

Reflections on the Life of Willis Bennett (1937-2010): Unedited Remarks spoken at his Memorial Gathering, November 6, 2010

Little did I know, as a six year-old little fellow walking up the stairs of the Dmitrieff Studio over the Avalon Theater in October, 1957 to meet my prospective piano teacher, that I was going to meet the 20 year-old who would mold the entire future course of my life in so many ways.

Initially, Willis would open the doors to, and be my guide to the magical, profound and endlessly fascinating world of classical music. Then he single-handedly prepared me, not a naturally gifted pianist, for acceptance to the top music schools. Along the way, he became a hugely important role model in countless ways, including showing me how life could be enjoyed and savored.

These accomplishments were achieved after 12 years together, but there remained 41 more years of our staying in meaningful close touch, and continuously exchanging thoughts on music and life. I especially cherish the past decade when I never came to the Washington, DC area without spending an evening with Willis as my guest at whatever restaurant he was in the mood for that evening.

Let me share some of what my years of study were like with Willis from 1957-1969. The first two years I made stellar progress. But for the next six years, I spent much more time throwing a baseball than practicing the piano, and when I was at the piano, my efforts were haphazard. During these years, Willis knew just how to make demands and keep my respect without being a martinet and turning me off.

At age 14, I became intensely serious, and Willis proceeded to give me everything he had. I believe his generosity and efforts over the next four years were absolutely unprecedented and unparalleled. He would accept payment for only 90 minutes of instruction per week, and yet on Tuesday evenings my lessons ran from 7:30 until 11:00 p.m. and frequently later. Then on Saturday, we had an additional lesson for an hour or more. Most of the time we were working on repertoire and on my technic. But he always allowed time for me to expound on whatever was transpiring in my life or was on my teenage mind.

He frequently loaned me his scores of the great piano masterworks which I dreamed of one day learning. He took me to countless recitals and concerts. He presented me in several public recitals which were extremely valuable for my education. But he never exploited me for his own reputation—instead, always aiming to do what was in my best interest.

He always took my numerous telephone calls when I was discouraged and thinking I was not playing as well as I ought to be at that point. Whether it took minutes or hours, he did not end the call until he was convinced I was feeling better.

It is not surprising that many years later I answered a question put to me by the Indiana University piano faculty as I did. When I was applying to enter the doctoral program, they said, “You have studied with many famous teachers of piano. Who was the best?” My response was that I owed most everything to someone they would not have heard of—Willis Bennett—who built me from scratch and guided me from ages 6-

18, giving me my entire foundation. Others would perceptively ice the cake, but Willis was the one who baked the cake.

For those of you who are not involved in music, I would like to mention a few aspects of Willis which I believe are highly unique and quite extraordinary:

1) Most all highly advanced pianists began study at a young age. Willis was a late starter.

2) Most piano teachers of any significance have conservatory or university music school training. Willis' academic studies ended with high school, with no conservatory training at all to speak of.

He was, in many ways, a self-made pianist and teacher. But he did not achieve this in isolation. He showed the tremendous initiative and courage to seek out the most highly regarded teachers in the world and take lessons with them. At age 22, he went to France to study for a summer, and even performed for the legendary Nadia Boulanger. A year or so later, he commenced the first of several trips to New York to take lessons with the highly esteemed Rosina Lhevinne, whose star pupil, Van Cliburn, had won the Tchaikovsky Competition only a few years before. At age 31, he began summer study with Frank Mannheimer, which continued until Mr. Mannheimer's death. At age 36, he approached Adele Marcus, the most sought after teacher at the Juilliard School, for lessons. She was perceived by many to be very difficult to get along with. But after one lesson, she invited Willis to keep returning for more lessons, and, over the course of the rest of her life, she made him a close confidante on many personal matters.

Willis was always growing—right to his last day. He never stopped seeking to learn. His curiosity was insatiable—for new repertoire that he did not know, new CD's, new performers, and new editions. A few weeks ago, I was teaching a student who expressed an interest in learning a recently composed piece. My knowledge is rather weak in that area, and so I picked up the phone and called Willis, who provided us, off the top of his head, a long list of candidates.

Performing did not come easily to Willis. He was never comfortable performing from memory, though he sometimes did it. Nerves were a battle for him as they are for many of us. But he pushed himself to do solo recitals because he knew it was good for him to have the goal and challenge. I can still remember him in his early 20's performing the Beethoven Sonata, op. 54, and the Schumann Symphonic Etudes. How inspired I was by seeing my teacher perform. In his 30's, he learned the very difficult Moskowski Concerto to perform with orchestra—a work which is almost never performed. A few years later, he performed the MacDowell 2nd Concerto under Izler Solomon at Wolf Trap. On several occasions, he publicly accompanied singers, including the renowned Hugues Cuenod.

