

Interview with Mary Tickner

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Oral History Recording Summary

Interviewee: Mary Tickner

Interviewed by: Blair Galston

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BG: My name is Blair Galston and the date is November 12, 2012. I'm interviewing Mary Tickner of Vancouver, as part of the Oral History Program of the BC Registered Music Teachers Association, Vancouver Branch. Mary, do I have your permission to proceed with this interview?

MT: Of course.

BG: Thank you. First of all, tell me a little bit about your early life: your family and your community and your involvement in music.

MT: My family consisted of my brother and a mother and a father. We were not wealthy. My father was an experimental engineer for a refrigeration company. Actually, he invented the automatic ice maker. But because it was a corporation, he never got credit for it. We had a piano, which I'd always moved around with, but never did anything [with]. My mother and father both were musically inclined; they liked to sing.

Mother had had a few piano lessons, but I didn't have any [prospect] of starting any lessons at all. Except for an incident, in which I thrust my left arm through a glass window because some children were teasing me at a grocery store. I would have bled to death, except for a neighbour who suddenly realized what was happening and grabbed a towel and wrapped it around with a tourniquet. And I was rushed to a doctor who wasn't too far away, who happened to be in. He took one look, handed my mother a towel, dripping wet and said, "Keep her awake. She must not go to sleep." And he proceeded then to stitch up the wound, which happened to turn out to be two. And he said, "She must not sleep; keep her awake. I want to see her tomorrow." And so, after about ten days of seeing the doctor, he turned to my mother, and he said, "I have good news for you. We aren't going to have to take the arm." Which came as a shock to everybody - particularly, of course, my mother. He said, "However, she will need help and we need to think of some way she can have some help." And it was decided that the best help I could have would be to take some piano lessons to get the arm and hand working again.

In our neighbourhood was a teacher, Mrs. Williams, who turned out to be very, very well-trained, but [who had] a terrible personality. And I studied with her for about four years or so, so I was around eight or nine - I don't exactly remember the age when that happened. But I changed teachers because, when I came home one day, she had hit my hands with a ruler and my mother saw the marks and that was the last of Mrs. Williams. So I was without a teacher for a short time.

Then I went to another teacher, a Mrs. Stockmeier, who was the teacher of a friend of mine. She thought I was just like an angel from heaven, because suddenly there I was playing all the scales, all the arpeggios, all broken chords - everything she was struggling with almost all her students, and she gave me a very difficult piece, a Leschetizky etude, which of course I had never seen before, and then it hit her that I really was not

ready to read that. So I was with her for about five years. Incidentally, I did get to play "Rustle of Spring," eventually. And then I decided, "This is boring. I'm not learning anything, really." And my parents had bought, at great expense, about ten books of various kinds of music, including transcriptions of things and regular classics and sonatas and so forth, and so I just kept right on playing. As far as I recall, I don't think I ever had any other piano lessons after that until I went to university.

But I kept playing, and I played for churches, I played for choirs. When I went to high school, I accompanied our choir. I actually played in what they called our "jazz band" a little bit, which was kind of interesting; I learned to read lead sheet. But I really felt I wanted to sing, so my parents – even though they were not wealthy – were able to put together enough money so that I could take voice lessons with a very fine teacher.

When I graduated from high school, I auditioned, and I was given a scholarship. Actually, I was given half a scholarship - I realize it now. But it was enough. I went to a private school called Evansville College. I had auditioned at Indiana University and Arthur Jordan Conservatory, but it was too expensive for me to go there because of housing and tuition. As it is, this was a private school, and it, too, was expensive, but [the scholarship] was enough so that I could attend. And in the auditioning process, which went on for about a week, I would be there every day . . . not singing (because I had already done my audition) but playing for other people – other singers, particularly, but also some violinists who had some stuff they wanted, and a clarinetist, and a trumpet of all things (which I thought had not very good music). Afterwards, the head called me in and asked why didn't I audition for piano. And I told him, number one, I didn't have the money, but number two, I hadn't studied piano. They offered me an opportunity to study piano if I would be available to help out with accompanying choirs, the chapel, and so forth. I said I would if I could study with a particular teacher named Sylvia Olmstead. And I was allowed to do so, even though I think she had reservations, since she certainly did not agree with the way I played certain things.

5:08

My favourite story about that is that the first week I studied with her, she gave me a Mozart sonata and I learned it in a day. I was complaining bitterly to friends, and one of them said, "Who's your teacher?"

I said, "Sylvia Olmstead."

"Oh!" Nothing else was said.

So I was going down the hall two days later, and her door was open, and she called out, "Mary, I have a half an hour break. Come in. How's the Mozart going?"

And I said, "Fine."

She said, "Well, let's hear it."

Well, half an hour later, and eight bars later, I found I knew nothing whatsoever about Mozart. And that's when I found how serious you need to be to be a musician.

In my third year, I attended a pedagogy course, and I didn't even know what that was, but we were given assignments, so I did a first day's lesson for a beginner. Since we didn't have much choice of music in that time (John Thompson and Leila Fletcher were about all that was available), I did John Thompson. Every paper was looked over by our teacher, who called me in and said, "Wonderful! Really outstanding, except you would need at least a week to cover all this. So, do it again, and think realistically about a seven year-old who wiggles all the time, and see what you can do in a half an hour."

