Byron Janis is internationally regarded as one of the world’s most remarkable pianists. Hailed by the *New York Times* as “one of the greatest pianists of our time,” Janis has also been called “the American Richter” and “a Rachmaninoff from America” by various sources abroad. A student of Vladimir Horowitz, Josef and Rosina Lhevinne, and Adele Marcus, he represents an exceptional generation of American virtuoso pianists. This soft-spoken and thoughtful artist has enjoyed an unusually colorful life and career.

**Early Years**

Janis was born in 1928 to a Russian mother and Polish father who had settled in western Pennsylvania. The family name, originally Yankelovich, was shortened to Yanks, then Jannes and, eventually, Janis. The young boy’s kindergarten teachers were the first to notice his musical gifts.

He began piano lessons in Pittsburgh at age 4 with Russian pianist Abraham Litow, a strict and authoritarian instructor who had trained at the Music Conservatory in Leningrad. From the very first lesson, Litow’s pedagogical techniques included balancing a glass of water on the back of the young pianist’s hand to keep it steady. The “Wrong Note Punishment,” as Janis called it, involved a smack on the hand with a ruler for every incorrect note. Although these methods distressed his mother, Janis’s accuracy improved, and Litow was eventually able to set aside his “exclusive treatments” learned in Russia. After only three years of lessons, Litow announced he had nothing more to teach Janis and, instead, reached out to two of the most esteemed teachers in the world.
Josef And Rosina Lhévinne

At the insistence of Litow, the 7-year-old Janis traveled to New York City to perform for Josef and Rosina Lhévinne. To his delight, the Lhévinnes immediately accepted him as a student. Janis moved to New York with his sister and mother, while his father stayed behind in Pittsburgh to run the family business.

The Lhévinnes would alternate their teaching so Janis would have a lesson with Josef one week and with Rosina the next. As a young boy he was fascinated to discover that to maintain good alignment, the body must move from left to right while playing scales. “I learned for the first time that the whole body must move, not just the hands. Of course, it made sense.” Once, while Janis was practicing Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 1 with Rosina, Josef came into the room, delighted to hear what he thought was Rosina performing a long-neglected concerto from her repertoire. “That wasn’t me,” she responded. “It was Byron.” The young Janis was mildly amused by his teacher’s mistake, but his mother was ecstatic.

Although Josef Lhévinne’s English was difficult for Janis to understand, the master teacher would never let a language barrier get the best of him. On one memorable occasion, Lhévinne dropped to the floor, prancing wildly around the room on all fours to demonstrate a particular quality of prestissimo for his young student. At times, during his lessons, the Lhévinnes would argue with each other over the interpretation of a passage. This taught the young protégé one of the most important lessons of his musical career. “Even great artists disagree,” Janis said.

“There was more than one way to play a piece of music. What freedom it gave me at that young age, and how much it helped me in my later studies when I needed to preserve my musical identity.”

During the Lhévinnes’ busy concert season, Janis studied with their student and associate Adele Marcus. She shared with Janis the perspectives of her teacher, Arthur Schnabel, particularly his thoughts on the classical and romantic elements in the music of Beethoven. From Marcus, Janis learned to keep present “the freedom of the heart” in Beethoven. He eventually made his orchestral debut with Toscanini’s NBC Symphony Orchestra at age 15.

Lessons With Horowitz

In 1944, Vladimir Horowitz was invited by the manager of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra to hear the 16-year-old pianist perform a concerto with conductor Lorin Maazel, then only 14. When Horowitz invited Janis to become his first student, the young pianist was elated. “He told me that one reason he wanted to work with me is because I had the same sort of nervous energy he had as a young man.” This sort of energy, which Janis is quick to distinguish from performance anxiety, gives some performers an edge when it is channeled properly. “Of course, Rubinstein didn’t have that same quality of nervous energy when he played.” Janis chuckled, “and it didn’t seem to hurt his career, did it?”

