

A PASSION FOR MUSIC

REFLECTIONS ON THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF PIANIST WILLIAM CORBETT-JONES

Donna S. Kline

CONCERT PIANIST, teacher, and university music professor, William Corbett-Jones, like most musicians, has had a lifelong love affair with music. Yet, unlike most musicians, his musical journey to become the well-known concert pianist and artist/teacher at San Francisco State University did not take the traditional path. While most performing artists of his and succeeding generations have either come from a musical family, or are products of a music conservatory such as Juilliard, Corbett-Jones did not have the benefit of either. Born (1929) in Manila but raised primarily by his maternal grandparents in Richmond, California near San Francisco, his future as a career military officer seemed predetermined. Corbett-Jones' mother, who had married as a teenager, divorced his father when he was barely three. His grandfather, a retired Army Captain, and his mother were convinced a career as a military officer was the *ne plus ultra* for a young man. Were it not for his exceptional musical talent combined with single-minded determination, Corbett-Jones' career path most certainly would have taken a different turn.

No one in Corbett-Jones' family read music, had any musical training, nor did they ever listen to classical music on the radio. His earliest musical interests began in the public schools, when at age ten he innocently raised his hand to play the flute and other instruments in the school band. Three years later, when his grandparents purchased a piano for his younger sister, he became fascinated and asked to take lessons. From that first lesson, he knew he wanted to become a pianist.

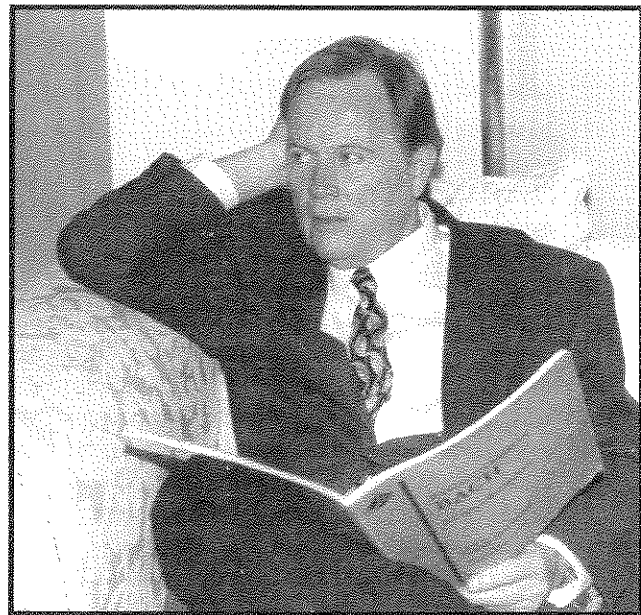
Early Years

After a year with local piano teacher, Emma Gibbons, whom he credits for giving him a very good start, his grandfather took him to study with

Allen Bier in San Francisco. Bier, who had studied with Vladimir De Pachman, Josef Lhevinne, and Harold Bauer, opened a new world to him. "I was a young teenager and did not know any piano repertory," he claims. "I did not even know there were Mozart and Beethoven *Sonatas*, or Chopin *Ballades* and *Etudes*! When Mr. Bier introduced all of this to me, I was completely enchanted."

Yet Corbett-Jones was unhappy and maladjusted at school. He had no interest in anything except music. He failed everything. "My day at that time was not going to school," he recalled. "I would collect beer and coke bottles, enough to get a little money and then I would hitchhike to San Francisco during school hours to listen to classical recordings at Sherman Clay, pretending I was going to buy. Then I would go to a pool hall on Market Street until it was time to hitchhike home. My mother and grandparents realized that my low grades would not fulfill their dream for me to go to West Point. When I was fifteen, my grandfather decided to move to Hollywood, where my mother had recently found employment. "This was during World War II and Richmond was a ship building, wild, frontier-like town."

