

How would one decode greatness?

Let me start with this notion: You know greatness right away when you see it. When Dr. Faina Bryanskaya, my beloved mentor and friend, passed away last fall, I knew we lost a genius.

She was a Musician and Pedagogue, a Scholar, - Teacher of Teachers!

Faina described her lifetime work as developing a method that “teaches the *language of music*, not only of piano playing.” She published 12 books, both in Russia and in the U.S. No other methodologist did more for young musicians and music educators!

Dr. Bryanskaya worked as a professor of Piano and Piano Pedagogy at the Leningrad State Conservatory until 1981 and at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, MA, from 1984 to 2008. She was a frequent lecturer at piano pedagogy seminars in Poland, Israel, the Netherlands, St. Petersburg State Conservatory, Westminster Choir College in New Jersey, and Yale. Dr. Bryanskaya also founded the Advanced Training Program for Piano Teachers of music schools and colleges in the former USSR. For many years, she taught workshops, masterclasses and held Piano Pedagogy seminars in her home in Brighton, MA until the end of the summer of 2018.

She graduated from Leningrad Conservatory named after Rimsky-Korsakov (now St. Petersburg Conservatory) where she studied Piano Performance with the legendary professor Natan Perelman. Her lifelong devotion to her teacher and their friendship is well illustrated in the book of memoirs of Professor Perelman’s famous students and colleagues as well as his own writings, together with the scripts of his TV series about music from the 1990s (including a CD with 90 minutes of his recordings) entitled ‘*Natan Perelman, Essays and Letters, Lectures at the Piano, Memoirs*’. Faina’s titanic work of several years together with Yelena Movchan, Perelman’s daughter, to organize and unite creative efforts by many to contribute to the book led to its publishing in 2013.

Her doctoral research was a 140-page dissertation, which was an enormous work on developing *Structure, Essential Elements and Function of Sight-Reading System*. Many issues, from preliminary stages of ‘decoding a composer’s message through the knowledge of musical grammar to developing a skill of accelerated reading, structural perception and motor reaction to written music - an ability to quickly analyze and synthesize musical text, horizontally and vertically’ - were meticulously described in her dissertation.

Faina developed an interest in methodological research due to the influence of her mentors, Professor S. Lyakhovitskaya and Sara Belkina. I heard many stories of experimental work under their tutorial with young piano students on developing sight reading skill when she began teaching at one of the music schools in Leningrad. Once a promising young pianist herself and a recipient of a state scholarship at the Secondary Special Music School of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, she almost quit playing piano because of her challenge with sight reading. It was probably then, and with encouragement of her beloved teachers, that she became determined “to do something about it!”

Her first *Guide to Sight Reading for 3rd and 4th year students* was published in Leningrad in 1963. Soon after, *The Road to Music Making. School of Piano Playing*, co-authored with Leningrad Conservatory professors L. Barenboim and N. Perunova, was published as well. I came to learn of these two books as an undergraduate student at the College of Leningrad State Conservatory. Later, in 2011, Dr. Bryanskaya's '*How to Develop the Skill of Sight Reading at the Piano*' (in Russian), an adapted version of her dissertation, appeared in the series 'Secrets of Mastery,' published by "Klassika-XXI" in Moscow much to critical acclaim.

Here is professor Lev Barenboim's introduction to the book (translated from Russian):  
"Faina Bryanskaya - one of the first Russian developers in the field of methodological systems to teach sight reading. Her many years of experimental work with children, wide theoretical knowledge and scrupulous studying of international pedagogical experience and methodology, makes this book a great asset. Her work also proves: if some musicians, seemingly without special training, show mastery in sight reading, it does not predispose that they have a 'natural gift.' With systematic approach *everyone* can learn to sight-read a musical text of highest complexity!"

When I got to know her in person while attending her Pedagogy Seminar and working at Longy school of Music in the late nineties, soon after I arrived in Boston, Dr. Bryanskaya was an established methodologist in this country with the three volumes of *The Key to Music Making* being published in the U.S. An epigraph to the Second volume of the KMM by Robert Schumann reads: **"You will be a musician when not only your hands but also your heart and mind are full of music."**

There in the preface she wrote:

WHO Needs *The Key (To Music Making)*:

- \* All beginning piano and music teachers - as an effective model for instruction
- \* Experienced piano and piano pedagogy teachers - as a resource guide and a refresher course in piano pedagogy
- \* Beginning music students of all ages - to develop a solid foundation in music
- \* Parents - to assist and participate in their children's musical development
- \* More advanced piano and music students - for strengthening basic skills, mastering weak points, and building confidence

I am still hearing an incredibly poetic language spoken in a kind manner, calm voice, polite and beautifully intelligent, never hurriedly, - that is how I remember Faina. Her lectures were inspiring, and what is more, she supported every one of my efforts performing at master classes at Longy's Pickman Hall, giving me a sense of being a capable musician who can make it in my new country as a professional.

My memories now revolve around lessons: Leah's, mine, other students' - both young and adults - our class's music soirées and her seminars during the last nine years. How did I get a sense of witnessing something *extraordinary* there!?

