

H. Leslie Adams, 26 Piano Etudes

Remembering why we play

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I've been a professional musician for a long time now, but I still occasionally have dark days when I think, what's the point? There are many times when what I'm doing feels exactly right, and I feel grateful that I can do it. Other days, though, I wonder why I chose to dedicate my life to something the world seems to value very little. Couldn't I have been a psychiatrist who plays the piano? I suspect I'd spend less time thinking about my bills.

And yet there are times when I know that music makes a great difference in the lives of other people. I was reminded of that during a recent trip to North Carolina to perform a solo recital.

That I was performing a solo recital made the trip unusual in itself. My original dream was to tour the world as a solo artist, but my current reality involves a lot of collaborating. I don't mind, actually — I've met most of my very best friends collaborating, and working with them makes me a better musician. Plus, I get to use the music, which I appreciate more and more each year.

A world premiere

I didn't think about turning down this particular concert, however, because two recitals, mine and one by Thomas Otten, were the culmination of a festival of etudes held at UNC Chapel Hill, where Dr. Otten is a faculty member. The featured work was the 26 piano etudes by Leslie Adams, of which I recorded the first 12 and Tommy the last 14; together, we were world-premiering the complete set.

Dr. H. Leslie Adams is a spry, unusually upbeat octogenarian who is best known for his art songs. He commissions himself, he says, because composing is more satisfying when he doesn't have to cater to anyone. This isn't to say he has never had conventional commissions: the Cleveland Orchestra, Ohio Chamber Orchestra, and Cleveland Chamber Symphony are among the groups for whom he has



H. Leslie Adams: a composer who commissions himself.

written, and orchestras all over the world, including Prague and Iceland, have performed his music. Still, he prefers to compose if and when the spirit moves him. The piano etudes are a result of one such whim — Leslie saw a hole in his output, and decided to fill it.

I met Leslie in New York in the late '90s, shortly before I gave a performance in Weill Hall. I was collaborating with my friend Darryl Taylor, who is currently a countertenor but was still a tenor then. After hearing me play, Leslie asked if I'd like to look at some piano pieces of his, most of which had

never been performed. I was honored. He sent me 13, but I did 12 (call me superstitious, or OCD about symmetry). Five had been performed before, but I world-premiered the other seven along with those on September 9, 2001. I rarely remember dates, but that one, understandably, lingers.

A composer's autobiography

He sent me the rest of the 26 etudes as he completed them, but my life circumstances made committing that much time to one project at the expense of the collaborations that tend to pay my bills impractical. I hoped that someone else would take up the baton, and thank goodness, someone did.

It took Leslie 10 years to complete his etudes, which exploit all registers of the piano. The writing is often thick, with multiple climactic moments and, as one would expect with etudes, a wide variety of technical demands. The final etudes are based on his recollections of three lovely popular songs Leslie wrote in 1960 (when he called himself "Les.") After a journey full of big chords, glittering scales, and

rapid arpeggiation, the last etude is reflective. It's a satisfying choice, a built-in encore (which is how Tommy Otten treated it).

Leslie calls the etudes his autobiography; he didn't compose anything else from 1997 to 2007, and they contain, in his words, all of the things that happened in his life during that time, positive and negative. Despite the turmoil to which he alluded, the pieces reflect his love of "pretty things." There is certainly dissonance, but Leslie writes from the heart. Of course, you don't have to be neo-romantic with touches of jazz and popular music to write from the heart. But in Leslie's case, that's how things turned out.

My concert went well enough — one man purchased my CD of the etudes with great enthusiasm, and the comments were positive (Leslie's thumbs up was the one that mattered the most). I was glad to have performed first, because that meant I could relax and enjoy the second half of the festival. I sat next to Leslie during Tommy's brilliantly played, emotionally rich concert, which gave me the opportunity to observe Leslie's reactions to his works. He confided that it was quite an experience to hear everything back to back. He was right, in ways he didn't imagine.

Changing lives

I mentioned that sometimes music makes a difference. During the intermission, a woman approached Leslie and said that she was an English professor, and her son was a former student of Tommy's. She had missed my portion of the festival, but she waxed rhapsodic about the music she had heard — she was eager to buy the score so her son could experience it. More than that, though, she said that what she had heard had "changed her life." She could barely contain herself.

So here was unfamiliar repertoire by a composer who isn't a household name, and yet it touched someone deeply. What message can musicians take from this? That we need not be afraid of delving into new music; all communication of the soul didn't cease in the 19th century, or even the 20th.

More than that, though, is to remember that what we do is about sharing, and when we bring the right spirit to it, it matters. We still probably won't get paid for our efforts in a manner commensurate to the joy we can inspire, but no sane person goes into music as a career expecting to get rich. Or should I say, no sane person goes into a career in music in the first place?

And yet, I applaud the brave souls who continue to venture much for limited gain. Because without them, music like Leslie's remains on the page, and people like that English professor are denied a rapture unlike any other.



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