Living in Hollywood for Corbett-Jones was a definite plus. It was a time in his life when his horizons were broadening and Hollywood was a far cry from the turbulent environment he had left in Richmond. Not only were the public high school academics better, but he had a greater opportunity to hear



many of the leading performing artists of the day, such as Artur Schnabel, Jose Iturbi, Artur Rubinstein, and many other pianists who made a colossal impression on him. Another singular experience he remembers while living in Hollywood was seeing the movie *A Song to Remember*. "I think I saw it twenty times and went to the library to read everything about Chopin." Although his family could not afford a piano teacher, Corbett-Jones continued to practice on his own. His passion for music took him to the Los Angeles Public Library where he borrowed every music book and score available to him. Always an avid reader, he devoured everything he could find about music, memorizing the borrowed musical scores because he did not have the money to buy them. He later maintained this was a distinct advantage toward his quick memorizing ability today.

Competition Winner

The successful outcome of a piano competition in Los Angeles with the prize of \$100.00 won him lessons with John Crown, the star teacher in Los

Angeles in the 1940s. However, Crown advised that he needed to improve his technique and sent him to Alice Ehlers (the harpsichordist at USC). Ehlers, who was of the Viennese School and had studied with Wanda Landowska, gave him large doses of Cramer *Etudes*, Mozart *Sonatas* and Bach *Preludes and Fugues*, which he learned quickly and with great interest. After six months of preparation with Ehlers, he was pronounced fit to study with Crown, but after only a few lessons with him, they stopped. His mother, who had remarried, moved her family to Arlington, Virginia, where her new war-hero husband worked at the Pentagon in Washington, D. C.

"In Arlington I was a total drop-out. I was not able to take piano lessons and did not even enroll in school." Instead, he formed the habit of going to the Library of Congress in Washington, where he spent every day reading the library's vast collection in the Music Department. It was incredible. The largest collection of music books and original scores in America were accessible to him. He pored over hundreds of them with a complete sense of awe and wonder. Allowed to practice on the library's Steinway, he was able to learn many works from their original manuscripts. The Coolidge auditorium at the library also had a constant parade of concerts, which he attended regularly. He heard the Budapest Quartet play the complete Beethoven cycle, Henri Temianka play the Beethoven violin sonatas with Leonard Shure, Rudolf Serkin perform the Brahms cycle with Adolph Busch. He heard many other artists of the day, including Horowitz, then about forty-two and at the top of his form, perform at Constitution Hall, where he ushered. He heard many great orchestras perform.

In 1946, a professional pianist who happened to hear Corbett-Jones play the Steinway at the Library of Congress recommended he should take lessons from the best possible teacher, Madam Samaroff at Juilliard. "I immediately wrote her," he said. "However, she replied she had a full schedule, but suggested I take her summer class and work with her assistant, the excellent

Joseph Battista." While the lessons lasted only the summer, this brief time with Samaroff and Joseph Battista at Juilliard was one of the most musically fulfilling experiences of Corbett-Jones' life.

Early Maturity

Another family move—this time to occupied Japan—encouraged him to make an effort to continue his musical study on his own. At seventeen, a time when he could have advanced musically and academically, circumstances found him with no money, no teacher, and what was perhaps the most critical, the need to support himself. He returned to San Francisco resolved to make a musical career. Soon he found several part-time jobs and rented a piano to teach and practice on his own until he could afford a teacher. He also enrolled in Galileo High School in San Francisco, for he was almost eighteen and had not finished high school. A few private lessons with pianists Egon Petri (who was teaching at Oakland's Mills College), Alexander Lieberman, and Lili Kraus followed in the late 1940s. "Petri took the job at Mills College during the war as did Darius Milhaud," recalled Corbett-Jones. "The war years flushed so many great artists out of Europe. Many came to California: Schonberg, Stravinsky, Milhaud, Petri. Living in California in the 1940s and 1950s gave me access to premium European culture."

Professional Debut

In the early 1950s, Corbett-Jones began to study with Adolph Baller, the prominent teacher at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and by 1953, he made his professional debut at the San Francisco Museum of Art. His enthusiastically-acclaimed debut led to several appearances with the San Francisco Symphony and other Bay Area concerts. By 1954, Corbett-Jones' career had become very active. In addition to many local concerts, he accompanied various artists for Columbia Concerts out of New York; made recordings of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Scarlatti *Sonatas*, and Haydn *Sonatas*; filmed five educational movies under the Ford Foundation with Henri Temianka and the Paganini String Quartet; and worked for Yehudi Menuhin and Josef Szigeti as rehearsal

pianist.