Willis was even an impresario—establishing the Lyceum Concert Series in Alexandria. This brought outstanding performers to Alexandria, giving them a chance to perform, and audiences the opportunity to hear the artists he had personally selected. Most performers and teachers are not capable of efficiently running a concert series with all the administrative demands. But Willis was fully up to the task.

But what really underlay Willis' success as a teacher, player, and human being? I believe it was Love. Willis was a giver—a selfless giver. He had natural instincts and intuition that guided him in all he did.

His musical instincts were phenomenal. He was a true musician, who had an Image and Ideal of what truly great, genuine music making comprises. He knew the piano, and how to get it to speak with sensitivity, warmth, and Love. He knew how to make it truly sing.

His own playing was very unique. It reflected what he evidenced as a person—beauty, warmth, gentleness, and tenderness. But it was not lacking in fullness, richness, and power. He stroked the keys and coaxed the sound from the instrument. But he also knew how to exploit its strength. It is wonderful that he compiled some of his earlier performances onto CD's late in life. But it was being in the live presence of his playing that one was most touched. The ecstatic response by the audience at the end of his Scriabin group on the CD testifies to the genuine, communicative effect of his playing.

His instincts, intuition, and Love were what lay behind his phenomenally successful teaching career. Just as he deeply listened to and truly heard what was in the music, he also truly listened to and heard what was in every human being whom he taught.

And he instinctively and intuitively knew just how to respond to each and every one of those varied human beings he taught over his 57 year career. And he taught the whole gamut—tiny children, teenagers, college students, adults in their middle age, and adults at the end of their lives. He could relate to, and meet the needs of the least talented, and was able to make lessons a positive experience even for those who were rarely able to practice, and in some cases, children who chose to practice very little.

But he could also solve the most complex problems of the most advanced pianist. It was a meaningful postscript to my years of study with Willis as a child when, in more recent years, I took several difficult pieces to him for his advice. Both of our manes had long since turned white, but just as 40 years before, Willis always had the answers for me.

But it was his presence and Love that were his most meaningful gifts to all of us. Willis was a nurturer, and it is not surprising that he took such great delight in cooking for people—and what a gourmet chef he was! Many people probably do not know that he authored a cook book entitled A Keyboard of Culinary Pleasures which was even illustrated with his own drawings. It was never meant for mass consumption—just another way of sharing with his friends something they might enjoy and derive benefit from. That memorable annual Christmas tree was motivated by the same kind of sharing.

He empathized. He gave one confidence in all aspects of life, and helped one believe in himself. Despite his awareness of our weaknesses, he saw the good in everyone and brought out the best in everyone. When you left his presence, you always felt better able to deal with life because you had his unconditional Love behind you.

I think of what Willis gave, not only to me, but also to my mother, who began lessons after I had left home. She was not an especially talented or advanced pianist. But Willis validated her and provided her a belief in herself and immense joy in playing the piano. When I was growing up, my father always said, “Though we are very frugal, I always take great pleasure in writing out the check to Willis every month.” To this very day, my father remains continuously grateful, not only for what Willis gave his son, but also his wife, and also for how Willis enriched his own life through their friendship. He would like to be with us today, but physical difficulties make that impractical.

Willis’ calm, peaceful, relaxed demeanor was always therapeutic. He was always upbeat and optimistic. I found it a continuing inspiration that he faced his illnesses of the past 15 years or so with such good spirits. He always seemed able to hide his pain and discomfort. He rarely ever shared any praise that was given him, but I did get out of him that one of his doctors said that he had never seen any of his patients absorb such a serious diagnosis with such calmness as Willis, and that when Willis left the hospital after his pneumonia a few years ago, several nurses said he was their favorite patient ever.

Willis was a teacher in the broadest sense of the word. He not only taught music—he loved life, he lived life, and through example and advice, he taught life. One of the rewards of being a teacher is that one’s work lives for eternity. It becomes a part of everyone privileged to receive it, and is then further transmitted on to future generations. Willis may not have been a biological parent, but his children are spread throughout the country and world.

I am deeply saddened by our loss, but I believe Willis would have wished us to follow the advice of the poet Wordsworth who wrote, in his “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.”

“We will grieve not—rather, find strength in what remains behind.”

I am continuously so full of gratitude that I was privileged to have Willis in my life for 53 years—as a second father, big brother, role model, revered teacher, best man at my wedding, friend, and sharer of so many fun times together. I believe he would want each of us to dwell on all the fun times we each shared together with him.

George Fee