



IN MEMORIAM

Barbara Shearer

Instructor of Piano Performance, Department of Music
Instructor of Piano Performance, Young Musicians Program
Berkeley
1936 – 2005

Barbara Shearer (d. December 6, 2005) was a beloved Bay Area concert pianist and music teacher, renowned for her interpretations of the Romantic masters as well as the music of her contemporaries. Her performances left a lasting impression on her audiences; her recordings of Schumann and Chopin were definitive. Among her students, she left a rich legacy of inspired and dedicated musicians and music-making.

Born September 16, 1936 in Ottawa, Illinois, Shearer (née Barbara Kay Strunk) spent her childhood in the rural Midwest and often commented on the forthright honesty of “her people,” whose directness would inform her own artistry. She attended Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin for two years, then completed her bachelor’s degree in music at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio. On the advice of her teachers, she relocated to New York in 1958 to study piano with the renowned Leonard Shure (whose other students include Ursula Oppens and Gilbert Kalish), later working with him in Zurich and Munich. Shure was a disciple of Artur Schnabel, a legendary performer and a model of scholarly integrity to all later pianists. In studying with Shure, Shearer enjoyed a pianistic lineage via Schnabel- Leschetizky- Czerny to Beethoven. In later years, she formed a professional association with pianist Karl Ulrich Schnabel, son of Artur, with whom she taught for many years.

In 1963, Shearer was about to take a teaching position in New York but literally changed directions when one of her former teachers in Ohio dissuaded her, offering to buy her a bus ticket to San Francisco. She began graduate work in music history at the University of California, Berkeley and in 1964 married singer and composer Allen Shearer, then an undergraduate in music at UC Berkeley. When he was granted an Alfred Hertz Memorial Scholarship, the Shearers spent two years in Salzburg, Austria. Upon their return to California, they established themselves as musicians and teachers in the Bay Area. Ms. Shearer initially served as accompanist for the student choral group Treble Clef with conductors James Fankhauser and Elizabeth Davidson, and taught in the Young Musicians Program at Berkeley in its formative years. In 1978 she joined the piano faculty of the Department of Music, where she taught for nearly 25 years.

The Shearers spent 1979-80 at the American Academy in Rome. During that year, Ms. Shearer gave a solo recital at the prestigious Vienna Konzerthaus and played the premiere of Allen Shearer’s Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra with the Orchestra Sinfonica della RAI (Rome).

Among her memorable concerts in Northern California were performances with the University Symphony under Michael Senturia: Beethoven, Piano Concerto No. 2; Brahms, Piano Concerto No. 1; and the Schoenberg Piano Concerto with the San Francisco Community Orchestra as well as the Mendocino Festival Orchestra. Shearer’s solo recitals drew overflow audiences: her last solo recital in Hertz Hall was a noon

concert performance of the Chopin Preludes. She was also an avid accompanist and chamber musician, often collaborating with her husband in song recitals and in performances of his music. Their performance of Schubert's Winterreise was described by Boston Globe critic Richard Buell as "superbly faithful to the blasted affections and frozen landscapes depicted therein. Indeed, their every gesture told you that they had lived with this music for decades." An expert performer of contemporary music, she was active in the new music group Composer's Forum.

Always generous with her talents, Shearer gave many performances in private homes and other intimate settings in the Bay Area. She also visited music history classes, offering demonstrations on the piano music of Brahms and Beethoven and shared her insights into the piano cycles of Schumann in lectures and radio broadcasts. In what was to be her last Hertz Hall appearance, she played the four-hand accompaniment to Brahms' Liebeslieder Waltzes alongside her former student Li- Wen Kuo with the University Chorus, conducted by her colleague Marika Kuzma.

Legions of musicians remember her as a powerful mentor — an inspiring artist with infectious enthusiasm who always sought to understand and bring out the best in her students. In the words of the San Francisco Chronicle's Joshua Kosman: "With her welcoming manner and her hair in a trademark bun, Ms. Shearer projected a maternal image, but she was a demanding pedagogue as well." Among her gifts was the ability to guide her students through the difficult transitions of their undergraduate years and help them find their own way. She listened deeply and responded with great warmth, an impish smile, and a light spirit. She went to great lengths to care for them. On one occasion she personally sought out and accompanied the delivery of a donated piano for one of her Young Musicians Program students. As this student, Donna Allen, recalled at Shearer's memorial, the note she left for her on the piano read, "Hello, I am your piano. Please play me."

On the record label Alba Artists (a combination of her first name with her husband's), Shearer recorded the Schumann Kreisleriana and the Chopin Twenty- Four Preludes, recordings now held in the collection of the Jean Hargrove Music Library on the UC Berkeley campus. Other recordings and printed programs of her concerts may be found in the UC Berkeley Department of Music concert archives.

Although music was her predominant preoccupation, Shearer also pursued other interests with great passion. She avidly read poetry and prose by international authors, was an expert knitter, enjoyed rustic retreats in northern California, and treasured her garden at her Oakland home with its ferns, fruit trees, and the towering redwood she planted as a sapling.

The historic house where Barbara taught and lived is a landmark, not only notable for its Arts and Crafts architecture but also remembered as a place where, for four decades, generations of students gathered to learn about music and life from Barbara Shearer. She was a profound musician deeply rooted in European tradition and yet also vibrantly alive in the contemporary era and fully present to her students.

A memorial was held at International House on January 22, 2006, followed by a concert in Hertz Hall. In July 2006, a second memorial concert was offered by her former pupil, Sue Hendon, at the Berkeley Piano Club.

Marika Kuzma
Christy Dana
Karen Rosenak
Michael Senturia