

A concert pianist's tips for performing on stage and in life



DONNA JACOBS
MONDAY MORNING

"Her playing was quite ravishingly beautiful ... her technique is impeccable ... an extraordinary gift for making a melody sing, incredible warmth... When she plays she has music in every fibre of her being."

— The Kingston Whig-Standard

"After hearing the excellent recordings you have made for Alfred Publishing Company, along with your other recordings made independently of Alfred, I must tell you that I believe your performances are among the most musical and technically perfect that I have heard from ANYONE. I have played these recordings over and over, and I have come to the conclusion that Valery Lloyd-Watts is my favourite living pianist."

— Willard A. Palmer, PhD,
Senior Keyboard Editor,
Alfred Publishing Company, Inc.

Yet, Valery Lloyd-Watts — voted last month among Canada's Top 100 powerful women by the Women's Executive Network — is ner-

vous just before a performance.

Playing since age four and a star performer in her teens in Vancouver and then London, England, where she studied, she has conquered fright — except in the final hour or two before she performs.

This concert pianist and well-known Kingston-based Canadian music teacher and recording artist says with her characteristic bluntness: "It's human weakness."

The chatter in her mind goes like this: "I'm not ready. I need more time. Why did I think that was a good idea?"

"That's just ego talking," she says.

To conquer the fear of a concert meltdown, she counters it. "Sit down. Reason why you're doing this. Is it because you love to do it and you want to communicate how wonderful this music is?"

"As soon as I get there in my head — no nerves at all. It ceases to be about me and it's about what I want the audience to receive."

As she succinctly puts it, there are two basic emotions. Love and fear. "If you are experiencing one, you cannot be experiencing the other at the same time."

She concedes that the split-second interplay of memory and performing is delicate. And the feat can be athletic. Her longest performance was *Brahms Concerto No. 2*, a 50-minute, 113-page orchestral score with the Kingston Symphony.

Ms. Lloyd-Watts' dozens of CDs include: *Music Meant for You*, *Music for your Baby*, *Music for a Better Brain*, *The Healing Heart of Music*, *Bringing Music to Life*, *Great Movie Themes*, *A Concert of Masterpieces*, *A Second Concert of Masterpieces*, *J.S. Bach's Inventions and Sinfonia*; *Falling in Love with Chopin*, *Burgmuller 25 Progressive Pieces*, *Op. 100*.

"It's never that you forget the score," says Ms. Lloyd-Watts. "It's that you get distracted because you're under pressure. You have this little brain freeze."

Her tips, adaptable to job interviews and other command performances, to combat brain freeze:

"Always have a minimum of three rehearsal performances before a major performance. You need a sense of what it takes physically and emotionally to keep your concentration over an entire program.

"Practice in two-measure segments. Your mind will remember encyclopedic information if you feed it in small chunks.

"Put the chunks together and practise with a metronome. Can you do all measures at the same metronome pace? The easy ones you do well. The more challenging ones, you tend to slow down and that's how you know where you need to spend more time.

"Right before a concert, I don't usually eat very much, but I do eat a big lunch. I stoke up on chicken and salad. I love carbs. I try not to eat too much of

them, but I have a lovely big pre-concert Mexican meal. I love the grease and fat and nachos. You burn two or three pounds up during a concert." She laughs: "Sadly, you put it back on."

In fact, her tips for performance, practice, stress and time management are identical: Focus your attention.

"I try to be fully present, regardless if I'm practising or performing. I'm not thinking about shopping when I'm practising."

For years, she relied on Neil Fiore's book, *The Now Habit* and its brief breathing and mental exercise to boost concentration.

Stress management? "You stay in the present moment. Usually if we're feeling stressed, it's because we're imagining we're someplace else. If it's something distracting us that we're frightened of, then we need to do our preparation for it."

Time management: "I am the list-making queen. I make and check off a list every single day of projects I want to do, things I need to do."

And these days, they're mostly music. "I'm more involved in playing the piano now than ever.

"Music can take you out of your ordinary life and allow you to see a level of existence that is so positive and powerful that when you return to normal existence, somehow you've changed inside for the better. Yes, definitely an epiphany.

"In my experience, this is a come-

and-go change. There have been times — and often these days — I have been able to access what (U.S. psychologist) Abraham Maslow called 'peak experience.'

"When I play a solo well, it's very powerful for the audience and it all comes from loving the music, knowing the magical sound inside my head and setting myself in the frame of mind to experience that."

Musicians and other performers sense it as an audience's "breath-holding silence."

Besides years of teaching thousands of children and music instructors, and her area charitable performances, she continues to tour professionally. Early in 2009, she'll perform in Colorado, Oklahoma, Virginia and Ontario.

Ms. Lloyd-Watts, separated from her husband a few years ago, plans to buy a home in Ottawa to be with her granddaughter, Michelle Landry, nine, and her son-in-law, Denis Landry, after the death of her daughter, Megan, 44, in August. (Her son, Lloyd Watts, and his children, Stephanie and Michelle, live in California.)

"I have a very close relationship with my granddaughter and especially now, I want to be as close to her as I possibly can."

Will her quarters in the house include a piano? "Yes," she says, "of course."

DONNA JACOBS is an Ottawa writer; her e-mail address is donnabjacobson@hotmail.com