



MUSIC IN MY LIFE

Pianist as Photographer

Christian Steiner balked at becoming a concert pianist, to the benefit of musicians.

By Damian Fowler

TODAY, CHRISTIAN STEINER is working with Cherie Hu, a fourteen-year-old pianist who's studying in the pre-college division of The Juilliard School. Dressed in an elegant pink ball gown, the young musician sits down at Steiner's Bechstein grand piano and rattles off the first movement of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto. As she plays, Steiner moves around his photography studio capturing her in action. Afterwards, as she poses against the piano, Steiner puts her at ease.

"How nervous do you get?" he says.

"Not really," says Cherie.

"How wonderful!" says Steiner. "When I play these days, I get very nervous and I always envy the people who don't."

The photographer continues in this vein, talking easily about piano technique, memory, repertoire, all the while directing the shoot with small comments: "Eyes to me." "You're being solemn again!"

Steiner, a youthful seventy-two-year-old New Yorker, has made it his life's work to

photograph classical musicians. He's been plying his trade behind the lens for more than four decades and his portfolio includes iconic images of Herbert von Karajan, Maria Callas, Leonard Bernstein, Plácido Domingo, Jessye Norman, Vladimir Horowitz, Alicia de Larrocha, Yo-Yo Ma and dozens of other stars.

"His eye is so keen, but more than that, he finds the truth and the soul in his subjects," says the American soprano Christine Brewer. "Because Christian got to know me and my music before we worked together, he totally 'got' me!" But before he was a maestro behind the camera, Steiner was on the fast track to a career as a concert pianist.

Steiner was born in Berlin in 1937 to a family of musicians he compares to the von Trapps. Steiner's father was one of twelve children, and everyone was brought up to play a musical instrument in a peripatetic family troupe that, like wandering minstrels of old, traveled from town to town. His father became the first violist at the eminent

Deutsche Opera, then handed down the musical legacy to his children, who had little option but to follow. “There was nothing other than eating, drinking, sleeping and playing musical instruments,” recalls Steiner, whose two elder brothers ended up playing viola and cello in the Berlin Philharmonic.

At the age of four Steiner was handed a violin and refused it. A few months later, a cello was presented to him, which he also rejected. But at the age of five, Steiner found his instrument: the piano. With enforced daily practice, he soon excelled. When he was thirteen, he gave his first recital at school and stunned the audience with a rendition of a Haydn sonata. Hooked, he set about training to become a concert pianist, attending the Hochschule für Musik Berlin, where his piano teacher was a former student of Artur Schnabel. The talented Steiner flourished, winning competitions as well as plaudits from the likes of Claudio Arrau, who encouraged him to study in New York thanks to a scholarship program run by the German government.

In New York, Steiner began studying with the pianist Frank Sheridan, who was on the faculty at Mannes College of Music (as it was then called). After a year, he continued in Strasbourg with Edward Steuermann, who taught him “interpretation, not technique.” A rising star in Germany, Steiner now had management and played over forty concert dates a year, seemingly on a successful trajectory. Then something stalled.

Steiner had returned to New York for further private study with an eminent teacher at Juilliard, but her negativity undermined his confidence. On one occasion she told him, “You’re not nearly as talented as you think you are.” He found her instruction to be paralyzing and he started to doubt his future as a pianist. “She beat me into a pulp and I let her,” Steiner now recalls. “It showed me that I perhaps wasn’t cut out for this career.”

At the age of twenty-six, the first phase of Steiner’s musical career came to an abrupt end. He nervously informed his father and was relieved at his reaction. “You’re right to do so.

It’s an awful profession,” he told his son. Still, that didn’t mitigate Steiner’s feelings of failure as he left Germany and sought some kind of solace back in New York City.

EVER SINCE HIS BROTHER had given him a camera at the age of thirteen, Steiner had enjoyed taking pictures, but he’d never thought of it as a profession. But then a friend in New York who thought he took great shots introduced him to a professional photographer.

Steiner quickly got up to speed, learned the trade and soon found himself with an assignment that took him to Philharmonic Hall at Lincoln Center (before it became Avery Fisher Hall) to shoot a two-piano Mozart concerto. It was a familiar environment, only now Steiner was behind the camera instead of at the keyboard.

Over time, word spread and Columbia Artists Management Inc. began sending him on assignments. “I immediately started to have a big clientele,” recalls Steiner, whose subjects were the biggest musicians of the day — from conductors to pianists to opera stars. If Steiner was nervous at first, he quickly realized that musicians were even more anxious about having their pictures taken. Eminent artists would arrive at his door declaring, “This is as bad as going to the dentist.” His technique was to put people at ease. When faced with self-conscious questions like, “What should I do with my mouth?” Steiner would say, “Nothing! Just talk to me.” And of course he could talk — with expert facility — about music.

Artists warmed to Steiner, who understood that getting good results from his subjects meant a good rapport and a relaxed atmosphere. This wasn’t always easy, especially with big names like von Karajan, whose silent, cool disposition made him unapproachable. Likewise with Bernstein, who arrived magisterially dressed in a black cape with red silk lining and would not relinquish his stony-faced severity. Steiner wondered how he could break through to the maestro, and finally said, “I have admired you for as long as I can think. Last night I had

a sleepless night thinking about this. . . . I’m so nervous.” With this, Bernstein forgot his austere reserve and said, “Oh, I’m not like that! Come over here and give me a hug.” Only then did Bernstein’s features soften, allowing Steiner to capture his portrait.

