

Conversations with Vivian Fine—A Maverick Tradition

by Tim Brookes

Quadrille, Spring 1986, Bennington, Vermont

(including excerpts from “A Celebration of the Music of Vivian Fine,” produced for National Public Radio by the International League of Women Composers in 1986. Fine was interviewed by Susan Cook, then professor of music at Middlebury College)

Vivian Fine credits three women with recognizing her musical abilities at an early age and helping her develop them. The first was an aunt who lived a few blocks away in Chicago and owned a piano. At the age of three, Vivian was fascinated by the instrument.

“I didn’t bang it. I would touch one note and listen to it. I had never even heard a pianist; I had just heard this piano.”

Fine, now widely recognized as one of America’s leading composers and described by Gunther Schuller as “in this grand old American maverick tradition of... Ives, Harry Partch and John Cage,” is the subject of “Vivian Fine,” a program produced by Ev Grimes for the International League of Women Composers in celebration of International Women’s Day on March 8th. The program will feature a selection of Fine’s music spanning more than fifty years, starting with “Four Songs,” a piece for voice and string quartet she composed in 1932 at the age of nineteen.

“My sister already had violin lessons – she was three years older than I was – and then one day I came home – I was a very mild and equable child –and I suddenly threw a fit. I threw myself on the threshold between two rooms and I started screaming and kicking. And what was it? I wanted piano lessons. And I remember Piatagorsky once told me this can happen with gifted children: they have a fit. It’s a passion. And so my mother said, ‘All right, all right, child,’ and she said, ‘We’ll get the piano.’”

This was easier said than done. They couldn’t afford to buy a piano, and so her parents had to lug the piano over from her aunt’s house. Vivian had no idea what sacrifices her parents were making for her; she still doesn’t know where they found the money. But although her father had to leave school at eight and her mother at 14 to go out to work, both believed in reading and the study of music.

The next woman in the developing pianist’s life turned out to be something less than a positive influence. Vivian’s mother soon realized that her daughter would need a professional piano teacher.

“But there was no money. There was this neighborhood teacher who went around from house to house, I think she got 50 cents a lesson—this was in the Twenties. Her name was Miss Rosen. Miss Rosen said she didn’t teach any child until they were eight. Mama said ‘Please come in and hear her.’”

Miss Rosen was duly impressed and agreed to teach the prodigy, who was already playing and memorizing pieces at the age of five, but the relationship didn't work out very well.

"Her method of teaching was to hit me over the hand with a flyswatter if I played the wrong note. I don't know about Miss Rosen," she added drily.

When she was twelve, Vivian began to study harmony with the woman who would develop the child's genius, introduce her to the world of international music and help her befriend some of the country's leading composers: Ruth Crawford Seeger. Within a few months, Seeger asked her to compose a piece for piano, and from that moment "nothing interested me other than composing music."

"She was a composer, and she was writing very bold, innovative music. We didn't know the expression 'role model' back then, but she certainly was a role model for me. I didn't think of her as an example though; she was just a person in my life who meant a great deal to me."

Her mother, meanwhile, was still playing a crucial role in supporting Vivian's music and at the same time, perhaps, helping to reinforce the maverick streak. After a brilliant elementary school career, at 14 Vivian decided to drop out of high school.

"It was an awful high school. There were fifty students in it and I wasn't learning anything. The point at which I decided I didn't want to go to school any more was when we were asked to memorize the number of post offices in the United States. It was a class call Civics. A small voice said to me 'I don't want to do this.'"

Vivian, who had read Victor Hugo at nine and almost all of Dickens by the age of eleven, was the kind of child some mothers would have pushed towards glittering scholarly success, but Mrs. Fine recognized her daughter's needs more clearly.

"I didn't tell my mother I didn't want to go to school, I just started not going." Taking piano and composition lessons and reading at home, "I had my own music and art school right at home. It was absolutely the wisest thing I could have done, and I would spend four or five hours a day composing. That's where I got the habit, and my own instinct was that this was exactly the time to do it, not wait till I went to college or something. Actually, my parents couldn't possibly have afforded to send me to college."

Her parents, meanwhile, were willing accomplices.

"I remember my mother hid me in a closet one day when the truant officer came by."

Living with a prodigy who was picking up Crawford Seeger's modern composition styles was no easy task.

“Both my father and my mother were infinitely patient. We had to move several times due to my constant playing of the piano, especially those modern compositions I was writing. They were very dissonant. Neighbors would object to this going on for five or six hours a day.” Her parents patiently moved every time, dragging the family and the piano from apartment to apartment. “They were fantastic. I could never have been as good a parent as they were.”

“Without my mother I wouldn’t be a musician,” said the member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. “You need the involvement of a parent. It’s not just saying ‘That’s nice darling’ – the parents has to become really involved.”