

Peter Takács—A Half Century Celebrated

by Stephanie Manning

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Photo credit: Tanya Rosen-Jones

Peter Takács may be retiring from Oberlin, but that doesn't mean he'll stop coming to campus anytime soon.

“They can't get rid of me quite so easily,” the piano professor says, with a knowing smile. After all, he and his wife live in town, and there are still performances and recording sessions to look forward to.

Still, this spring marks the official conclusion of Takács' tenure, after an incredible 48 years of teaching. Many of

his former students from around the world are set to convene— either live or via video—for a celebratory concert in Warner Concert Hall on May 12. A reception and Piano Play-a-thon will round out the festivities that day.

Born in Bucharest, Romania, Takács studied piano in France and the United States before accepting his teaching job at Oberlin in 1976. Described by The New York Times as “a marvelous pianist,” he has performed and given master classes around the world.

Even in the midst of his Oberlin career, Takács performed 15 to 20 concerts in a typical year, which he said “contributed to my teaching by always keeping me on my toes, musically speaking.” His student Spencer Myer '00, now an associate professor at Indiana University, says he has a new appreciation for the challenges of juggling teaching with performing.

“I’m excited for him in that he can invest more time in practicing, performing, and doing his passion projects,” Myer said. “It’s definitely not an end—it’s a new chapter. So there’s a lot to celebrate.”

Ludwig van Beethoven’s Sonata No. 27 in E Minor, Op. 90 is Myer’s chosen repertoire for the celebration concert. It’s a fitting tribute, as Takács is a well-known Beethoven interpreter. His recording of the complete piano sonatas—released in 2011 and reissued in 2021—made him the first pianist to release them all in a single volume.

“I think he’s just the perfect person and musician and pianist for Beethoven,” Myer said.

At Oberlin, the Peter Takács Beethoven Prize was established in fall 2019 to celebrate his teaching legacy and lifelong dedication to the composer.

Myer had initially come to Oberlin to study with Joseph Schwartz, who retired after his first two years. But Myer felt drawn to Takács because they were of similar musical minds.

“He just loves nothing more than to live and breathe and talk about music. I definitely share that with him,” Myer said. “So the connection was there, and I knew that transition from one teacher to another would be totally seamless.”

During a recent conversation, Takács touched on the highlights of his teaching career, the legacy of his students, and what comes next.

You started at Oberlin more than four decades ago. Could you paint a picture of your first few years?

In the early days, I was kind of eager to do just about anything that anybody wanted me to do. You know how it is when you’re young, right? Those were the heady early days of doing difficult contemporary music. And you know, I must say that over the years I’ve retired from that literature and gone to what I love, which is the classics.

Any favorite memories from that time?

Olivier Messiaen was here in 1978, and I played a piece called Oiseaux exotiques. There’s a cadenza for piano, and I made some kind of gesture and I knocked my glasses off. And I just kind of leaned down, picked them off the floor, put them back on and just kept playing. People still remember that—it was an exciting performance.

How are you feeling about retirement, has it sunk in yet?

There are going to be some adjustments, of course. But last year I was teaching at two thirds, and this year I’m at half. So it’s not completely cold turkey. I feel good about

it—I'm still performing and I have some recording plans for the next couple of years, so I'll definitely keep active.

What kind of recording projects are in the works?

I've already recorded five of Beethoven's violin sonatas, and the next five are planned for next year. It's been really exciting—with editing these days, you can do anything you want. The latest violin sonata is in the process of being edited, and it's fun to see if you can find that perfect take that can fill a gap.

You'll be playing in the celebration concert together with one of your former students, conductor Robert Spano. How did that come about?

Bob and I are friends, and he's writing a piece for us for piano four hands. The working title is *Benediction*, so that has a ring to it. He said it's a combination of Arvo Pärt and Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite*. So he wants it to be kind of simple and maybe sort of childlike in some ways.

I'm very touched that he's coming and I'm touched by everyone that's coming. There's maybe 40 studio alumni who are coming that day, including the performers. They're all exceptional.

Are there any shared attributes that you see among your students?

There are some things that are very important to me. It's kind of a combination of intellectual analysis and emotional involvement with the music. And I think I hear that in my students. I have some who still write to me and say, "I found the perfect phrasing for a certain section of a piece—it took me like a week to figure it out, but I finally did it." So it's very rewarding to hear that my legacy is still out there.

What's your favorite Oberlin venue?



I think Finney Chapel is a treasure—really beautiful acoustics. There have been events there that linger in the memory. One of them was when Simon Rattle came and conducted Mahler 4 in Finney. The place was completely electric—it was packed to the gills.

My concert with Robert Spano (left) was another one of those electric moments, but I was on stage. The orchestra was on its toes and the

audience was pretty full—big ovation at the end and all that.

Any non-musical hobbies you're excited to have more time for?

I'm kind of an addicted puzzle solver. I do the New York Times crossword, the Spelling Bee, and Wordle. I would love to get in better shape, that would be nice. And we'll do some traveling. There's a lot of exciting things that I'm planning to do when I have more time.

Any final thoughts about your time at Oberlin?

I'd like to say that Oberlin's been an ideal place to be. I have incredibly stimulating colleagues and I have had an administration that's been very helpful and not interfering. You pretty much have freedom to profess your convictions. And the students over the years have been incredible.

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