7:55

At the beginning of my fourth year, I was asked if I would consider taking a few students at the preparatory school, which thrilled me no end, so I had three students. And in the second week when they came, I held my breath and . . . wonderful! They actually had done what I'd asked them to do. And I knew then that I really liked teaching. At the same time, I was also asked by the principal to drive across the Ohio River to a high school on the weekend, and give some piano lessons to a little community . . . which I did. And my brother went with me because my parents were sure I was going to be attacked, because of **Kentucky**. So I had some experience.

When I graduated, I wanted to get my Master's degree, and I auditioned for several places, including Eastman. I was a little discouraged when I was told that I was very good in a lot of ways, but Eastman is for mostly very high-powered performers. I was good, but not quite good enough.

So, after I got over that shock, I applied for jobs, and I finally found a job that was far enough away from my family, so they could not see me every day, but also close enough that they could see me on the weekend. I became choral conductor of the Fairfield High School, and I developed some very fine choirs, took them to state conventions and things. And even though there were no [athletics-related] trophies in the gymnasium trophy cases, there were a lot of trophies for choir in the gymnasium trophy cases. I was there for three years. During that time, I also was conducting the church choir of the Methodist Church, which turned out to be pretty good, including opera singers.

Then I met my husband. I met him the second year. Didn't like him; he didn't like me, either. The third year, having taken a trip to Europe, I seem to have mellowed, and I guess maybe he had changed, too, because we became engaged. I also decided I needed to go ahead and get my Master's degree, so I applied again to Indiana, UCLS, and USC. I was accepted at all but USC, and I didn't understand why. I thought, "Okay, I'll just go anyway." So I took my **pension** money and went. Only I went to USC first, and got off the plane. My fiancé met me and we had a night's rest.

11:11

He said, "Okay, we'll go on the trolley to USC."

And I went to USC and introduced myself, and said, "I want to know, did you get my application and am I accepted?"

And they looked in their files and said, "Oh yes! Didn't you get our notice?"

I said, "No."

They said, "Yes. We'd be very happy to have you."

So I went to USC because there were three people there that I wanted to work with: Ralph Rush, Max and Beatrice Crown, and also there was a very fine harpsichord teacher, and that's how I became involved in a lot of things. I met some very great people, including Jascha Heifetz, Bill Vennard, and Wanda Landowska - not Wanda Landowska, but her contemporary, Madam Ehlers.

And I got my first job. After I graduated, I started on my Doctorate and went to Brea, California, where I was in charge of the music program. I was there for three years, and had just been elected president of the teacher's association, when my friend, Ralph Rush, called and asked me to come in and meet someone. He had a gentleman there who was from Pasadena; he was the Pasadena Supervisor of Music. Now, prior to that, I had been invited to San Jose State [to teach] by the Orange County Supervisor, who had seen me do some work for an MTNA national convention. I had had to step in and do some sight reading and things for a conference. And so, Irene could not go to San Jose State, but I did. I did the whole summer school program at San Jose State.

So I was invited to go to Pasadena and become one of their three supervisors, which I did. I guess I was very successful. We created some audio programs for classroom teachers, so that they would have something every week on music that had something to do with music appreciation or understanding music. We made the scripts and made all of the tapes (or what we call CDs now). And it was a very successful program, but it was exhausting, too. I recall that in my third year there, we had a huge catalogue program, which included orchestra and bands and choirs, and everybody in the world. And it allowed all the students who participated – if they wanted to – to have seats [for their families, at the concert]. And I was designated to go to the door of the Pasadena Auditorium, and tell parents they could not come in and hear their children sing or perform [because we had run out of room for them]. Which I did, and fled for my life!

BG: That would be a difficult task!

MT: Yes! So, I got inside, and I'm feeling very, very distraught about this. I was not happy. And a tap on my shoulder, and there was Ralph Rush. He

15:34

said, "Are you having fun?" I said, "Not right now!" And he said, "Would you be interested in something else?" And I said, "Well, what are you talking about?" He said, "Let's go outside." I said, "I can't go outside! So, he said, "We'll go. We'll find a place." And he said, "The University of California State College has an opening for someone, and I have sent them your file. You may get a phone call from John Green. I think you might enjoy it." I was kind of in a state of shock when I finally told my husband, who was finishing his Master's degree now and also directing opera in Arizona and a few other places. The next day, John Green did call me, and at the end of the week, we went down to Long Beach and I met him, and he asked me questions. Then I met the entire Council of Teachers of the Music Department, and I was hired. But I was hired not only to teach piano, but class piano, and in a pinch, if they needed it, conducting, and a new kind of course for non-music majors, which they thought I would be ideal for. And it turned out to be very, very good. I really enjoyed it, so much so, and I guess they did, because in the third year, I was nominated and became a master teacher for music education, which surprised me.