Horowitz’s offer, a tremendous honor for Janis, was qualified by the condition that Janis not perform for anyone else during that first year. He cautioned his new student that, when experimenting to find one’s own musical voice, the opinions of others will be confusing. To underscore his own philosophy, Horowitz never played for Janis during his lessons. He would often remind his student, “You want to be a first Janis, not a second Horowitz.” Janis later recalled, “I battled for some years before I became me.”

Janis cherished his teacher’s advice. Once Horowitz commented, “You must make the piano sing more. And colors...you paint well in watercolors but must paint more in oils.” Occasionally he would explain his teaching methods to Janis: “You can be a big romantic pianist and at first, you will exaggerate. Don’t worry. It’s easier to subtract from something good than to add.” Horowitz never dictated a particular interpretation, preferring to allow his student to find his own way. If he did not care for how Janis performed a piece, he would simply ask him to “think about it some more” and bring it back to the next lesson.

In addition to being an inspirational teacher and preeminent virtuoso, Horowitz was an endless source of anecdotes. He once related to Janis his experience of performing for Maurice Ravel. Horowitz was puzzled when
Ravel asked him to perform his _jeux d’eau_ completely without pedal, and the performer ultimately did not heed the composer’s advice. Years later, Janis had the opportunity to play Ravel’s piano in its original acoustic environment: a large Bechstein grand in a very small room. The sound was so sonorous that, in that location, no pedal was needed. For Janis, it was a good reminder that composers often adapt to the conditions at hand, and that performers must do the same.

After four years of collaboration and Janis’s Carnegie Hall debut, Horowitz ended the lessons. “Don’t play for me anymore,” he told his student. “Now you are free to make your own mistakes.” Janis embarked on a performance career that would ultimately span six decades.

**Unexpected Treasures**

Janis has always had a keen affinity for the music of Chopin. While visiting the home of George Sand in 1955, he unexpectedly met Sand’s granddaughter, and had the opportunity to play Chopin’s music for her. More than 30 years later, he met and performed for the great-great-grandson of Chopin’s sister, Ludwika. Later, a curator of Sand’s house in Nothalant would give Janis a number of priceless treasures including one of Chopin’s original death masks, and a locket containing the hair of both Chopin and Sand.

A surprise opportunity presented itself in 1967 with the discovery of unknown versions of two Chopin waltzes at the Château de Thoiry in France. Inside a trunk marked “old clothes,” Janis found two original 1833 manuscripts of the _Grande Valse Brillante in E-flat Major_, Op. 18, and the _Waltz in G-flat Major_, Op. 70, No. 1. Six years later, Janis discovered unknown versions of the same two pieces, composed a year earlier, this time at Yale University. “I was excited to be privy to Chopin’s interpretative and creative process, ever-changing right up until the moment of publication.” His recently remastered compilation CD, _The Chopin Collection_, includes unpublished versions of the two waltzes.

Janis is celebrated for his interpretation of music by a wide variety of composers, and many of his recordings have met with critical acclaim. He won the Beethoven Medal of the Harriet Cohen International Music Award for the best performance of two sonatas, the _Waldstein_ and Opus 109. He earned a Critics’ Choice Award from NPR’s _Performance Today_ for his recording _Byron Janis Plays Chopin_. He also won the Grand Prix du Disque and a Cannes Classical Award for his recordings of Prokofiev’s Piano Concerto No. 3 and Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 1.

**Overcoming Adversity**

When he was 11, Janis faced his first major challenge to becoming a performing artist. While chasing his older sister (“we must have been fighting”), he put his hand through a glass door, severing a tendon in the fifth finger of his left hand. Although that accident would render his fifth finger permanently numb, he learned to adapt to his circumstance. It was to be the first of many physical challenges.

