



Ingrid Clarfield receiving the MTNA Teacher of the Year award and presenting Mel Mack with the "Husband of the Year (and my life)" award at the 2012 MTNA National Conference in New York City.

Dedication to excellence: An interview with Ingrid Clarfield

by Sam Holland

Ingrid Jacobson Clarfield has given lecture-recitals, workshops, and master classes in more than a hundred cities across America, including many at state and national conferences of the Music Teachers National Association. She has presented master classes and pedagogy sessions at the National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy, the TCU/Van Cliburn Institute, the National Piano Teachers Institute, the Music Teachers Association of California, the World Piano Pedagogy Conference, and the Calgary Arts Summer School in Alberta, Canada.

Ms. Clarfield serves as Professor of Piano and Coordinator of the Piano Department at Westminster Choir College of Rider University and has directed Westminster's Piano Week for High School Students since 1984. In 2012, she was honored as the Musical Teachers National Association Teacher of the Year.

The documentary film *Take a Bow* (2011) tells the inspirational story of her tenacious fight back to teaching after a devastating stroke.

We sat down to this interview via *FaceTime*™ on the weekend following Thanksgiving 2014. And what follows is a glimpse into her background, passions, philosophies, and practical experience as one of the most successful piano teachers in America.



Ingrid Clarfield receives a standing ovation at the 2010 MTNA National Conference in Albuquerque after performing Dennis Alexander's *Arioso* (for RH alone).

Photo by Harry Butler.



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Tell us about your early experiences in music and your first teacher.

My first piano teacher was my uncle who emigrated from Poland. I started lessons with him when I was five years old. I remember feeling very happy and comfortable with him and loving my lessons. I will never forget playing "Country Gardens" (the last piece in the red book) for my kindergarten class.

My uncle died when I was ten years old. I was accepted at Juilliard, but refused to go, so I began study with Michael Field, a partner in the famed Appleton and Field duo piano team. My lifelong love of two-piano playing probably began when I heard them perform Bach's *Art of Fugue* in Town Hall. Mr. Field was *much* more demanding than my uncle. I studied with him until I was thirteen, when he quit teaching piano to become a cooking teacher and the author of several famous cookbooks.

At the insistence of my parents, I went to study at Juilliard, which turned out to be a less than positive experience for me. My teacher taught me how *not* to motivate students. Every week he told me I was the worst student at Juilliard. Then a week before my jury, he would tell me what an excellent pianist I was and that he expected me to do an outstanding job. You simply cannot beat students down all year long and expect them to perk up with one compliment before a performance.

Because of this experience, I am overly concerned and cautious about my students feeling prepared weeks before a performance. I obviously chose not to follow in his footsteps. During my senior year, when my teacher became ill, I was assigned a wonderful graduate assistant as a teacher, who was critical but positive, and helped me prepare for my audition at Oberlin.



Top left: Ingrid Clarfield giving a teaching demonstration at the 2011 National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy.

Bottom left: With husband Mel Mack.

Right: With Dennis Alexander.

Were you an exceptional talent?

I never considered that before, but if I really think about it now, the answer is no. I played well, but not exceptionally. I have several students now who are much more talented than I was.

How did you come to love music?

Our house was filled with music! After dinner my parents would listen to operas and symphonies, and my father often played the piano for relaxation. At a young age I was exposed to all the arts. Every summer I attended music and dance camps. My parents took me to concerts, ballets, and museums. Two of my fondest mem-

ories are going to hear Rubinstein and watching the Bolshoi Ballet.

You and I share the gift of having studied with John Perry as undergraduates. It's not telling any secrets to say that he was very young when we studied with him. How did you find him and why did you choose to study with him?

John was twenty-nine and I an enthusiastic seventeen when I was in his very first class at Oberlin. I didn't choose him. He got stuck with me. Let's be honest, the new teacher doesn't get the superstars.

Would you tell us something more about what you learned from John? How has his teaching shaped your teaching and your career?

There is so much to say, but most important was the total commitment and dedica-

tion I felt from John at every lesson. He was demanding and critical, but he was committed to making me the best musician possible. I left several lessons crying because I felt I couldn't live up to his expectations. But, I couldn't wait to come back for my next lesson. I hope my students feel that same dedication from me. I must admit, I've given out a few kleenex at lessons too!

John cared about me as a person, and he could tell when I was upset without my having to say a word. I remember playing the opening of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 109, and he said to me, "You had a fight with Steve didn't you?" And he was right. I hope my students also know I care about them, too.

I also learned from John that it's important to say something positive after a student performs. I remember performing the "Waldstein" sonata for him, convinced, after hours of practice, that this would be the lesson where he would jump up and yell "Brava!" Instead I bombed out and sat shaking waiting for the critical tirade. After a minute or