In my third year, meanwhile . . . I'll skip back a bit. We had come to Canada in the summer. My husband had started doing a little bit of opera. And Walter Marcus, Head of the School of Music, had enquired about him: When would he finish his Master's? So, he was going to finish it in (I think) '62 or '63. Anyway, he was offered the position to start the opera program at UBC and also teach voice. And almost the same day, I was promoted to Associate Professor at State College at Long Beach. To my mind, there was no doubt. But the State College at Long Beach wasn't going to let me go so easily. They called me in after a week and said, "Look. We've looked into all the various things. We have figured out that you could come back to Long Beach on Monday night, take a flight, and we can get your courses done on Tuesday and Wednesday morning, and you can fly back to Vancouver on Wednesday night. So you could commute." I said, "Commute?! From Vancouver to Long Beach?! Do you know where it is?"

17:30

BG: They really wanted you, didn't they?

MT: They said, "Well we would like to keep you if we could." And I said, "I can't do that." They said, "Well, think about it." I said, "I don't need to think about it." So I didn't. And so, suddenly, we had to move. And in fact, we didn't even pack ourselves. They wanted French [Mary's husband] up here in Vancouver sooner than we'd thought. So our neighbours packed us. I didn't even get to say good-bye to the faculty.

BG: That was quick! Now, before we move on to the next chapter of your life, I wanted to ask you, as you cast your mind back over your formative years, was there any defining moment in your development as a musician? You might have named it already, but would you like to highlight a defining moment?

19:26

MT: I don't think so, because I had known . . . in my eighth grade year book, I

had written down that when I'm 21, I will be playing Carnegie Hall. In the sixth grade, or fifth grade, we had a very good music teacher, and she had bought community concert tickets, and anyone who wrote a really good essay, she would give them a ticket to a concert. And except for one other person, I was the only one who ever wrote essays. And I saw Niemenloth and Lubeschentz. I guess I was in around grade six. I thought they were wonderful. And that's why I kept playing. I literally taught myself. It sounds weird, I know. I guess most people don't believe me, but I literally did not have a teacher; not a really solid teacher.

And Sylvia Olmstead, God bless her soul, gave me everything that I needed. So, I guess she saw something in me that I hadn't seen before. But she was very honest with me when she told me, "You are not a performer, not like . . ." and she mentioned Horowitz, because he was well-known at that time, too. So I would say I've known for a long time.

What's interesting, Blair, is that I have some students, and I've had students, that I knew were going to be musicians, one of whom is fourth year at UBC. And when her mother brought her to me, I knew this was a pianist. And you can tell – I don't know what there is – there's nothing written about this. There are some things that you can tell by how they handle a line, their listening to what they want to do, and they can be very temperamental, but I don't know.

I am very fortunate, unlike some of my own students and some other people; my family did not stand in my way. My brother became a musician. He also became a singer. He was a very fine bass-baritone, would have been very, very successful if the Vietnam War had not come. And he was in the National Guard at the same school I'd gone to, and they were called up. And so, that stopped his voice training. But even when he was very sick and dying and was in the hospital, he would astonish the nurses by singing an aria from Don Giovanni. Still a very fine voice. Now, he had been trained well, and my parents never understood this, as my father said, "How did we get *two* musicians?" when he was an experimental engineer.

BG: You've mentioned several people who were influential in your life. Would you name them as role models or mentors in the field of teaching? 23:29

MT: Certainly I would say Ralph Rush was one who recognized my potential. Of course, he's been dead for some time. And so has Sylvia Olmstead, for that matter. There are some other people who are well-known now. For instance, I think of Frances Clark as being probably the one twentieth-century teacher who has had certainly the greatest influence on me, just by what she had done. She revolutionized the way we teach by recognizing how valuable intervals were and creating a whole new way of approaching things. Up until then, we'd had a choice: it could be rote teaching, like the Oxford books. Robert Pace tried, but it was not good. Otherwise we had the middle C approach, and it was all patterned on John Thompson. Although the Oxford School, which was before John

Thompson, was based on singing, and then you learned piano. And the British tradition still insists on you having to sing. If you take an examination, you will have to do some singing. And I like it if I can get my students to do singing, because they learn phrasing, and not only that, they use their ear. But if there is one person that I feel has probably been the one individual that has been the greatest help, as far as I'm concerned, whenever I need help, I always look at [Frances Clark's] book.

BG: Questions and Answers.

MT: Questions and Answers, yes - she only wrote one. And when she died, Clavier lost a great [contributor].

BG: Did you ever have the chance to meet Frances Clark?

MT: No, never. And she established a school. Some of our own students from Vancouver have gone there, have studied with some of the teachers, and in fact, I'm a very good acquaintance (I wouldn't say I'm an intimate friend, but) certainly of some of the teachers there. Certainly, Lillian Livingston and Louise Goss, who is still there, and [Janine] Jacobson, who has done so much - has carried on the tradition and, despite having had a stroke and everything, is very, very sensible, and has been very inspirational in the way she has done things. If you're not acquainted with some of her **masterpieces of classics** in which she breaks things down, it gives you really an embarrassing sense of guilt of what you *haven't* done when you introduce a piece to a student. And I've learned so much from them, and in fact, that's what all these books are about [Mary indicates her bookcases]. I read incessantly – I definitely do.

BG: You're passionate and committed to pedagogy.

