

“THURSDAYS WITH FAINA” BY PAULETTE THERIAULT, February, 2019

It all happened as I sat back in the furthest row of the classroom at Dr. Faina Bryanskaya’s Summer Piano Pedagogy Institute. It was 1995 and all I could see was a diminutive woman with a huge pedagogical vision. Her English was superb considering her short time in the country, arriving from her home of St. Petersburg, Russia just a few years ago.

Magic happened every time Faina sat down at the piano to demonstrate! The sound was mesmerizing, even when she played short excerpts from simple pieces. The combination of a unique perspective in pedagogy with a stunning touch at the piano convinced me to try to stay with her in any way possible. I simply asked the maestra if she would consider me as her student. Holding her chin from a bent elbow, she looked at me and said, “Okay.” Oh joy, I was the envy of the class! All others who had dared to ask the same were denied!

Just so you understand, studying piano with Faina was a humbling and seemingly impossible task. She was exacting, demanding, and bluntly honest. When she asked me to listen closely in order to adjust my touch and technique, I retorted that it was impossible to change on a dime after playing in my own way for forty years. Her terse response: “That’s loser talk!”

What followed was a monumental turn-around! I resolved to never, ever, hear her say those words to me again! So I set out to prove her wrong.

Lessons every Thursday now included taping (yes, tape cassettes, the old-fashioned kind!) every sessions. At home I replayed them and took copious notes, listening intently to her words and the sound she produced. It took hours before I got the chance to actually practice what I learned on the piano.

But aside from becoming a much better pianist and teacher, I came to know Faina on a personal level. She often shared stories of her earlier life in Russia and once invited me to St. Petersburg Café, where I could experience vodka and blintzes. I started to meet some of her friends and experience the food, culture, and music of her native country.

Some quick vignettes I can remember:

Meeting Professor Sara Belkina, her beloved Solfège teacher, who welcomed us into her home in NJ with a table-full of delectables.

Trips to concerts at Harvard to see Robert Levin and to Boston Symphony to hear Sergey Schepkin play “Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini” (we were so moved by his performance, we could not stay to hear the rest of the concert!). She was also enamored of Evgeny Kissin and Daniil Trifonov, never missing the chance to hear them. Via the Internet, we also followed Lucas Debargue, a favorite of ours, especially his performance of Chopin’s Ballade No. 4.

Traveling together as I helped her with master classes in Princeton, NJ, and seminars for Teacher Associations at the University of Maine and Yale. Here she afforded me the experience of participating as an unofficial adjudicator at a competition, a new experience for me!

Planning trips where we met various musicians to make big plans that never truly worked out, as in starting new music schools.

But by far, it’s been my greatest honor to have worked side by side with Dr. Faina Bryanskaya most Thursdays for over 24 years. Just imagine how I felt when, in the very beginning, she asked me to help

put her thoughts into words for her unique teacher's manual, Teaching Fundamentals of Music Making, A Holistic Integrated Approach.

I also was lucky enough to have the blessing of her presence at my home on several occasions. Here she would teach special individual master classes for my students, after which we would enjoy a sumptuous dinner (cooked by me) and regale each other with cognac cheers. The next day I would be sure to receive her succinct evaluation of my students, usually hard for me to hear. But each time I learned immeasurably how to become a better teacher. I was fortunate indeed!

Trips to Rhode Island were especially important to Faina so she could see her family. Here I met her amazing daughter, Diana Smirnov. We spent a day touring Providence, a city Diana truly loved. Along the way, I shared in her joy as we visited her granddaughter Anya and her beautiful great-grandchildren, Gianni and Isabella.

Almost too difficult to mention was being by her side as we attended Diana's funeral in 2004 at Providence College. Diana's death had a profound effect on Faina. Yes, she grieved. But on one particular Thursday, Faina unexpectedly announced that she was sure Diana would want her to go on to share her considerable gifts with the world. She stated it only once, that she would follow the path that her daughter would hope for her. And from that day on, I witnessed Faina pulling herself up to meet the challenge of fulfilling her daughter's deepest wishes.

And happily, I am a part of that legacy.

With deepest appreciation and love for my mentor and dearest best friend, Faina,
Paulette Theriault