In 1973, Janis began to experience swelling and stiffness in both hands and wrists. His diagnosis of psoriatic arthritis was one that would have devastated the careers of most pianists. The stiffness eventually progressed to pain, inflammation and fingers that occasionally refused to bend. In joints affected by this type of arthritis, pain is greatly aggravated by the pressure and repetitive motions associated with practice and performance.

He kept his condition a secret for 12 years, fearing the stigma of a disabled pianist. Instead, he focused on finding practical solutions at the keyboard. He frequently changed fingerings mid-performance, often distributing passages between the hands, depending on which joints were the most inflamed. He has endured five surgeries for arthritis, including a procedure that left
one thumb a half inch shorter than the other. "Doctors told me that I would no longer be able to play," Janis said, "but I refused to listen."

In 1985, he made his condition public with the help of First Lady Nancy Reagan. After a performance by Janis at the White House, the First Lady announced that Janis would become a new spokesperson for the Arthritis Foundation as its National Ambassador to the Arts. Since then, the Congressional Records of both the Senate and the House of Representatives have acknowledged Janis as "a musician, a diplomat and an inspiration."

As Teacher And Advocate

Although Byron Janis is best known as a paragon of virtuosity, he believes teaching is one of the most important and difficult areas of music. "Over the course of my career as a student, performer and teacher, I've realized that there is no 'right way' to teach the piano. But there is one cardinal rule that should be every teacher's credo: It is essential to allow talent its own creativity and not give in to the temptation to impose your own."

According to Janis, one of the most difficult aspects of performance to teach is rubato. Freedom of rhythm is, he believes, the greatest secret to an artistic performance. Metronomic playing guarantees a bad performance, because skillfully handled rhythm is never exactly accurate. "Music is not a lake. It does not sit still. It is a river or an ocean, one that moves continuously." He is quick to caution that musical freedom does not imply doing whatever one wishes to do. "Freedom without discipline is not freedom!"

Janis frequently works with young pianists who suffer from juvenile arthritis, offering inspiration and techniques to make practice easier for them. In 2011 he remarked, "I worked with two children yesterday who have arthritis all over their body...hands, wrists and legs. But incredibly, they don't feel sorry for themselves. These children have much more understanding and intelligence than most because they've gone through this suffering. It adds another layer or depth to their thinking."

As of 2011 Janis has chosen to play the Yamaha piano, he also serves as the first Presidential Advisor to the Yamaha Music and Wellness Institute, an organization that awarded him a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012. Barry Bitman, CEO of the institute, said of Janis, "I am profoundly moved by his unwavering resolve for inspiring others to move past their barriers. Despite the potentially career-ending diagnosis of psoriatic arthritis, he persevered against the odds and offers myriad personal experiences, insights and perspectives that must be shared."

Janis has also earned Juvenile Arthritis Awards of Excellence for his work with young piano students. According to the Arthritis Foundation, more than 300,000 children in the United States are stricken with this chronic disease. When working with these children at the piano, Janis will often demonstrate gentle stretches to increase flexibility, including exercises away from the piano. He often tells students, "Every day that we get up, it's a new day, and we are reborn. Anything can happen. Remember that."

A frequent advocate for the need for government funding for research, Janis believes scientists will one day find a cure for arthritis. Until then, as he stated at the White House in 1985, "The disease is still with me...I have it, but it does not have me."

Young At Heart

Janis, who describes himself as "85 years young," has enjoyed a 47-year marriage to artist Maria Cooper Janis, the daughter of legendary actor Gary Cooper. Together, they wrote his recent autobiography, Chopin and Beyond:

My Extraordinary Life in Music and the Paranormal. They have also collaborated together on various projects for stage and screen. When asked if there was anything he would especially like to share with MTNA members, Janis said, "Yes! You know, music is a tremendously healing thing. Scientists now know that playing an instrument affects the brain in a very positive fashion. Even the most ancient cultures understood that vibration could have a healing effect, and today there are thousands of music therapists in the U.S. Sometimes in our practice and teaching we forget about the healing power of music, but it is so important for all of us to remember."

Sources