MT: I like teaching. I am a teacher. And I didn't go into it for the money - that's for certain - although I'm not starving to death, I would not advocate someone to go into it for a money-making venture. But I have produced, I think, some students, who are very good teachers, one of whom is taking my place at UBC. Susan Chan was her maiden name, and I forget what her married name is. She's on sabbatical leave now, but David Vandereyk was my student. I adjudicated him at a festival, and I remember him knocking on my door at UBC and there he was, all six-foot-three of him:

27:28

"Do you remember me?"

And I said, "Yes, I do. And I remember what you played." I did.

He said, "Can I study with you?"

And he did. He studied with me for about a year, and I said, "David, you need to go to someone else. I do not take Performance majors." Because I had other things; I was teaching Class Piano and Pedagogy. So he went, I think, either to Jane [Coop] or Bob Silverman. But he was with Jane for

most of the time. And there are others that have been my TAs: Terry Dawson was my TA.

A couple of them are graduate students at universities in the States. And, in fact, one of them was wanted by both the University of Kansas, where Jane McGrath is at, and Scott McBride-Smith is now there. And the University of Texas at Austin, where Guy Holland is. And some others. Grace Ho was a graduate of UBC and applied for both of them. And I had met them last year, as I recall . . . yes, it was. It was the last MTNA in Milwaukee when I met them. And Jane said, "We really want her; we're working to get some money to bring her." And then, on the last night before I left, I had dinner with Christopher Norton on one side, and Guy Holland on the other, and there was Jacobson and Scott McBride-Smith, who were hosting this, and a few others, and I turned to Guy Holland, and I said, "One of my students has applied to your school."

"What's her name?"

I said, "Her name is Grace Ho," like that.

He said, "My god, we really want her."

I said, "Well, she does need money and Jane McGrath is getting some money."

He said, "We've got lots of money! Can I call her tomorrow?"

I said, "She'd be happy [if you did]."

And Grace called me next day and said, "Somebody called me from the University of Texas." So, ultimately, they gave her \$28,000, a teaching assistantship, and a place to live.

But there are others that have gone to the University of Michigan and some are playing jazz in Toronto, one's in Hong Kong, and some that I have taught are still working on their ARCT after ten years - which is interesting! They keep calling; they've changed the syllabus; they still have the same Beethoven, the same Bach . . . Okay, we're going to get it done!

BG: Now, you've already led us into your post-California departure, so maybe we can pick up the thread of when you left California for BC. 31:27

MT: For one year, well . . . I applied to the Education Faculty [at UBC] and they turned me down. They had an opening but they turned me down and they hired two other people, and I couldn't understand why I was turned down. And I know that the two people they hired were not very good, based on what students were telling me, until I had a chance to talk to the Head at a buffet dinner for a guest conductor of the symphony. He introduced himself and I introduced myself, and he said, "Oh! I meant to contact you."

I said, "You did?"

And he said, "Yeah. We didn't hire you."

I said, "I know you didn't hire me. You hired two other people and you had to let them go."

He said, "Well, the reason is you're over-qualified."

I said, "What do you mean *over-qualified*?"

He said, "Well, we just couldn't afford you."

And I thought, "This is silly." I could not understand that.

And then Dale Reubart, who was Head of the Keyboard Division (having worn out our carpets and everything at the house - I was teaching a bit privately) asked, on the day that the School [of Music at UBC] was about to start (it hadn't started yet, but two days before they needed another piano teacher): Could I consider taking a few. I said, "Oh God, yes." So I did.

BG: And what year might that have been?

MT: Well, we arrived here, I think, in '63 or '64. So we were a year without me teaching. French was already busy. So it would be about '64 or '65. I retired on December 10th, and I remember that it was Bill [Benjamin], who was the Head at the time, got the shock of his life when he realized I was going to be 65 at the end of that year. Would I mind staying on for the second half? They would rehire me again. So it's been about 17 years since I left UBC. But I still keep track . . . I still go to UBC for lectures. Alice [Enns] has asked me to come quite a few times to lecture to the class on certain topics.

BG: Yes, I know. I was in one of those classes. Mary, I was wondering if there was any project or particular piece of work that you've done that you're especially proud of. 34:24

MT: Not particularly. If nothing else, I think what I feel proud of is when a student leaves, they either . . . frankly, now enjoy playing the piano, as many students do not, at first. As one said yesterday, "I'm beginning to like this a lot more than I used to." Which I think, "Okay, right!" But I would say, project-wise, the pedagogy forum is good for me. I think I'm fortunate in having the opportunity as an individual to have an open kind of situation in which I can write about anything I want to.

BG: Yes, and you're speaking about the newsletter that the Vancouver Branch of the BCRMTA puts out.

MT: I know several people have said, "Why don't you publish it?"

And I've said, "Because I can't." For some of the things, I would have to get permission from other people to use their quotes, so I'm trying to be as careful as I can with this newsletter. Actually, it's kind of interesting when you read about Thomas [Francois?] Marchand. He's just had an article printed in the paper. So he's still a reporter at the *Sun*, and he was quite interested in what we were doing about this. He was asking about many of the things. And, of course, I'm really interested in the research that's going on in the brain and learning. This is probably the fastest-growing area of science – that is, brain research.

