

A Musical Spirit

BY CAROL CUMMINGS

SYLVIA KERSENBAUM STARTED PLAYING THE PIANO AT AGE FOUR — BEFORE SHE COULD READ AND BEFORE HER FEET REACHED THE PEDALS ON THE PIANO. WHAT FOLLOWED FROM THAT POINT FORWARD HAS BEEN A REMARKABLE HISTORY THAT HAS LEFT A LEGACY OF STUDENTS AND ENRICHING PERFORMANCES, INCLUDING TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY.

Kersenbaum was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and became an American citizen in 2001. Her mother played the piano and the violin, and she was Kersenbaum's first teacher. Kersenbaum later became a pupil of

renowned teacher Vincenzo Scarmuzza.

"When I was a small child, there was no television and very few radios in homes," she said. "Almost every home had a piano; it was part of the furniture."

"My mother started teaching me in earnest when she saw I could play by ear," Kersenbaum remembered. "I started to improvise and write music and was able to pick up tunes from what I heard on the radio. I have a picture in my mind of being five years old and having my mother hold up the telephone so a friend could hear me play 'La Paloma.'"

Kersenbaum has enjoyed a long and successful career thus far. She holds degrees in performance, pedagogy, and composition from the National Conservatory in Buenos Aires, and Artists Diplomas from both the Academy of Santa Cecilia in Rome and the Academia Chigiana in Siena. She has appeared in recitals and as soloist with orchestras throughout Europe, the Far East, and North and South America — orchestras such as the London Symphony, Royal Philharmonic, Munchen Philharmonische, Bayerische Staatskapelle, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, the