Vienna

In 1956, he was awarded both the Fulbright Scholarship and the Alfred Hertz Scholarship from the University of California. He accepted the Hertz over the Fulbright inasmuch as it awarded more financial help and enabled him to study in Vienna, a lifelong ambition. Vienna, however, did not fulfill his musical expectations. Living expenses were high and he was not allowed to practice in his modest apartment. There was no alternative but to return to the U.S. Within a year after his return, Corbett-Jones became a full faculty member at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Baller, who was frequently away on long tours with the Alma Trio, turned over his class of advanced students, which gave him an excellent opportunity to develop his teaching.

After the age of 26, Corbett-Jones never took another piano lesson, although he briefly studied chamber music in Siena, Italy with the Trio De Trieste. A London debut in 1960, with two USA tours as soloist with the Temianka Little Symphony and concert tours with noted soloists, many violinists, kept him active in the early 1960s. Additional concerts at the Salzburg Chamber and Meiringen Music Festivals, plus tours of Greece, Mexico, and the USA, filled his performance calendar in the middle 1960s.

In 1967, Corbett-Jones joined the faculty at the University of California at Santa Cruz and concurrently became an Associate Professor at San Francisco State University. In 1968, he joined and toured extensively, nationally and internationally, for eight years as a member of the acclaimed Alma Trio. By 1973, he was awarded a doctoral equivalency and tenure as full professor from San Francisco State University, where he actively continues to teach and perform. His vast repertoire has taken him to all corners of the world as performer and guest professor. Today, he lives with his wife, Louise, who is a Systems Designer at Pacific Bell, and their eleven year-old daughter, Laura, who attends the French-American School in San Francisco. Corbett-Jones' current joys besides his family and music

are traveling, and reading in German, French, Italian. He is conversant in Mandarin. An added delight is being involved in the numerous school and extra-curricular activities with his daughter, Laura.

His Teaching

During the many years I have known and studied with Corbett-Jones, it has been a privilege to be under his influence and professionalism. There are few who know, love, and share their art more than he does. Yet he is modest about his musical gifts. As a teacher, his high standards, warmth of personality, and depth of knowledge and insight into music are an inspiration. When I bring a new work to my lesson, he has not only performed it but knows its complete history: what year the work was composed, where, and under what circumstances the composer created it. As an educator, Corbett-Jones' teaching is a unique mixture of his own experiences and that of his teachers. He claims he has learned as much in rehearsal with professional colleagues such as Gabor Rejto or Tossy Spivakovsky, as he has learned in his lessons. Continually

reading and studying, he has taken everything he has been taught in such a way that he can not separate them. "The fact that I did not go to a conservatory or university has its strengths and weaknesses," he said. "The weakness is my lack of a solid foundation at an early age. On the other hand, I had to show initiative and was allowed to be creative. I am reminded of the man who asked Brahms how to become a composer, and Brahms answered, "You go to a conservatory and take all the necessary courses." But the man replied, "Herr Brahms, you never did any of these things." Brahms answered, "I never had to ask how you become a composer!"

Practice Techniques

Corbett-Jones has developed practice techniques almost entirely from his own experiences and observations. He advises that practicing can be like giving yourself a lesson if the time is used efficiently. "Approach it systematically, but creatively. You must alternate your technique of practicing so your mind stays fresh. Always ask yourself what you want to improve before you practice." He directs us to use a "prac-

Good fingering is perhaps Corbett-Jones' most notable hallmark as a teacher. He calls himself a "fingering fanatic." It is a lifetime search for usable fingering that is effective and not injurious. He insists we write our fingering in after we have defined what is easiest for the fingers to learn, the easiest to remember, and the least tiring. "If you wish to improve your playing look for the simpler 'key that opens the lock.'"

The entire keyboard is your kingdom. "Do not neglect the most distant provinces, for you must feel you embrace the entire keyboard. Practice scales and arpeggios over the entire gamut. Take passages out of the repertory to develop the big feel, such as the big skips at the end of the Liszt *Rhapsody, No. 6*, or the skips at the end of the Scherzo of the Chopin *B-flat minor Sonata*. One need not play the entire composition."