36:24

My best student, whom I miss terribly . . . should be playing in the Celebration of Excellence, but she won't be able to be here because she's at Brown's in Rhode Island, and she's in Neuroscience. That's what she wants to do. And she doesn't give that impression. She's actually a silly nut sometimes, but she's so smart. But the idea of exploring the brain . . . They're finding out so much! They're finding out that this wonderful thing we have can do so much more than we would ever expect it to do. There's an article in the paper – yesterday's, Saturday's, or Friday's – and several articles in the *Smithsonian* on this particular topic. It's an area that I find absolutely fascinating. I only wish I were younger.

BG: But it sounds like that's a topic that you'll be looking forward to exploring more.

MT: Oh, it would be. I've ordered a book, which is not easy to get, but Hager's says they can get it for me. Amazon says it's been out of print for a bit. But according to Google and Wikipedia, it's still available, so I've ordered it, because . . . My Friend the Brain (I think it's called), and I think I mentioned it in one of the handouts [at my workshop for the Vancouver Branch in September]. Anyway, I will continue with this, as you found in the newsletter; they wanted more, so I'll do some more in that area, I think.

BG: Looking forward to it. Now, I'm going to ask you a little trickier question, perhaps. Has there been a low point or most challenging point in your career?

38:40

MT: Challenging, hunh? Nothing really challenging and nothing really low - not in the sense of thinking, "What have I done?" There have been some things with . . . at least, I mentioned in the lecture about the father and the daughter. That really bothered me a great deal to have a father that refused to accept the fact that he was not helping his daughter. His presence was hindering his daughter.

BG: You're thinking back to the workshop you did for the Vancouver Branch, and talking about one of your students.

MT: That's right. That was quite traumatic for me. One of the most disappointing things is a student this year who should have finished his

ARCT - he had everything ready - but because he is such a bright student, he never finished. He was enrolled twice in his ARCT and never took anymore lessons because of the academic demands of his family for him, or what have you, or wherever he's going. And that's disappointing.

On the other hand, probably one of the most interesting things that's happened this year has to do with a student of mine that I haven't seen for, I'd say, eight years. Actually, one longer than that, where I stayed in Hong Kong, who's playing so well that he's been invited to play at a hotel, and he's playing Rachmaninoff Third, himself, all by himself - no teacher. I've given him a lesson once or twice. But this was a boy - a young man, now - who, apparently, has finished his degree in business, was hired . . . I never knew anything more about him except I got a Christmas card from him saying he was still playing the piano, but I didn't know what he was doing, or where, or anything, and all of a sudden, he called - just about three months ago, and I saw his mother at the Paul Lewis concert, but he'd called and said could he see me? He wanted to know if . . . still the same repertoire? Yes. He wanted to buy a digital keyboard because he was being transferred from San Francisco to Dublin, Ireland.

I said, "Oh really. What do you do?"

He said, "I do marketing and research for Facebook."

I said, "Facebook?!"

He said, "Yes, and they're transferring me to the European market because they want to expand. And they're going to move everything, and I would like to take a keyboard with me. So can you tell me where I can buy one?"

Anyway, I told him the ones I knew about that have good touch and so forth. And we went to lunch, and he said he was practising as much as he could.

Anyway, his mother, after the concert, said, "He's doing fine. He goes to Europe at least once every week - a different city - stays in Dublin, but he said the moving company broke his sound system and his television, so it's a good thing he hadn't bought a keyboard yet. So when he comes back at Christmas, he's going to buy one, and he'll have it shipped in his own luggage, because he's determined to do his ARCT."

I said, "Facebook!?"

And she said, "Yes. They love him! They've given him a promotion. He's got so many good ideas."

I said, "And he's not married?"

"No, but he's having a good time."

And he's terribly good-looking, you know. Here he is, about 24. Wow!

BG: It sounds to me, based on what you've told me about what's the most rewarding thing, and what's the lowest point, that you really care about your students.

MT: I hear from them a lot. I get Christmas cards. They phone me. It's surprising how often I hear from a lot of them. And some I don't even think about. In fact, it was funny at the Paul Lewis concert, because Tara Wohlberg (Stephen Chatman's wife), took me. And we had to go to the washroom, and there I met Donald's mother; she's the one that told me about all this stuff that's broken. And I came out and there were three other people, including Susan Lim and a couple of others I haven't seen for, I'd say, ten or twelve years. I think they're surprised I'm alive! Am I still teaching? Yes! How many do you have? I have plenty! I said, "I'm going to be losing two, so I have space for two coming up!"

BG: That sounds like you! Let's get into some more big-picture topics like: What's the most important thing to you about your life of teaching, up to this point? What's been your main passion, or the common thread throughout your career?

44:38

MT: Allowing a student to play in a style of their own, and being flexible enough to accept their choices, even though I warn them about certain problems. And patience, I suppose, that I guess God has given me, to tolerate particularly very bright students - knock on wood. I've had some very bright students. I have one student, who is what's called a transition student. There are twenty that are at UBC. They're finishing all of their high school training at UBC, and the grade? I have no idea what grade you could call them. And like many, many bright students, they're very quick; they learn things quickly. He's learned his grade ten stuff almost immediately, but his details. I even talked to his mother yesterday about this. He learns everything so quickly that he doesn't see, you might say, the big picture. I keep having to use an analogy. I said, "I guess the best way I can explain it is: If you were a cook, you've got all the ingredients, but you're putting them together wrong. So we'll talk about you driving a car. When you learn to drive a car, do you hop in, turn the motor over and go like crazy?"

