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Transcript:

00;00;01;11 - 00;00;10;12

I'm wondering, what piqued your interest in piano as a child? Was there someone who inspired you? Something that you saw that got you interested in it?

Piano was already in my house when I was born, and when I was a kindergartner, we all had to sing the national anthem at school every single day. So when I went home, one day, I just started to pick out the tune, and my mom thought, hey, maybe this kid has some talent. So that's how we got started.

00;00;43;10 - 00;00;49;09

And when you say the national anthem at school, so you, in kindergarten, you were already living in the US?

00;00;49;24 - 00;00;51;08

No, that was in Taiwan.

Oh. [Laughs]

00;00;55;00 - 00;01;21;13

Yeah. My mom had a dream one day, that her baby had the ears of an elephant. And that was before I was born, right. So as soon as I was born, she quickly asked the nurse, "is [are] her ears okay?" Then later she realized that, "Oh, maybe she has a musical ear."

00;01;21;27 - 00;01;22;16

Aww, that's really sweet. Following up on tha, how did your mom support you when you were learning piano? And how was that different from how your dad supported you?

00;01;34;00 - 00;02;08;25

Okay, that's a great question. My mom, she was Taiwanese, and my dad was Caucasian, originally from California. So they have pretty different styles of disciplining us. So my mom would sit by me when I practice piano, and making sure I do the right things, and she had a stick in her hand, because I was a free spirit: I wanted to play, I did not want to practice. But she made sure I did my part. And then my dad, on the other hand, he gives me a lot of applause and encouragement, reinforcement, so I have probably the good balance between the discipline and the encouragement.

00;02;33;17 - 00;02;39;06

Yeah. And is that something you try to pass on to your students when teaching, having a good balance of both?

00;02;39;14 - 00;02;40;06

Yes. I always remember, try to say something encouraging. It's very easy as a teacher to just pick on things that are not quite right. But then I have to remember that, most important thing is to have fun with music and get the enjoyment out of it and not be overwhelmed by these details. So, yes, I do try to do both.

00;03;13;00 - 00;03;28;04

When you said when you wanted to play instead of practicing piano, did that start to change at some point? As a student, what did music mean to you and did you aspire to be a career?

00;03;28;23 - 00;03;58;18

When I was in elementary school, I was in a music school and there was an exam everybody took. And all of a sudden, one day I got called out and stood in front of the whole school and I was receiving this paper. It was an honor that I got first prize. So for, for the, for the test and that sense of honor felt really good. And I didn't, at that time, didn't know what that meant. But later I saw how happy my mom was, how happy my dad was. And so I just kept going and going. And eventually I remember playing Mozart sonatas and just the joy of that music somehow resonated in me. It gave me this sense almost like a mini opera, like I'm playing a theater music, and I could see some characters come alive in my imagination, just hearing the music and trying to conduct this little play in my mind.

00;04;41;08 - 00;05;19;01

And it just brought so much joy. So starting from that point on, I think Mozart really unlocked something very special, the meaning of this joy, transcending joy, despite how I felt at that moment, just, when I start playing, that joy just somehow lifted me and so that was the beginning. And when I was 13, I got an opportunity to go to Europe to study in the summer festival. And in the summer festival, I got to hear this amazing string quartet perform Beethoven's last string quartets. And, you know, Beethoven, he couldn't hear when he was composing those pieces. And in the middle of the performance, I just sensed that there was like this elderly man who went through so much in life, and he's turning to us and telling us, keep going, and there is this encouragement from somebody who had been through so much. And that that sense of positive encouragement just touched me so deeply. And that was the point where I decided this is something I would like to do. I saw the meaning of music's touching the heart without words. There's this direct channel and bringing something so beautiful into the soul and the spirit. So that was kind of the journey turning point. Yeah.

00;06;32;10 - 00;07;02;19

When you said touching a heart without words, that reminded me of Gabriel Faure's, I think it was Romance Without Words or something, when Ella played it.

That was beautiful. One of my other questions was, who or what do you perform for? And I think you sort of answered that: to kind of just bring joy to everyone who listens and sort of create like a better world too, right?

00;07;04;17 - 00;07;09;19

Can you imagine a world without music or even watching a movie without music?

No.

00;07;12;28 - 00;07;25;25

It also sounds like there's a visual component for you that you try to imagine, like the story, the plot in a piece of music, and that helps you kind of embody it.

00;07;26;12 - 00;08;07;11

Yes. You know, composers share their life with us through notes. It's like writers share their life journey with us through words or poets through words, and then artists through their colors, the painting. And for us are these notes. And there are so many, in romantic period, the composers, a lot of the time, their music almost lead[s] us on a journey. And then this journey of course, they're never just smooth from beginning to the end. Their highs and their lows and their struggles and tough times, so when you hear these things in the music like the tension and how it resolves at the end, sometimes it just describes something. It could be something visual or something emotional. Or a mood that, that or even just a temperature, you know?