On another occasion, Steiner had a photo session with the great Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter, whose very dour image troubled the photographer. On arriving at the pianist’s New York apartment, Steiner was surprised to learn that Richter’s first language was German, which immediately built a rapport between the two men. After two hours, Steiner had rolls of film with images of Richter affable, smiling and relaxed. As the relieved photographer packed up his equipment, Richter said, “I will not approve any photograph that will have any smiles in it.” Steiner’s heart sank; he unpacked his equipment and had to spend another hour dedicated to the preferred gloomy profile.

AS HIS PHOTOGRAPHY career went from strength to strength, Steiner slowly made his way back to the keyboard. His first foray back into performance, four years after he’d stopped playing, coincided with a photo shoot with Maria Callas. In 1969 he was invited by pianist Earl Wilde to record a group of two-piano pieces in London. (Wilde had once heard Steiner play before he quit and continued, over the years, to encourage him to return to performance. Steiner reluctantly agreed and started practicing again, although his fingers “felt like pudding.”) At the same time, Steiner was assigned to fly to Paris to take some pictures of Callas for an album cover.

He arrived at the diva’s apartment on Rue Georges Mandel half expecting the session to be canceled, as it had been several times before. And then she appeared, barefoot, in a peignoir, with her hair flowing down her back. At first Callas wanted to direct the shoot, telling Steiner to photograph her from below because “it makes my nose look shorter.” After a while, the two fell into conversation. Callas was curious about a

Famous faces. Christian Steiner's portraits of (clockwise from left) Jessye Norman, Maria Callas, Vivica Genaux and Herbert von Karajan



pianist who had chosen to make a career in photography. “In her mind, I think she was intrigued by doing something else, too,” says Steiner, recalling that only the week before the newspapers had been full of the Kennedy–Onassis marriage. Not surprisingly, Callas — whose relationship with the shipping magnate had ended the year before — was in a vulnerable state. At one point during the shoot, she ran over to the window to watch some soldiers on horseback ride by. Steiner, who was delighted by this burst of girlish enthusiasm, had his camera at the ready as she gazed down at the street. He had his portrait.

The next day he returned to London and began his recording sessions with Earl Wilde, which included Rachmaninoff’s *Symphonic Dances* and Ravel’s *La Valse*. The session went well; all of a sudden playing was fun again.

Still, it was another few years before Steiner returned to public performance. As he started practicing again, he found that his old facility at the keyboard returned.

Since then, Steiner has made performance a counterpoint to his daily life as a photographer, playing regular chamber concerts around the country and in Europe. It helps that he knows virtually everyone in the business, not to mention his brothers in the Berlin Philharmonic. He’s also launched his own chamber music series — the Tannery Pond Concerts — held every summer in upstate New York on the grounds of the Mount Lebanon Shaker Village. This year the series, running May 29 through September 25, celebrates its twentieth anniversary and includes the Brentano String Quartet, pianist Jeremy Denk and mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux.

In fact, for her last record, *Pyrotechnics: Vivaldi Opera Arias*, Genaux used Steiner’s stunning portraits, which capture “the energy and vibrancy of the music and my enthusiasm for this repertoire,” she says. “There is an elegance, a simplicity and a directness in his portraits that stands out to me. To the public, the artist is often seen as some kind of heroic figure, and Christian shows us our heroes in



All in the family. Christian Steiner’s grandfather (above) with four of his children. The Steiner Quintet (below) is advertised in a 1952 poster for the Nordmark Sinfonie-Orchester in Flensburg, Germany.

very human form, which I think makes them even more dear to us.”

Over the years, Steiner’s aesthetic has evolved. His early work tended toward the moody headshot, with the face of the artist emerging from a dark background. “My influence was Rembrandt, who only used one source of light,” says Steiner. But that technique has now changed. “What’s important in my pictures is that a subject looks interesting and approachable, intelligent and engaged. Beauty is not necessary.”

Many musicians, impressed by Steiner’s portraits, have found themselves returning to his studio for more sessions. Callas, Domingo and von Karajan, to name a few, were repeat clients. The late, great pianist Alicia de Larrocha once told Steiner, “You’re the one who makes me look like I wish I looked!”

Looking back at his career, Steiner sees the continuity in his joint passions of photography and music. “The fact that I photographed musicians was natural because of my background. Then music came back into my life, which was a natural progression,”

he says. “One fed the other and continues to do so.”

Hanging on the wall of his upstate New York home, Steiner has a prized possession — a framed poster announcing a concert from 1988 that took place in the chamber music hall of the Berlin Philharmonic. Steiner and his brother presented works for piano and cello by Schumann, Debussy, Bréval and Beethoven to an enraptured audience of over a thousand people. It was an auspicious and thrilling moment for Steiner: the first time he had performed in Germany since he had stopped playing all those years before, his confidence restored. ■