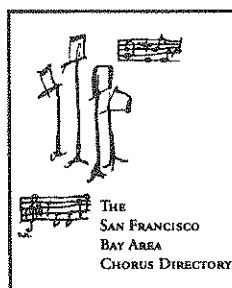
Physical Adaptation

In addition to fingering, Corbett-Jones is also aware of the general physical address at the piano, the arms, the forearms, the shoulders and the way we sit. In order to avoid fatigue and injury, every joint in the body can move so far, and somewhere in the middle, there is maximal ease and comfort. Therefore, if you are too long at the maximum of that particular joint movement, there will be pain or fatigue. The lateral motion of the wrist is also important. The hand should be in as straight a line as possible. To avoid strain, adjust your upper torso by leaning back, forward, or left or right. Align your wrists and forearm and body in such a manner as to prevent strain.

tic shopping list." "Are the notes, rhythm, tempo, pedaling, touch, dynamic contrasts and phrasing accurate? And also, work out the fingering to gain the maximum artistic result with the least amount of effort."

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Proper body alignment at the piano not only prevents fatigue or injury, but a better legato touch is obtained, a playing technique of paramount importance to Corbett-Jones. He arranges his fingering so his hand is constantly opening and closing so that his fingers and hand will not become fatigued. "Chopin understood this concept and wrote in fingerings that would not produce fatigue for his students," he says.

Memorizing

"Memorizing," says Corbett-Jones, "is a very important aspect of musicianship." He wants us to make a piece of music a part of ourselves, something that we can carry around and possess. "A piece must have the whole of one's conscience," he maintains. "Get the piece in your ear and memorize away from the piano. Develop the ability to picture every note in your mind." When memorizing, permit yourself intervals of rest so the brain can assimilate the new material. Do not engage in other learning activities during these rest periods, and above all, do not play or listen to other music. The first tryouts of a newly-learned piece should be with the music, and then gradually wean yourself from the score. If you get stuck, look at the music to remember the forgotten spot, look away and try again. Continue this way, adding bar by bar and phrase by phrase. "Memorizing is noticing things," he continues. "Look for patterns and think of the bass as linear, mentally connecting the bottom notes."

Sometimes we memorize a piece almost without conscious effort that Corbett-Jones calls "islands of memory." When this is the case, memorizing is a matter of building bridges or memorizing the connective material between these "islands." "Our purpose," he says, "must be to make our memorization as secure as possible so we can rely on it under pressure. "Notice basic things about the piece; e.g., the key, harmony, the major divisions of the piece. Close your eyes and visualize the music." When not playing the piece, you should also be able to turn it on and run it through your mind. Memorizing is akin to studying a foreign language, for you have to learn, forget, and relearn each word several times before it finally sticks in your mind. "It may take many more times before a musical passage stays," he advises.

A Sense of High Purpose

Above all, it is simply Corbett-Jones' passion for music and sense of high purpose that motivates him strive to make his students humanists while equipping them technically. At the end of a lesson, he always shows much kindness and never fails to praise and encourage us. As a teacher, he never tells a student he/she has no ability. "That's when I can be surprised," he said. "I believe there is a tremendous amount of human potential in everyone and one must be open to the whole person. If you aren't you are bound to miss something."

As a performer, Corbett-Jones is aware of the artistic ferment that the "golden age" of music is over, that the piano is a dinosaur. "I don't believe this to be true. There aren't too many pianists," he continues. "Art of all kinds must be kept alive and we need amateurs as well as professionals to continue to create and perform, whether it be music, dance, painting, writing, or poetry. Music and all art forms have something new that I find very exciting."

Donna S. Kline is a pianist and the author of *An American Virtuoso on the World Stage*, the biography of pianist Olga Samaroff Stokowski, published by Texas A and M University Press in 1996. She continues to study piano with Corbett-Jones as well as write and research the lives and careers of different piano virtuosos. She is a member of the Marin Branch of MTAC.



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