"No."

I said, "You learn a little bit about the automobile, don't you?"

"Yes."

I said, "Okay, you've got all the notes but all those other things, like those black lines, and those little teeny-tiny lines that go with two notes, or those dots above notes? They mean something."

"Oh."

I said, "So this is what your assignment is this week: concentrate on the following . . ."

So, we're working on Beethoven, and of course, he's marked in his own pedal and I've given him recordings, and he said, "But they're all different."

I said, "Right. They are all different. However, Beethoven has got some ideas that you could use. Like, you don't have to play two pages as one long melodic line. You can rest occasionally!"

So, if there's one challenge, it's making a student aware, as they're playing, that the notes are important, but it's what you do with the notes. It's just not enough to play notes. You could teach a monkey to play notes, and God knows you're not a monkey, even though you act like one sometimes. We have a good relationship. My students, hopefully (except for one, who's very shy, and I have to be really careful there) – most of them have a pretty good relationship.

BG: And you do have a sense of humour.

MT: That's the other thing. You need patience and you need a sense of humour. But it must never, ever be at the student's expense. Ever. And I do not use sarcasm at all. Some students have had that, and it scares them, and it's almost impossible to get rid of it. But no – patience, humour, and knowing what you're talking about. I have a student that is doing her ARCT – she's a transfer student. This is a student that graduated from UBC. She's playing a sonata by a Classic composer and she has learned the whole thing, and there are ornaments in it. The teacher has marked out the ornaments and said, "It's not really necessary to play those. Besides, they're too complicated. You won't understand them."

And I told her, "You're playing for a diploma. You cannot leave anything out unless there's a reason for leaving it out, as if your hand is too small or in the original or in whatever source we have available to check, it's advised that you omit this or you add this."

And, in fact, in one piece that a student is playing, one of my best students is doing a partita, and all the recordings do the minuet - there are two minuets - they do a Minuet I, a Minuet II, and then they do a da capo for Minuet I. But the score doesn't have it in it. But everybody plays it that way. So, I said, "We're going to play it that way. But we'll mark in it 'Minuet I da capo, according to . . .' (and I list the five or six performers, who include Andres Schiff, and he certainly knows how to play Bach. And Angela Hewitt. So, I mean, if it's good enough for them, it's good enough for [her]. And besides, she already knows it, so why change it? What do you think is good, that a teacher should have? I think knowledge is important. I think keeping up-to-date is important. I think keeping an open mind is important. If a student is determined to play [Mary plays the

opening to Rachmaninoff Prelude, op. 23, no. 5 on her piano], they will play it.

BG: A popular tune.

MT: Yes. I say, "If you're going to play it, then so are ten other people. So you might as well play it as well as you can and make something out of it."

BG: So that taps into what you were saying about being flexible.

MT: Yes.

BG: And allowing the student (pardon me for putting words in your mouth) to flourish in their own way.

MT: If a student really wants to play that, fine. I have a young student – I think she's now ten – she heard someone do *Golliwog's Cakewalk*. She's determined to play it. Her hand is not very big. I said, "Okay, we'll learn it." Now, she's doing grade nine and she's actually coaching with a former student of mine once a week, who is really good, herself – she's working on her licentiate.

I said, "But with the promise, understanding, cross your heart, I will choose a second piece that you're going to learn from the same category. And then when the time comes, we'll choose which one is going to give you the best mark."

Agreed. It will not be *Golliwog's Cakewalk*! Because she's not ready for it. She will be in about two years. Because she can't produce a big enough sound. You know, there's a big fortissimo in it – a couple of them.

BG: Can you offer a word of wisdom to future generations of teachers?

53:16

MT: The only word of wisdom is: Try not to be discouraged. You're going to have bad days, and you're going to have very good days. Some of it is the students; some of it is you. The important thing, as far as I'm concerned, is: No matter how lousy my day has been, I really try hard not to affect the student. Sometimes, I guess, I'm not as energetic as I could be, but I don't want my personal life (not that I have any! I mean problems. Thank goodness I'm married to a husband who seems to be quite tolerant of my life, which is kind of weird, with students calling at midnight – you know, that kind of thing . . .)

I think you have to be very tolerant, and you have to work with what you've got. And some students are not very fun to work with. They just don't have musicality or they don't practise enough (and most of them don't). But try, if you can, to give the best you can with them. I work with the students – I really do. I try hard to work with the student. And practicing – we didn't spend too much time on practicing. Maybe I should talk about that.

I put something in the Art of Pedagogy, which is on the Internet, because [teachers] have been complaining that kids are playing too much soccer, and so forth. I remember Donna Fishwick says that she expects her students to play so many hours per week. Not every day. And that's exactly what I expect my students to try and do. Now, I don't expect them to do as much as Donna's students. She must have a magic threat of "I'll cut your hands off!" [Laughter] "If I take you, you're going to have to . . ." Whatever it is, it's wonderful, because her students play well. She would be a good one to interview. But anyway, we work out in the lesson, we work out. Yesterday, I did this with a student: I said, "Let's see how long it takes you to do g# harmonic minor." Because she hadn't practised it . . . and getting the fingering worked out . . . or doing double thirds, which is grade 10 . . . how to do the fingering.

