'downward path' of many intervening piano exercises and methods, he then goes on – 'The trend goes from the Bach Inventions through a number of Etudes by Clementi and Cramer to those of Chopin, Liszt, Scriabin, Rachmaninov and Debussy' (ibid p. 90).

Curcio also had a great love for and affinity with the music of Schumann and I particularly remember a lesson I had with her on Schumann's *Papillons*, to which she brought extraordinary magic and enchantment. Her imagination for nuance and colour achieved through the subtlest combinations of articulation, tone, rhythm etc was truly amazing.

Douglas Ashley comments in his book on her outstanding ability to 'resolve the paradoxes and contradictions in Schumann's music' (Ashley 1993, p. 56) and to link together the often short, disparate sections into a cohesive whole, whilst at the same time embracing the infinite variety of shading, rubato, polyphonic strands and virtuosity implied. She also emphasized the importance of studying Bach to help understand Schumann – a strong, well directed bass line being vital in the interpretation of both composers.

In drawing all this together, with Curcio it inevitably came back to what lay beyond the notes. In the chapter on *How to Become a Performer* she says:

The performer cannot just give us the theoretical analysis but must give us the soul of the composer. It is the spirit of the work which must be projected and communicated. This is the ultimate work one has to do with a student.... There is too little musical analysis which is not also emotional analysis. The student of music theory learns to name the harmonic changes, but the performer must know what these changes mean emotionally, in order to find the right tonal palette for each piece (ibid p. 33).

An essential humanity was also central to Curcio's approach, as was her ability to adapt her teaching for the individual requirements – both musical and personal - of each student.

We are fortunate that the present generation of pianists continues to benefit from Curcio's wisdom and insight thanks to her many former students who now occupy teaching posts in music schools throughout the world. Two notable examples which immediately spring to mind are Tessa Nicholson at London's Royal Academy of Music, (who was studying with Curcio around the same time as myself) and Rae de Lisle at the University of Auckland.

I count myself very fortunate to have had the opportunity to study with this wonderful teacher, who so completely embodied the ideal that we all strive for in our teaching. Perhaps I'll finish as I began - and leave the last word to maestro Carlo Maria Giulini, who said of Maria:

This extraordinary human being, in whom there is heart, soul, intelligence, culture, experience, an incredible instinct and in total a generous devotion to her task, represents in my opinion, a rare and precious realization of that which is, in an ideal conception, the figure of a Master Teacher (ibid p. viii).

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About the Author: Wendy Lorenz

Active as both pianist and teacher, Wendy Lorenz has performed extensively throughout Australia and overseas and appeared for many of the major radio and television networks in Europe and Asia. A 'Student of the Year' graduate of the Sydney Conservatorium and Beethoven Bicentenary Medallion winner (awarded internationally by the west German Government), she has also belonged to a number of successful chamber ensembles including the highly acclaimed New England Ensemble, the Australian Piano Trio, the Young Sydney Piano Trio, the Phoenix Ensemble and currently Trio Empyrean, together with violinist Andrew Lorenz and cellist David Pereira.

In the solo realm she has appeared as concerto soloist with many of Australia's leading orchestras and has featured as soloist on commercial releases with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, the Queensland Symphony Orchestra and the Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Also active as a music educator, she has taught at the NSW Conservatorium, the South Australian College of Advanced Education, the Australian National University, and the Universities of New England and Southern Queensland, where she was also Head of Music from 2000 to 2004 inclusive. An experienced presenter of workshops, masterclasses and piano teaching seminars throughout Australia and overseas, (including guest residencies in China, Singapore, Malaysia and the USA), she has served as National Chair of the Australasian Piano Pedagogy Conference Committee and is an accredited Federal Examiner for the Australian Music Examinations Board.