00;08;44;23 - 00;08;47;22

So something that is universal in the human experience.

I just started wondering, have you ever tried to compose something yourself? I've seen some videos of you playing improvisations, like, the Christmas one.

Oh, yes, I do improvise. I wouldn't say I'm a composer. I did try to compose when I was a little girl, and I did not get the encouragement. So, I kind of regret that I didn't continue on with the composition. We did have some theory assignments encouraging us to compose some inventions like Bach. But I enjoy improvising and I have a CD where I use all the nursery tunes and combine it with classical tunes, famous classical piece, and then fusion, and together. And my hope in that CD was that children, when they listened to these pieces, eventually, if they take on piano, they would recognize these themes and say, "Oh, wait, I know this theme", right? And so improvisation is less of a structured thing. It's more of, the inspiration comes, and you do it, and then there's some new patterns, and you weave it together.

00;10;25;19 - 00;10;26;01

So composing, since that's something you wish you could have learned or worked more on, do you see yourself working with that in the future? In the next few years, is that possible?

Perhaps!

00;10;46;10 - 00;11;06;22

Like, our Tristan, so good! I guess I'll ask some questions about how you prepare for a performance. Okay. So, please describe your process for preparing for a performance and anything that you think about or try to visualize.

00;11;07;13 - 00;11;39;02

So, we all start with learning one note at a time. So they're the process of, very bare, just getting to know the music. And then after a while you get to know the music and you start to think, I think at the same time, then you start researching more about the composer and what the composer is doing around the time, when he was composing this music. And then, there might be some inspiration that ties the two together, seeing what he's experiencing and what's happening in the music. And also it's very enlightening to read the letters, the journals and even others, that talk about the composer during that time. And then, that understanding helps enhance the meaning of this process, and I start playing for people, because it's very different when you have a piece of music that you learn by yourself within a practice room, than sharing it with other people. And then through many little failures here and there, you get to strengthen those weak spots. I would say, two weeks before the performance, that's where I'm already very excited to play, and have it memorized and looking forward.

00;12;54;05 - 00;13;36;26

So I try not to peak too early because you know how you learn a piece of music, it's like a journey, right? There is an excitement that's building off and you get to know more and then get to find and then at the point is that, "Oh, I really want to play and share this." And so then the concert time comes, and every time it's a little bit different because of the environment, the people you play for, and how long you've been with this piece also makes a difference.

After a performance, how do you feel when you maybe say a temporary goodbye to the piece, or do you keep it going?

00;13;48;27 - 00;14;19;12

Oh, there are more projects to be done, so, right? Let it rest a little bit and then continue it. Sometimes you get to play one piece in a few years and then within a lifetime maybe you get to play it 10 times, 20 times, and that piece just becomes like a best friend. Yeah. Like you're reading a book and you put it down and then after a while you bring that book back and then you read it and you see something new.

Yeah. Yeah. I think I can relate to what you described, and I think that piece for me is the Maple Leaf.

I guess from my own experience and from talking to a lot of other students, it's quite a common thing to be really, really nervous before a performance. Do you think it's become any easier to overcome the mental game of any expectations that are placed on you for delivering something really meaningful, or has it presented new challenges?

Mhm. All of the above. You thought it through. I think, being a performer, I remember hearing Yo-Yo Ma said that the butterfly will never go away. Before the concert there is always this little momentum where the adrenaline is going and you have this little stomach thing going, but the difference with more and more performance opportunity is that you learn to embrace it. So instead of allowing this, perhaps this adrenaline to go in the wrong, steer it in the wrong direction, you embrace it and let that be like a friend. So, for instance, and also to really focus my mindset in the right place, I'm learning that too. Before, you know how we're worried about who's in [the] audience and on Facebook, I posted my concert, "Oh, somebody is coming. Oh, no, that person is coming!"; you are all worried and, but to come down to just focusing on what is in front of me and, and really soaking into that music and also not making the performance a big deal because there shouldn't be big or small performances. There should be all the same. They are all equally important, but they're not like [a] life or death situation.

So just take it as a natural, just like I'm walking into my practice room, I'm doing this, and I'm sharing this with my friends. And I think that mindset really help[s] relieve a lot of tension because if you set so much expectation on that one event, then you could hardly breathe. You're too afraid of messing it up. So the thing is, just take it easy. Not a big deal. If I make a mistake, nobody dies, right? And enjoy the whole journey.

I remember you telling me. I still have to learn that!

