

A Passion for Piano Babette Hierholzer

by Dorothy E. Noe photographs by Amber S. Clark



Dwarfed by the horse totem that oversees the stage of the Maverick theater outside Woodstock, New York, Babette Hierholzer stands beside a nine-foot piano, her left hand resting lightly on its glossy frame. Dressed in black sequins, she bows her head to acknowledge the polite applause of the audience. Sitting, her wrists arch upward and pause above the keyboard as she prepares to play the first notes of Edvard Grieg's *Arietta op. 12, no. 1*. That delicate arch belies the power of her hands. Hierholzer is a petite woman, so when the tsunami of sound her fingers generate floods the concert hall, it comes as a bit of a shock.

Unfortunately, flood is a word that resonates with Hierholzer. When the Sawkill Creek reared up over its banks in the spring of 2007, it inundated the lower level of the house she shares with her husband, Michael Simpler, in Red Hook, New York. Muddy waters swirled through and destroyed a lifetime's collection of books along with the kitchen appliances. And yet, she smiles: Her two grand pianos were safely ensconced on the second floor.

Sitting in her second floor music studio, you would never know Hierholzer was gutting, renovating, and reconstructing her home. In her studio, Oriental carpets cushion each Steinway piano ("the best piano for solo playing because they are so powerful") sitting beneath large skylights, and two cream leather sofas reflect each other; tables holding mementoes of world travel plus the floor-to-ceiling bookcases of sheet music make her world look ordered and sane. But a freelance concert pianist's life is anything but routine—even when it starts at age 11.

Babette Hierholzer was a child prodigy. As the oldest of four siblings on the west side of the Berlin Wall, it was clear by the time Hierholzer was five that she was not likely to follow in the family tradition and become a doctor. It wasn't as if her family had no musical interests; her great-grandmother was not only an opera singer but conducted as well, and both of Hierholzer's parents played instruments when not practicing medicine. By the age of five, however, Hierholzer's skill and interest in the piano were apparent, and her parents found the ideal teacher to nurture and encourage her talent.

"My first teacher knew how to motivate young players," recalls Hierholzer fondly, her tumble of long brown curls clipped back in a semblance of order.

"Instead of drills of boring scales, she selected actual phrases from a piece of music for us to master a technique. We always played good pieces—minuets by Haydn or Bach—and were always preparing for a competition or recital."

"The Berlin Steinway competitions are the Olympics of piano playing for children under the age of 16," she continues in lightly accented English. "I entered at age six and won first prize in my age category. I was very motivated to win the second year. I won another major competition at age nine. Competitions are necessary because there are so many musicians, and it's good to see other musicians and build a repertoire."

"Besides," she confides with a chuckle, "Berliners are competitive by nature."

Despite the lessons and practice, competitions, recitals, and awards, she describes her childhood as normal—there was no dramatic change precipitated by the crescendo of her talent.

"Like other children, I always wanted a dog," she recalls with a wry smile seasoned with adult insight, "but we lived in an apartment. My parents thought they could placate me by promising a dog if I played in the Philharmonic Hall. But, when I reminded them of the bargain after I made my professional debut there at age 11," Hierholzer said, "they forgot the promise."

Public elementary school, followed by attendance in the Humanistic Gymnasium where she studied Latin and Greek along with English, continued until her father's sabbatical, spent in the United States. This move allowed for further music studies in Fort Worth, Texas, with Lili Kraus and the Julliard Pre-College program with Herbert Stessin. Her formal education was completed with four years of music theory and history at a conservatory in Essen.

"There was never a conscious decision to be a concert pianist," Hierholzer reflects. "I had thought might want to study something in addition to the piano—criminal pathology or archeology—but I can't even recall when I went from 'child prodigy' to professional pianist because the work is the most important thing."

Sadly, even for many who begin working later in life, the flip side of "the work" is all too often burnout: the drag-yourself-to-the-job-on-Monday despair. The syndrome manifests itself when the spark of interest and challenge is extinguished by numbing ennui. When you begin working professionally at age

11, however, and are still happily at it three decades later, one can only assume that the driving force must be a passion—plus something else.

For Hierholzer, the excitement for piano's challenges is obvious, and that "something else" takes many forms. The counterpoint of sitting on a piano bench for hours practicing and perfecting a piece is the recharge of physical activity: peddling a bike 20 miles (her husband is an avid cyclist) or, when time and weather allow, running and swimming. In addition, for a while, she was seriously breeding German Shepherds. Possessing an inquisitive and disciplined mind has enabled her to earn her private pilot's license (Simpler is a retired airline pilot). Plus, she is currently adding Spanish to her collection of languages as her concert schedule often takes her to South America. But, when at home, her Saturday night addiction takes over: She is a regular at the auction houses, adding artwork, furniture, rugs, and pottery to her collections.

"And," she fairly bubbles, "I'm an opera fanatic and love to accompany singers."