Her every lesson was a masterpiece, a brilliant show, and a *fable* magically told! They were always stories that opened the listener's eyes to be in *awe* with the music, with the composer and

his time, and to admire the style and content of a composition. Her pedagogical philosophy was similar to that of the Baroque musical period: one has to acquire analysis and improvisational skills in order to retrace the composer's journey through his piece. Yes, a student had to examine chords' progression of a sentence or a few in Bach's piece, and improvise on that; try to compose their own.

**“Bach is the best teacher,” Faina always said, “Start your morning with Bach!”**

“It is necessary that every young student learns at least five Short Preludes and at least three Inventions by Bach before they study his *Well Tempered Clavier*,” she warned me. Her teaching Bach vitalized every detail of a piece. She was a marvelous pianist! She studied and performed almost all of Bach's piano compositions. While working on her dissertation she often attended workshops of one of the titans of Russian schooling, Professor Isaiah Braudo. It was a great source of inspiration for Faina, then a young pedagogue at the Leningrad Conservatory. Later, already living in Boston, Dr. Bryanskaya co-sponsored the publication of I. Braudo's book *On the Study of Keyboard Works by J.S. Bach* translated from Russian by the late Henry Orlov.

With endless attempts at the lesson she demanded from me just the right sound for *intoning a Motif*, by explaining and demonstrating the palm and wrist motion, its loop or swing. That is where the greatness comes into play: finding the best way to explain the matter, and always helping! **“Go with gravity!”** she would say, tirelessly showing how it was supposed to sound. She taught me to *listen*! I would be exhausted at the end of the lesson, yet she was galvanized: “What else did you bring to play for me?”

Those meetings at the piano brought me back to my youthful mind, and to the time of studying for the undergraduate program at the College of the Leningrad Conservatory in the early nineteen-eighties, which were great memories of my beloved teachers at one of the finest colleges in our old country.

Being close with Faina in the last nine years of her life was my daughter Leah's and my blessing! I remember her sparkling humor! It also helped her to get through her cancer diagnosis and the long and exhausting treatment of the terrible disease with which she put quite a fight for four long years. She told me so many times: “Let's go to the piano, other things are not interesting. When I am teaching you and Leah Chopin, Schumann, Tchaikovsky or Bach, I don't think of my sickness. I simply feel alive!” Faina's late daughter Diana Smirnov's framed picture was on her grand piano. Diana, a very fine musician and also a student of Natan Perelman at St. Petersburg Conservatory, was everything to Faina; losing her daughter almost broke her but she had to stay strong for her granddaughter and great grandchildren.

I would come almost every day for the last year. She would speak about everyone close to her, students from St. Petersburg Conservatory, now teaching at Juilliard or other colleges in the U.S. and Canada, Netherlands or Israel, with so much love! So many of them called and wrote to her all the time to check on how she was. So many close friends stopped by to visit. No one wanted to believe or think about the inevitable, until one summer day I found her at the piano, her Yamaha grand that probably still has Faina's soul, playing Diana Smirnov's Waltz entitled with initials F.D.B. (Faina Davydovna Bryanskaya.) I hear this heart-piercing tune with the interval of a falling *Third* and an upward *Sixth* right now: F-D-B... My heart clutched aching.

She taught until she died. During the last month when she stayed at her granddaughter's in Rhode Island, I would call every day. First, she would listen to Leah or my playing and then, she would start singing the tune over the phone explaining the character and the task at hand, breathing very heavily. Her weak voice would suddenly strengthen. I could hear a smile in her voice at those phone sessions, even laughter sometimes. They made her day. The truth is that she made our lives...

**“Life without Bach is one without inspiration!”** Dr. Bryanskaya often said, lifting the *craft* of a music educator to one of great importance!

Her biggest aspiration was to make as many piano instructors *competent* in their laborious work of teaching young musicians as possible. Working tirelessly, she believed that a piano teacher has to know the *system* of effective ways to approach and master music from rhythmic, melodic and harmonic structures to develop students' interpretation skills. That is why after the second and third volume of *The Key to Music Making*, she wrote and published *Teaching Fundamentals of Music Making, a Handbook for Piano and Music Teachers*, first edition in 2002, and second in 2007. Of course she dedicated that book to the ‘Memory of my beloved Teacher NATAN PERELMAN.’ In that book a reader will find Faina's now forever encrypted acknowledgement of her daughter Daina Smirnov's: “For unwavering support and loving encouragement, for standing by me from the very beginning of my new life in the USA.” On the cover there the readers will find a picture of Faina's great-grandson, as she puts it: “The future.”

Dr. Bryanskaya has left an extraordinary legacy. Her incredible passion for music will continue reaching out to new generations of young musicians through her wonderful books.

What Faina did for my girl, her student, and for me as a musician and a piano teacher, is invaluable! What she meant to me and my whole family is indescribable! All happy and some tough memories of our time together, her praise and critique, the joy of making *music* will forever be with Leah and me.