00;17;42;26 - 00;18;14;06

And I remember during a competition, my teacher said to me, "Sandra, if you win the competition, you're still the same person the next day. It doesn't make you a better person. And if you don't win the competition, you're still the

same person. It doesn't make you less worthy." So I think that is also [a] very important thing that the event doesn't make you greater or less worthy. It's that consistency of striving for what's better, that journey. Keep growing. Step by step.

Yeah.

Is that concept something, or is it something that you observe often that your students learn in the time that they spend learning from you? That is a strange question, I apologize. I guess, speaking from a personal standpoint, it still is really hard for me to learn that lesson, so I'm just wondering, based on what you've observed from other students, how well they absorb it themselves.

Oh, okay. You know, the thing about performing is we don't get to do it a lot, right? It's not like every day we get to practice performing for somebody. But if you want to get good at something, the more you do it, the more you get a hang of it, right? And I do believe performing, I can see the students that, they work at it, using more opportunity to play, and then they learn how to embrace it and then I also get to see how they get more and more comfortable with [a] certain piece on stage. So I do believe that process needs to be also learned, how we grow up on stage too. It's also part of the practicing.

That might be one of the reasons that music is integral to children's development, or teaching them not only the joy of sound, but also determination.

00;20;21;22 - 00;20;30;02

Patience. And it's okay to mess up, right? It's not a big deal.

Speaking of students, I think I remember that you told me your very first student was in Taiwan when you started teaching for the first time. Do you remember how that felt? Any lasting impressions?

00;20;50;08 - 00;21;28;14

[Laughs] First, I was not prepared to be a teacher at that time. I was teaching as how I was taught so I had no idea how the student was perceiving my messages. I was just trying to dump all the information that I know as much as possible on them, and they could be just totally clueless [about] what I'm talking about, because I did not consider their level, their understanding, their vocabulary. So I remember one time I was teaching a young student, and there was this note that had a little dot. And that usually means short. You know, you let go of the note a little bit quicker. And so I was trying to explain to the kid, this is staccato, that means short so you want to bounce it, letting go quick.

00;21;55;06 - 00;22;18;24

Okay so the next week, the kid comes back and it's still very long and somehow I said, "Can you remember? With the dot, that means just let go quick." Okay. And then the next week comes, the note is still there. So week after week, the mom got so frustrated that Mom jumped up from the seat and said, "Take your hands off! Teacher told you many times, it's short!" Anyway, so the following week, I had a friend who came and I asked him to come and give a masterclass. So the kid played, and of course, the teacher observed that he didn't let go. So what the teacher said was, he asked the kid, "Is there any insect that you're afraid of?" And then sure enough, this kid says, "Yeah, I don't like spiders." And then the teacher said, "Okay!" So he drew these little spiders underneath that note with the dot. "And then whenever you go there, you want to really bounce away, because otherwise there's a spider beneath that note. And he would jump up and bite you. And you don't want to get a spider bite, right?"

00;23;17;14 - 00;23;47;19

So you can imagine this kid, when he goes to that note, he'd just go like this! He totally jumped away. So that taught me so much about speaking and understanding my audience. Who am I trying to communicate with? And using their language, what they can understand, and then lead them from there.

00;23;49;01 - 00;23;52;20

Out of curiosity, how young was this kid?

He was six or seven. Very young. Yeah. And I was teaching like I was taught in college. So it did not work.

Do you still keep in touch with the kid today?

No. Well, I did get to see them two years ago before COVID. Yeah, there was a party.

And that brought back memories, I'm sure. That's really cute.

You said that you took on the way you were taught in college and tried to translate that into your teaching at the beginning. So while you were in college at Peabody, did you know that teaching was something you wanted to go into?
No. I always wanted to play, and so I did not go through the DMA program, the doctrine of Musical Art. I took the route of competitions, and I was preparing - I really wanted to be a performer. However, there's very few performers that can get away from teaching, right? Everybody needed to teach. And so after I graduated, I needed to make money to support myself, to get more lessons, to prepare me for competitions, and that's how I started the teaching. So I did not enjoy it much, but I grew to love it so much. It's that relationship with the students and seeing growth and seeing how the music take[s] place and how the students fell in love with music and take that into their life. And that just brought so much joy.

00;26;10;03 - 00;26;53;04

I still remember, two years ago, my mother passed away and I was quarantining in Taiwan, but we were doing online lessons while I was in the hotel room - and having this heavy heart, meeting with my students, every one of them, just felt like the greatest comfort at that time. That, it really strengthened me, that I had no idea the meaning of having this relationship with student that carried me through my difficult moment. So now it becomes a community and it becomes perhaps a greater love for me than performing. And greater meaning too.