She said, "Isn't there a better way of doing it?"

I said, "Yes, there is. I've got a whole book. You can change the fingering if it'll work. No one is going to be upset if you change from 5 to 4 there. But let's see what you can do in ten minutes."

And I've even gone so far as to give every student a little book in which they have to write down, on a daily basis, when they get up, when they eat, what they do. One, with great humour, said, "When I go to the bathroom?"

I said, "Okay, you can do that, too."

"Oh, Mrs. Tickner!"

I said, "I don't care. Go, though."

But they're surprised to find how much time [they have].

Some of them are under such heavy programs and they're taking so much tutoring, math, English, Mandarin; mostly math and mostly languages. One of them is doing something special, and so on. For instance, this one student, who's at UBC – I mean, these are twenty high-powered students. When I talk to him about the brain, [students in his program] are talking about the brain. They know what's happening. And he has memorized his Beethoven, both movements. He actually has already gotten the Bach almost memorized. He's done all of this. He's been away in the summer, but he's done all of this. I said, "Find a piece you like - any piece you like." And he brought a piece by someone I've never heard of before, and it's very nice. It's got a beautiful melody. I said, "John, you've just told me something."

He said, "What's that?" I said, "You should play a Chopin nocturne. I'm going to give you my book and don't you dare lose this book. It's a Wiener-Urtext; it cost \$1,000." (No, it didn't. But it's very expensive.)

"And, do you know, I don't have a single recording available I can give you, so I'm calling tomorrow and getting something, because I want them all." But I said, "I want you to choose one of these. I've marked ten – I've got them all marked. Try them out, because if you can play that melody the way you're playing it now, you will love playing these."

"What are these tiny notes?"

I said, "That's where you get to show off! Because you show off how good your fingers are."

"But I've got eighth notes in the left hand and all these teeny-tiny thousand . . . how many notes are there?!"

"I think there are about 25."

"And I can do all those in six eighth notes?"

"We'll do it. It's not impossible. If Chopin could do it, you can do it." We'll see what he chooses.

As I say, probably the biggest challenge is dealing with either very slow students or students who hate piano. So your job is to try to make the life as pleasant as you can for yourself, and find out what you can do for the student to make them less unhappy. Or, with the very bright students.

And the bright students, you feel the most guilty about because you can see the potential you can do. It's just that they're impatient. And I asked him, "When you do your homework and you take it to school, does the teacher say, 'You're going to have to make a change here because you haven't done this?'"

"Oh yeah."

I said, "That's one of the values of taking piano: it's the details. It's looking at the score, not playing it. Looking at it." And I said, "I want you to sit down and look at this page, and I want you to put a pencil – coloured, preferably – but I want you to put a pencil on everything you see that's not a note, that you don't understand, or you haven't seen before. Or put a question mark by it. Or make a list. I don't care. And then when you come next week, we're going to read the book. We aren't going to play. We're going to play on the fallboard." And that's kind of interesting, especially when you're doing [Beethoven] op. 14, no. 2.

BG: I remember you mentioning a little earlier about the importance of communication with students, no matter what their level.

1:01:51

MT: That's true. You have to know what little kids like. Who was it? Oh! Beverly's birthday – she's 14 – and I asked her sister, Emily, today, what they did. They did something I've never heard of before – I can't

remember what. So, I had to ask Bervery, "What in the world have you done?" I'll have to give her a birthday gift of some sort. I'm not sure what. A Bach invention? [Laughter]. No, I won't do that to her. But, if they're five or six, they have different tastes. I'll tell you, the best education you can get is to go to the dollar store, and be there when the family is there and the children are there. Oh boy! Your eyes are opened by what the children are interested in. I just went yesterday to the dollar store and got gifts for my students, and they had little snow crystals. So I've gotten little snow crystals for everybody. Everything from Santa Claus to snowmen to kids, and I figure they're so small. I've got to get some bags, I guess. But, everybody liked them. And not only that, but I'm sure older children, eighteen and nineteen years old . . . it's just something you can keep. You will feel like a kid. And I thought, so many children have allergies to this and that and the other thing that the safest thing I can give anybody are the gummies.

But no, you have to use language, also, that they understand. I know that Leticia, who is going to be seven now, is an only child, very bright, parents are French - has a very French mother. But Leticia's having to pretty well practise on her own, and we're now doing eighth notes, and she comes up with some very interesting questions. "Why do I have to do that? Doesn't it sound better this way?"

I said, "Well yeah, but that's your version, Leticia. And the name of the man up here wrote this, and he wants you to play it this way. Now, we could make another copy (and we won't tell anyone) and we could say, 'This is Leticia's.' Or you could just simply say, 'This is his copy,' and you could put your name under it, 'This is Leticia's copy.' But," I said, "anyone singing 'O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree' – they're not going to be able to sing it because they don't know your tune."

"Oh. I guess I had better play it the way it's written, then, if I want someone to sing it."

"Yeah, well I'm sure your dad would like to sing it the way it's written because he doesn't know how you're playing it."

