

A Profile of Kevin Kenner *by Hanna Saxon*

Every year America's music schools graduate an increasing number of talented musicians, all eagerly seeking to fulfill the career goals for which their years of dedication, discipline and seemingly endless hours of practice prepared them. However, launching a career as a concert artist requires more than an innate musicality and a technique honed to digital perfection. It also requires appreciation and support from the private sector and music organizations to help open the doors of opportunity.



Kevin Kenner

These doors open mostly after some degree of public recognition occurs. So far, this seems to rest, very often, on participation and honors-winning in major competitions. Many too many new competitions have been formed (too often self-serving) and they have diluted the impact of and chances for success for young artists. Yet, the competition form remains one of the most effective ways for gifted talent to be recognized. But make no mistake. Winning a competition is only the beginning of a new stage of tremendous effort. Nobody has better demonstrated these qualities than the gifted and recognized world-class American pianist - Kevin Kenner. Kevin's interest in music began when he was just a few years old, but as his parents recognized his deep interest in music, they arranged for him to study with a leading piano teacher.

In Kevin's own words:

... When my sister Melissa started taking piano lessons, I lay underneath the piano to take in all the sonorities. I asked my mother if I could have a lesson, too. She thought I was too young and that I would get tired of it. ... But after the first year of study she could see I really enjoyed studying piano. So she engaged Melissa's teacher, Eugene Prather, an exceptionally gifted and kind teacher whom I will always remember fondly. He treated me with great respect and he called me 'Governor.' ... By then, I was seven years old and I really enjoyed myself.

In 1980, at age 17, although he was still studying, his great talent was understood by his master teacher of the past 5 years, Krzysztof Brzuza. Kevin began working in a new milieu taking the competition route to try to achieve public recognition. He applied for entrance and was accepted as a candidate for the 1980 International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, Poland. This was a tremendous experience for him, when he won a Certificate of Recognition in that prestigious competition. This set him firmly on the competition trail. For the next ten years, he entered many competitions and won many awards. He combined these activities while continuing to study with master teachers, amongst them the great Ludwik Stefanski in Krakow, Poland.

When in 1989 he entered the Van Cliburn Competition and was passed over for top honors, in spite of excellent critical notices, he felt discouraged and decided to go back to California to teach. This is a feeling experienced by many great musicians. Leonard Bernstein expressed it for all when he said, "Everyone called me an 'overnight success.' What they didn't realize was that it took me 19 years of study and work to become an overnight success!" Kevin can say the same. He began studying at age 7, but it took him 20 years to achieve national and international recognition!

Happily, he had been persuaded to enter just one more competition before going back to California. He entered the 1990 Chopin Foundation's American National Chopin Piano Competition and was voted one of the top prizes. This included automatic acceptance into the International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, Poland, the oldest and most prestigious piano competition in the world. Thus, after ten years, he returned to the Warsaw Competition at age 27 to win the Top Prize. The rest is history!

His career was launched! He began with his prize-winning tour of Poland, a tour of Japan and a number of concerts in other countries. Since then, he has become so sought-after that he criss-crosses the globe every year to both great critical and audience acclaim. International critics have called him "... a world-class American pianist."

Kevin is not only an outstanding artist. He is also a very happy man. During his studies in Poland he met and fell in love with a beautiful English pianist, Sonia Dembinska, who reciprocated that love. Kevin's own account follows:

"... During a 1988 tour of Poland I was introduced to my wife-to-be Sonia Dembinska. Sonia attended my recital at the Ostrogski Castle in Warsaw. A couple of days later, she happened to be in Lodz visiting her grandmother (Sonia is half-Polish and has many relatives in Poland) and attended my appearance as soloist with the local orchestra. I was really surprised that this beautiful girl would attend two of my concerts and stay on to chat with me. A music critic must have sensed our enchantment with each other when he wrote two days later, 'Presently [Kevin] concertizes in many areas of the world, traveling as we could observe with his charming young sweetheart!' I suppose it was our fate to be together, and we were married two years later in London."



Kevin with his wife Sonia and twins, Antonina and Isabela

"They were married several months before the 1990 International Chopin Competition and have not only lived happily since then, but have added a pair of beautiful little twin girls to their family and to their happiness.

We anticipate, with great pleasure, Kevin Kenner's return to Miami in October 1999 to perform a concert for the Chopin Foundation as part of the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Chopin's death. This will be one of the highlights of our festival year honoring the great composer - Fryderyk Chopin.

We anticipate, with great pleasure, Kevin Kenner's return to Miami in October 1999 to perform a concert for the Chopin Foundation as part of the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Chopin's death. This will be one of the highlights of our festival year honoring the great composer - Fryderyk Chopin.

Kevin cutting his birthday cake during Hanna Saxon's introduction at his May 17, 1998 Miami concert Elyse Levine age 11 at her very first concert – thrilled by her meeting with pianist Kevin Kenner at his May 17, 1998 concert

To record just a few of the many, many reviews Kevin has received:



Kevin cutting his
birthday cake during
Hanna Saxon's
introduction at his May
17, 1998 Miami concert

Independent, London, England

"[Kevin Kenner's] performance of Chopin's complete Preludes showed the most generous imaginable range of expression, strong emotional commitment and the kind of balanced musical judgment very few artists achieve." The

"His recital's strength reaffirmed his stature as one of the finest American pianists to come along in years ... consider Kenner's treatment of Ravel's 'Valses nobles et sentimentales,' as exquisite a suite of miniatures as the composer ever crafted for piano. One would be hard-pressed to find another young American who could conjure up its turn-of-the-century French flavor as persuasively as Kenner..." Chicago Tribune

"With his great gifts, Kenner led into the magic realm of the Chopin Ballades... Kenner's interpretation was convincing proof of the performer's innate art... It was self-contained playing in which the poetically telling charm of these pieces blossomed forth in their finest nuances." Alpener Zeitung, Kempten, Germany

Hanna Saxon is the Past President of the Chopin Foundation and of the South Florida Council. Mrs. Saxon created the prestigious Dimitri Mitropoulos Music Competition and served as its Executive Director under Leonard Bernstein, its chairman, for fifteen years. Mrs. Saxon is a past Vice President of the Florida International University.



Elyse Levine age
11 at her very
first concert –
thrilled by her
meeting with
pianist Kevin
Kenner at his
May 17, 1998
concert