Sounds like it was kind of an unexpected thing, but I'm really happy that it brings you joy.

Yes, yes. Great, great joy. Uh huh.

00;27;24;02 - 00;27;47;15

Well, because each student is really different.. I know you keep students for many years. Take Chloe, for example. Kindergarten, through probably high school, and I'm sure she's changed a lot. How do you adapt to the way you teach to the changes you see in one student over time?

00;27;48;24 - 00;28;19;29

It's probably like parenting, right? When you deal with little kids, you're telling them not to do this, and then you got to be careful, watch, there are many things you're reinforcing, the habits, the good habits. And then, when they develop this good routine, this good discipline, then you start letting go of those things, and then you start [to] lead them into a different level. Perhaps more about principle or interpretation, understanding of style, listening to various performances and absorb all the styles from [the] symphony, chamber music. So there is so much more to offer later on. So yes, there are differences. So for the younger kids, you got to make sure the metronome is there and then the practice, the habits, and there are certain things about the hand, but then later you just build on that.

00;29;12;14 - 00;29;22;17

Oh, yeah. Something else I'm curious about. Since you started teaching at the San Francisco Conservatory, how has that been different from [teaching from home]?

Yeah, I really enjoy teaching at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music Pre-college. First of all, it is an environment - a musical environment. And it's not just one-on-one coming, right? You have a whole group of students coming into the school on Saturday, under age 18. They're all there that day, and they're doing musicianship class. They're doing their chamber music groups and they're doing all various things about music, and jazz improvisation. And so, there is this environment, and then the library that [you] can find music, sheet music, biographies, books on music and there is just this, almost like a musical palace for us. So the studios are great, two grand, nine-foot concert grand and the seven foot, and also the concert hall. So every week, students get to sign up and play in these concerts that are in these professional concert hall[s] on top quality piano and state of the art building[s]. And then you have, then kids get to have friends that love music, right? So they're excited. I'm excited. And I get to have really wonderful musical colleagues, so that's also great.

It sounds like an amazing experience.

00;31;15;03 - 00;31;29;25

It is amazing. And it's only a walking distance to the Davies Symphony Hall.

Oh!

Yes, so I've been benefiting so much from it.

00;31;41;03 - 00;32;06;05

I think you answered most of my questions and beyond. Well, I guess I'd like to conclude with - any words of advice that you'd like to share with people who love music, or just for general life, approaching life and enjoying happiness?

00;32;07;13 - 00;32;46;05

So I think, looking back, there are many struggles, and especially being a musician, there is always self-doubt. "I'm not good enough and I need to do more", these things. And my husband, when we got married, he just said, "Sandra, you need to start thinking you're the pianist. And not just some time you're the pianist." And I think that kind of unlocked something in me, that if I want to be a pianist and I know I am born to be a pianist, I *am* a pianist, and I start living in that lifestyle. I start breathing like a pianist. And somehow that mindset taught me something very different. So when I play, there is the confidence of "I'm the pianist" and so that was, first believe what you're born for, right? You know what is your special gift that you have, that you know deep down. And I remember as a little kid, I already knew music was that special thing for me. But that confidence thing didn't come easy. Yeah, it was there but then when I was in high school or went to Peabody and seeing other people, then I shy away from it. So that was one thing. And second thing is, if you know and you believe this is your path, although it's going to be difficult and very tough at times that you don't know where the opportunity is going to be. This is different than having an engineering job: you can schedule your calendar, you know you're going to work. But with the concerts, you never know where the next concert is. People call you and then you, you write it down, right? Yeah. So sometimes you have a lot in one month and sometimes you have several months that's nothing, or one year that's really crazy, and then another year; it's not in your control. But just, there are seasons, and I think we just have to have the faith and keep going, and whatever the season is, if it is a busy season, you thrive and you give. If it is a quiet season, you rest and then you restore and then you learn new things. So I am also learning that rhythm of the different seasons. I remember the struggle, perhaps, biggest struggle is that, not knowing where this is going to lead me to, I think that was the hardest struggle, just not having an assurance of where this is going to, and if I'm going to make it or not. But now looking back, I am so grateful that I have a very supportive husband that just kept me going and then nudging me and giving all the support whenever opportunities come, he's fully supportive, always there. And then the road just started opening up. So don't worry about the future. Take one step at a time and do your very best to nurture that gift, no matter what.

00;36;22;17 - 00;36;33;25

Good advice. Did you ever try to plan for a Plan B?

I don't have a Plan B! This is the only thing I know. [Laughs] So it was easy. But my plan B was housewife. But we didn't have children, so that plan B didn't work.

00;36;47;10 - 00;36;48;28

Yeah, I'm glad Plan A worked. I'm very glad.