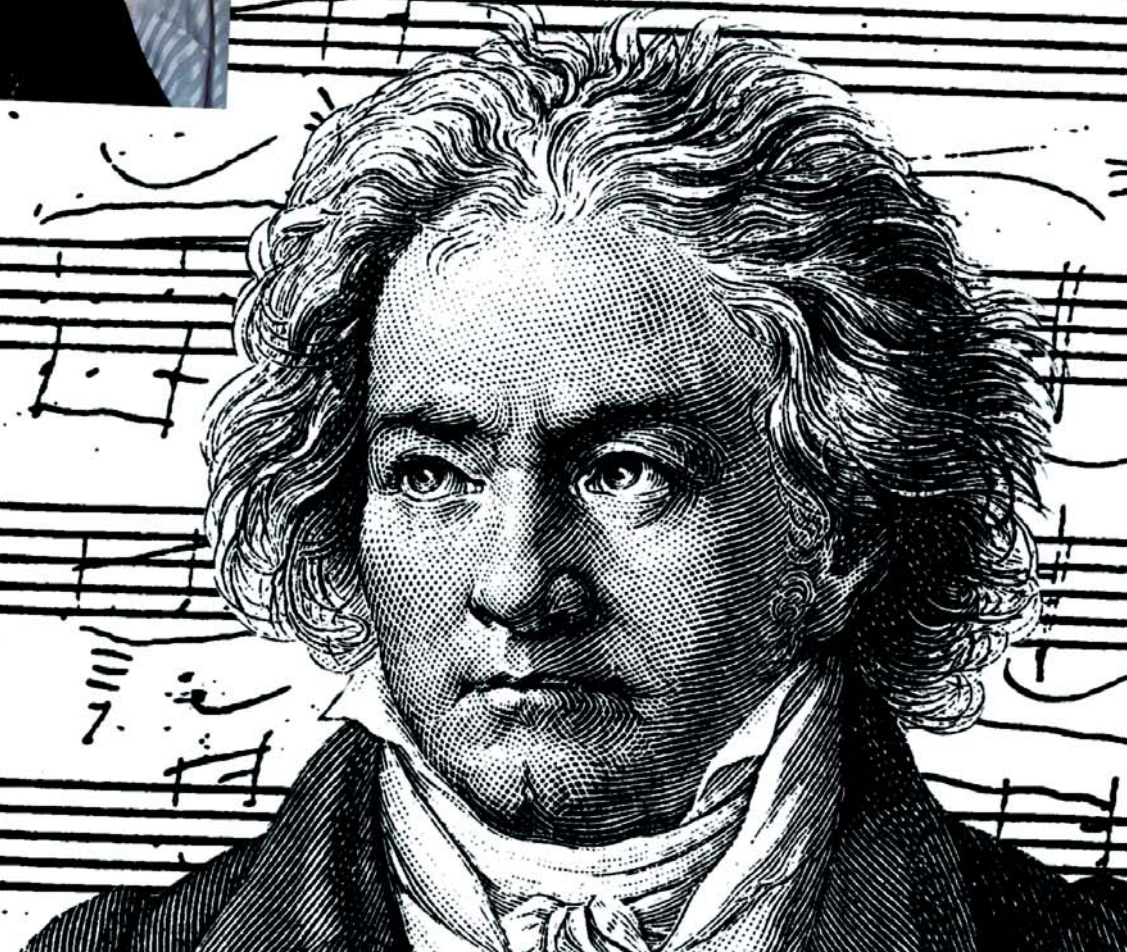


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Dr. Sylvia Kersenbaum



San Francisco Symphony, and the Louisville Orchestra. Her recordings for the EMI-Angel label have won major international press acclaim.

She is in the midst of an exciting project in which she will perform the entire group of thirty-two piano sonatas by Beethoven in a series of concerts that will run through the spring of 2004. The concerts are being recorded, and CDs will be made available. All proceeds from these concerts will go to support the Sylvia Kersenbaum Scholarship for Western music students, which was established by the Delta Omicron musical fraternity in April 2002.

Having one musician present all of these sonatas is a rare occurrence. Should one perform them all back-to-back, it would take an entire day, non-stop, to get through all thirty-two.

"This cycle is so special," she explained with feeling. "It is a journey which dates from 1795 to 1822 — a full three-quarters of Beethoven's life. This was a very rich period in history, and lots of things were happening. Working through this music is like going through a diary."

All thirty-two of his sonatas are equally good, and each has stood the test of time, Kersenbaum said. "Beethoven was writing so much ahead of his time, and he was not comprehended in the beginning," she said. "It is unreal how critics and teachers did not understand him, but he wanted to break from the traditional classical form, and he did." Many scholars credit Beethoven's work as beginning the romantic era of music, she said.



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In a series of nine concerts, Sylvia Kersenbaum has performed all of Beethoven's thirty-two piano sonatas to benefit the Sylvia Kersenbaum Scholarship for music students.

"It is interesting how many of my students choose pieces composed by Beethoven," Kersenbaum mused. "There is a rebelliousness in his music and personality that is close to young people, and they seem to love to perform his compositions."

Working with countless students has been one of the most rewarding parts of Kersenbaum's career. "I enjoy the variety that comes from the one-on-one situation," she said. "Absolutely everyone is different, and you have to continuously revise, review, and adapt your teaching technique. You must always slightly change some of the repertoire without ignoring the basics and the classics. The nicest part of teaching is when you

know someone who studied with you years ago has made it in some way."

Another rewarding experience has come through her work with Edgar A. Poe's "Masque of the Red Death." Kersenbaum wrote music to tell this compelling story, and it premiered as a ballet at WKU in October 2001. "I was so pleased when it was finally ready for performance. The premier was the happiest day of my life. I hope we can do it again."

Although Kersenbaum has been a part of WKU's music faculty for some twenty-seven years, she does not intend to retire anytime soon. "There is so much left to do," she exclaimed, ticking off a list of challenging projects. "I would like to compile a volume of Latin American piano music, with both teaching

and performing material. I am still working on refining the 'Masque' project, and a second group of choral pieces are in the process of being printed. I also love the study of philosophy and would like to take more courses in this area."

Kersenbaum still allows herself the occasional days off from the all-consuming practice schedule. "If I cannot have a few days off, it is not worth it," she laughed. "Music is more than just mastering a technique; it is inside you."

In a fitting parallel, Beethoven would certainly have agreed. He once wrote, "Music is the soil in that the spirit lives, thinks, and invents." For twenty-seven years, she has kept that spirit alive at WKU.