

# Passion & Precision: A Tribute to Irina Ginzburg

By Rhona-Mae Arca

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In September 1991, I was a cocky second year university student, pleased as punch over my musical progress. That attitude quickly faded when my brother Jay-Arnel began lessons with Irina Ginzburg.

It wasn't long before this 11-year old was playing circles around my classmates and I. Who was this woman who transformed this quiet kid into a musician who lit up the stage, capable of pulling off repertoire people said was "too old" for him? Not just him, several other students in Irina's studio were simply amazing.

Irina's background is impressive. She began her musical training at four with her grandmother. Later, she studied at the Latvia State Academy until she graduated at the age of 18. She performed as a soloist, chamber musician and accompanist. She won the Republican Competition for Young Pianists and was awarded a tour of four provincial centres. In 1980, she immigrated to Canada and began teaching in Saskatchewan and eventually, in Calgary when her family moved. She was past president of Calgary ARMTA and an active member of the Calgary Arts Summer School (CASSA), Honens and the CFMTA Peak Performance Steering Committee.

My opportunity to get to know this formidable woman came in 1993, when I served as my brother's accompanist at the music festival. I was a nervous wreck at that first lesson. This stern-faced robust woman was far more intimidating than my own piano teacher. However, once we began, she came alive, overflowing with passion and precision. It was hard not to get caught up in the excitement. Everything had to be precise and each note had to sing. That was the most important thing.

In the following years, Jay-Arnel and his peers at Irina's studio continued to flourish. They won awards, countless awards. Their performances continued to astound, impress and move audiences. Driving up to hear Jay-Arnel perform at the provincial music festival became an annual event. Often, Irina accompanied us, ever the proud mother hen.

In July 1996, Jay-Arnel and I went on an intense three-week study trip to the former Soviet Union, organized by my alma mater. To prepare, I signed up for lessons with Irina that January.

What a taskmaster she was. She always demanded more - more dynamics, more melody, more emotion, and more technical precision. I honestly didn't know if I could ever satisfy her, but I gave her all I had.

Irina had the ability to draw everything out from a person. She found everyone's emotional "hot buttons" and pressed them until we poured our hearts into the music. Any strong emotion did the trick. Sometimes, she shouted and gestured wildly to get students to play more expressively. Like a conductor, her hand shaped the phrasing. Climaxes were punctuated by a clenched fist in the air.

She didn't have to shout at me to play better. She would just look at me balefully with her bright blue eyes and say matter-of-factly, "You should know better." The feeling that statement generated fired me up more than yelling ever would have.

The trip was phenomenal. Studying with Irina gave us some insight into music education in the former Soviet Union. When we were in Minsk, Belarus, we learned that students there have at least two lessons a week. Our teacher was just as demanding and as passionate as Irina.

One of the highlights from the trip was Jay-Arnel's command performance at St. Petersburg. Our group attended a folk music/dance recital. During intermission, we pianists flocked to an elaborate drawing room that showcased a very old grand piano, which was cordoned off. One of our organizers arranged for one of us to perform on this piano and summoned Jay-Arnel. The room quickly filled as he launched into Rachmaninoff's *Prelude in c# minor*. People were murmuring in the audience that surely this teenager was studying in Austria or perhaps Julliard. With pride, members of our group turned around and replied that he studies in Calgary, Canada with Irina Ginzburg.

We also picked up a little Russian in our travels. Irina always broke out into a grin whenever we cheekily greeted her in Russian.

I returned home with the desire to work on my Performer's ARCT. My lessons with Irina kept me going during the ups and downs in my career. Actually, she saw me through four career changes. Other than my family, piano lessons with Irina was the only other constant in my life. She put up with a lot whining from me about work. After patiently hearing me out, she'd say, "Now play." She helped me channel all my frustrations about work into my playing.

Lesson nights were draining. I would show up early for my lesson, already tired from work. Some nights, Mr. G would greet me with a smile and his scrumptious hot potato latkes (how could I refuse?). Relaxed by good food and a good chat with her husband and their children Rebecca and Ariel, I was better prepared to handle my lesson with Irina.

There were days when I really needed those potato latkes and chats, for Irina was very challenging. "Go to HERE...go to HERE... SING! You must sing more. Keep going...don't stop...GO!" My heart would often pound during lessons, with Irina singing enthusiastically beside me, pushing me further with each passing week. We bickered over repertoire and interpretation (she always won), we smiled and laughed in between all the moments that I tried to play more musically.

If I wasn't emotional or precise enough, I'd hear, "What is this? I don't understand this." Or, "I don't like that. Too sloppy." When she couldn't come up with the English word for what she wanted to say, she would resort to Russian or use a metaphor to communicate her wishes. Somehow it all came together.

I quickly learned to hone my peripheral vision. If I could see the flash of Irina's blonde head bobbing and swaying to the music, I knew I was on the right track. Problem spots had to be drilled ad nauseum, "You must get it right 11 times out of 10 at home so that you can get it right 10 times out of 10 when you perform." As far as musicianship goes, if you tried your best and then gave a lot more, that was acceptable to her.

In June 1999, I did my ARCT exam. After years of choking in performance, I just wanted to be able to make it through without succumbing to nervousness. Thanks to Irina's thoroughness, I succeeded far beyond my greatest expectations. I felt more confident and comfortable than I ever had. We were both pleased with my mark. For Irina, that's saying a lot.

Jay-Arnel and I studied one more year with Irina – just for fun. We enjoyed the opportunity to study with her without the stress of our ARCT exams hanging over our heads. There was sadness when we stopped taking lessons because we had grown close over the years. We both planned to return to Irina for lessons someday.

Even though our studies drew to a close, we kept in touch. Sometimes, we ran into Irina at a restaurant (she loved good sushi) or a concert. We loved to watch her body language during performances. If her head bobbed to the music, the performer was good. If she looked stern or puzzled and her arms were crossed – she was not impressed.

After one concert, we teased her because she insisted on wearing high-heeled shoes in the height of winter. She simply shrugged her shoulders and replied, "It is my one vanity." In truth, it was simply part of her approach to life. She lived life *con molto brio*, which involved looking good, sounding good and just plain being good. However, her "good" was everyone else's "outstanding." Nothing but the best would do for Irina.

From time to time, we would get a mother hen call from her. "You don't call. You don't visit. What is wrong with you?" So we would happily oblige her and stop by for tea or lunch. Every now and again, we would call Irina and take her out to lunch.

In 2001, I had the pleasure of interviewing Irina and her family for an article on CASSA. It was a wonderful visit with all of them. Irina treasured her involvement with Piano Camp and especially the opportunity to work with clinician Ingrid Clarfield. "I'm doing [this] because I love it. I love the challenge," she said in her interview. "I love to see the difference in the kids. I love to see them perform so well." That's how she felt about teaching too.

Irina continued to give us advice as we developed as music teachers. She also hounded us to keep up with performing and growing, demanding regular updates. The last few times we talked, she'd shake her head and give a hearty chuckle. "It's funny," she'd say with a slight accent. "You and your brother. You both studied different things at school. But now look at you – you're both teaching piano. I told you it's a good life. Isn't it?"

Yes it is.

Спасибо большое (thank you very much), for everything.

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*Irina Ginzburg passed away on December, 6, 2004.*