"Oh, okay. I guess I'll count 1 and 2 and 3 and for that tune."

I said, "Quarter notes help. Especially when you have eighth notes. Any piece that has an eighth note, you're going to count '1 and 2 and' for every quarter note."

"What about the white note? What do we call that?"

"It's called half note."

"Oh yeah. Do I have to do 'ands'?"

"Yeah, '1 and 2 and.' Yep."

BG: What a wonderful illustration of how you meet the student where they are, and what'll reach them.

MT: Well, they're fun. They are fun. I hate it when somebody cries. I've had students cry, occasionally. They're usually crying because they're frustrated or they're angry. Not – I don't think – at me. They're angry at themselves because they've done something dumb. Like, for instance, they have tried to put together some Bach, hands together, without doing hands separately. And I just sit there. And [they ask], "What do you think?"

I say, "What do you think I think?"

"Well you haven't said anything."

And I say, "No. I'm trying to think of how to say it. Let's look at your book. What does it say? Number one?"

"Oh yeah. Well, it seemed awfully easy to do [Mary sings the theme to Two-Part Invention No. 8]. I can do that!"

I said, "Yes, I can hear what you've done, but your left hand is not doing it right. You're making up something. So, we're back to the drawing board: hands separately."

And I said, "Those numbers there?"

"Well I don't like that fingering."

I said, "Okay, let's change it. How are we going to change it? We're going to mark it in. What do you want to do there?"

"Well, how can you do 3-5 on one note?"

I said, "You will do 3-5 on one note. You play 3 and then you put 5 on it."

"How?"

I said, "We're going to do a scale. We're going to do this: [Mary plays a descending scale, using finger substitutions.]"

"How'd you do that?"

"I skip 4."

BG: This is where your God-given patience comes in handy!

MT: Yes.

BG: Before we wrap up, is there anything that I've missed that you'd like to talk about?

MT: The questions you've [asked] I think are good ones. People have asked me why I'm still teaching.

BG: You retired from UBC long ago.

MT: Yes. The only answer I could give quickly, without being terribly rude, is, "What else would I do?" But that's not it. I really enjoy sharing ideas. I enjoy meeting students. I enjoy the give and take between the student and myself. I enjoy working with young people - particularly if I feel they're getting something out of it. It's wonderful. It's so exciting when a student comes in and says, "I just *love* this! I really love this." And I feel we've got a bull's eye here. And students are so honest, usually. Some try to cover. And I tell them that, if you've had a bad week, you've got a project, you haven't practised one bit . . . I have a university student going to Langara. Their home had a home invasion. Three weeks ago, a man broke into their home - they were there - he pepper-sprayed her father and her brothers, and had a machete, and was threatening to kill her mother and her, and robbed them. The police have finally gotten him. So they had to move out of their house. They're not living too far away; they're living in Dunbar now.

But she called and said, "I haven't been able to practise because the piano's in the house, and we're all still very upset."

I said, "I don't expect you to. I don't expect to hear from you for awhile. But do you mind if I phone you sometime in the next couple of weeks or so and see how you are?"

"No, but I just can't come."

I said, "Fine. Don't worry about it. Just relax."

So I called her last night. I said, "How are you doing?"

"We're a lot better than we were, I must say, and we're settled in, now. I think I'm about ready to take a lesson."

I said, "Fine, but you don't have to play. Let's not play."

"Well, I don't think I have anything you really want to hear."

I said, "That's fine. In fact, it's a very good thing because now we can spend time on sight reading and ear training. And you don't have to worry about that." And I said, "How are your father and your brother?"

"They're much better. They've gotten over the pepper spray and we're now not jumping at every sound around, and this is really a nice area here."

Everybody's being awfully nice." They're renting a house here in Dunbar. But I thought, what a horrible thing to have to go through.

I said, "How are you doing in school?"

She said, "It's really been hard to stay focused, but I'm getting through my exams. I have one more this weekend. I think I'm okay after that."

I said, "Fine. Well come on Friday. I'll see you about 11 o'clock, and we'll just do some ear training and some sight reading, and you can relax. Do you want tea or coffee?"

"Oh, no."

"How about some Hallowe'en candy? I'm giving it away in big bucket-loads because they all love it."

And she laughed. She said, "You know, we had a lot of visitors."

I said, "We haven't. So maybe we should try Hallowe'en again for this year."

But, you know, students have things that happen in their families. I think the worst thing that happens is if the parents have a divorce and they don't tell their children until very far along.

I don't know if I've ever had a really low point. I've had points that make me angry and discouraged or are challenging. I guess leaving Long Beach, with all the effort they had gone into about flights, and rearranging classes."

BG: I think that qualifies.

MT: But I'd already made up my mind. It was my husband's moment/opportunity to start a new program and be Head of it. And you don't get that very often. And you can set your own levels and do your own things.

BG: How lucky that we got you!

MT: Well, I don't know about that. You may have some disputation about that!

BG: Well, thank you very much, Mary. It's been such an honour and privilege to speak with you.

MT: It's fun! I feel like I'm venting, you know. It's fun just to talk about yourself. You feel as if you really aren't that important but, if somebody is interested in what you have to say, okay.

BG: You're a gem. Thank you very much.

MT: Thank you, Blair.