Beyond the actual preparation for performances that has her on the piano bench five to six hours a day, coaxing a cascade of music from a stationary keyboard and the rehearsals for the concert itself, there are many professional demands that require Hierholzer's attention. For starters, she employs two agents: one in the United States and another in Germany. She must inform them both of any benefit concerts she accepts so they can coordinate her calendar of worldwide commitments. She also spends time marketing herself by granting interviews, encouraging attendance at performances, and being involved in music-related activities. Prior to the advent of her website, she worked with her agents organizing the press packets of information and photos that preceded her arrival. There is also the fun part—wardrobe selection. Over the years, she has accumulated a substantial number of gowns and outfits for concerts and photo shoots for general publicity and CD covers.

The cover photo for a CD is, perhaps, the easiest part of the production.

"You would think that being able to repeat a piece until the sound engineer thinks it's perfect would make it easier than a live concert," she muses, "but it isn't. I prepare for a recording the same as for a concert, but playing things six or seven times doesn't make it better. I like to have an audience of even one at the recording to get me pumped up, but they must be extremely quiet. Taking two and a half days to record is standard, and sometimes, they deliberately pick the version with a mistake in it so the piece is not mechanical. At least you don't have to worry about your attire."

"Luckily, I love black, but every skirt or dress has to be comfortable to sit in and of a material that travels well." And, then she jokes, "Don't even ask my husband about the weight of my luggage when I travel."

Sixteen years ago, in order to minimize travel, she and Simpler sold their home in Germany in order to live permanently in the United States. While the move reduced Hierholzer's annual trips from 40 to a mere 20, it also presented new challenges and insights to maintaining her international career.

As if sustaining a freelance pianist career weren't challenge enough, there are also the inherent risks of live performances going awry: Beverly Sills danced out of her shoes during one opera, Marie Osmond's collapse during a recent taping of "Dancing with the Stars," and Janet Jackson's infamous "wardrobe malfunction." Hierholzer fortunately recalls only one such nightmare.

"I was playing in FDR's birthplace in New York City on an old Steinway," she states with appropriate horror. "The ending of the piece was six very loud F-minor chords. When I hit the first one, it sounded horrible. I was shocked and checked my hands to see that I had the right notes. The second and third chords still were awful, but in the cloud of sound, I couldn't tell which note was off. After the performance I found that the F had been tuned to F-sharp. Now, before I perform, I always play a slow chromatic scale so I know if every key is tuned."

Performances have had her checking keyboards on four continents—Europe, South America, North America, and Africa—with some invitations including travel arrangements and expenses and others not. While Hierholzer enjoys large venues—the Berlin Philharmonic, playing in castles, and Carnegie Hall are among her favorites—she has a special fondness for more intimate settings with great acoustics, such as churches in Mexico and the Maverick barn outside of Woodstock. Besides enjoying new destinations, constant travel has afforded her an intimate awareness of how the business of music is approached.

"In Europe," she explains, "the state supports music programs. In America, there is constant fundraising to support music. I have found that when you have to raise the money, you are much more involved, and that is a good thing."

In addition to performing, Hierholzer judges piano competitions for young artists, similar to the contests that launched her career. This exposure has led

her to certain truths regarding young players.

"Children should be exposed to music," she states unequivocally. "As a child, music was all around me. And, young children should get a very good teacher at the beginning, because he or she lays the foundation and motivation. Also, parents should not put hopes and pressure on children to become a professional. After a competition, when upset parents are allowed to question my decisions, I always focus on the child and advise the child: Become a musician only if it is the only thing you want to do, and be able to take criticism."

Hierholzer concedes that despite the glamour associated with the life of a classical pianist—the travel, the clothes, collaborating with some of the best musicians on the planet—working as a freelance pianist can be grueling. "Some weeks are really full," she says. "I have to be constantly ready for new challenges or to substitute for a pianist anywhere in the world at a moment's notice. You are always reviving old pieces or learning something new, preparing for a concert or recording. I play every day except when I travel because the mechanical part is like running or playing tennis; I notice a difference if I haven't practiced. Luckily, as a recognized 'Steinway pianist,' I have access to their pianos anywhere in the world to practice. One of my professional goals is to work more with singers—especially in German. But there is never enough time. On the other hand, the unpredictability keeps things fresh."

And, every concert is, essentially, a fresh start for a freelance pianist. With the last notes of the Maverick concert lingering on her finger tips and drifting into the darkening summer air, Hierholzer's head bows briefly and her wrists arch off the keyboard before she rises to accept the resounding applause of a very pleased audience. The next day will find her back in her studio preparing for the next concert. In the end, neither height nor age matter; it is her passion for "the work" that counts. ●

Babette Hierholzer will be performing on July 13 with Nancy Allen Lundy, soprano, and other young German musicians at the Church of the Messiah in Rhinebeck to benefit the Rhinebeck-Rhinebach Exchange Program. www.rhinebeckexchange.org/index.html.

Hierholzer and Lundy will also perform a Schubert-dominated program at the Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock with clarinetist Ethan Sloane on July 19. (845) 679-8217; www.maverickconcerts.org.

