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IN PERSON; A Lifetime Passion For Musical Literacy

By **Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco**

SITTING before a piano at the Monmouth Conservatory of Music, the Red Bank school he founded in 1962, Felix Molzer asked a visitor, sotto voce, in a Viennese-accented lilt, "What is your phone number?"

He jotted down the numerals, and speedily assigned them each a musical note.

"That's your number," proclaimed the 77-year-old composer and musical director, pointing to his notations. Without missing a beat, he added with a smile, "I have your number."

He then turned to the keys at his slender fingertips and delivered a dreamy 70-second improvisation based on the 10 notes. "I can do this in a million styles," he pronounced without a hint of immodesty.

As charming as the impromptu was, it was primarily an object lesson in musical literacy, the cornerstone on which Mr. Molzer has secured a career spanning over 50 years.

"Improvisation asks for various kinds of things," he explained. "First of all, familiarity with the keyboard; second, a thorough knowledge of theory and harmony; and, most important, I would say, you have to know before you touch a key what comes out, so you have a feeling of where things are going."

The ability to devise such a musical road map, he maintained, must be grounded in the capacity to read music, which is at the heart of his conservatory.

Former students include Kevin Langan, a soloist with the San Francisco Opera, the Broadway singer Elena Ferrante and Christopher Young, composer of the score for the film "Hurricane." But Mr. Molzer founded the conservatory to promote musical literacy even among those who consider music a pastime and not a profession.

"For some the mere introduction to musical literacy provides a basis for informed listening," he said. "We give lifetime pleasure."

The pianist Vladislav Kovalsky, the conservatory's executive director since 1998, said that reading music was as valuable "as being able to read to be knowledgeable in literature."

Mr. Molzer and Mr. Kovalsky agree that general education leaves little time for music, which consists of the marching band, the choir and the spring musical. "It leaves little opportunity for youngsters with classical or operatic interests," Mr. Molzer said, "because what they're doing is 'Grease' or 'The Music

Man.' "

To provide for such children, in 1969 Mr. Molzer organized the Children's Opera Chorus, a secular children's choir that now has 70 members ranging in age from 9 to 16. The chorus will be part of the conservatory's American Music Theater Company production of Kurt Weill's "Street Scene." Timed to celebrate the centennial of the composer's birth, it will be performed at Holmdel High School April 6 through 9. These will be the first performances in New Jersey of Weill's innovative work, which is based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Elmer Rice and featuring lyrics by Langston Hughes.

"It's a category unto itself," said Mr. Molzer of the work, about the interactions on a city block in New York. "You have, on the one hand, ariettas and ensemble pieces -- very European. On the other hand, there are blues and jazz pieces. The whole idiom is a wonderful amalgam of both American and European influences."

The ages of the "Street Scene" cast, which he assembled late last year, range from 9 to about 60. During the performances, Mr. Molzer will be in the orchestra, at the piano.

"He's easy to work with," said Leigh Nash of Holmdel, a 36-year-old soprano who plays Ann Maurant, one of the leading roles. "He cares a lot about the people he works with."

Patrick Hosfield of Manasquan, a junior at Christian Brothers Academy in Lincroft who is in the cast, said, "I love the way he'd drill everyone carefully to ensure that the harmonies were exact."

Unless musical training "is introduced in a -- pardon the emotional expression -- positive, caring, loving way, connected with music fundamentals, at an early age, people resent it," Mr. Molzer said. This was a music lesson he learned as a child in his native Vienna, from his parents.

"My father was an official in the bank, but his love was playing the organ, playing the piano and teaching his children," Mr. Molzer said. "In fact, he married his church choir soloist. He would play the piano, my mother would sing these songs, and I would listen."

Mr. Molzer's older brother, Hermann, was killed during World War I; his younger sister, Gretel, who also plays the piano, is a professor of mathematics and physics. His ancestors were organ builders in the 19th century, a profession carried on by a nephew who is the cathedral organist in Vienna.

As a child, Mr. Molzer performed with the children's chorus of Vienna's Jesuit Church. "My parents would have never consented to allow me to join the Vienna Choir Boys," he said. "At the time, one of the choir boy's parents had to sign a statement saying that "until the boy's voice breaks, we are in charge.' "

Originally taught to play the piano, Mr. Molzer also mastered the organ, the clarinet, three different recorders, the bass, the bugle and the accordion. "A gentleman," he said, "is someone who knows how to play the accordion but doesn't do it."

After graduating from the Vienna Music Academy (now the University of Music), he finally did join the Vienna Choir Boys organization, in 1948, as one of its four musical directors. His group's first post-World War II tour took him to the United States. This led to positions coaching the Columbus Boys Choir, which moved to Princeton and became the American Boys Choir, and the Westminster Choir College (now Rider College).

After getting a master's degree in music education in 1952 from the University of Pennsylvania, Mr. Molzer taught at Monmouth College. He wrote three scores for the Philadelphia Orchestra's Children's Chorus, as well as over 1,000 arrangements and compositions.

Mr. Molzer became an American citizen in 1960, and in 1961, he met Jeannette Ballantine of Rumson. The following year, they wed. She had a son and a daughter from a previous marriage; he had a son from a previous relationship. Together, they have a son, Philipp, now a geologist in Massachusetts.

Mr. Molzer started his conservatory, taught there and hired other teachers; she kept the books and answered the telephone. "It was a mom and pop operation," he said. Their first year's budget was \$8,000.

That budget is now \$500,000, and the enrollment is 600, with 50 faculty members. Most of the income comes from tuition. A nonprofit organization, the conservatory receives little money from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, only \$2,300 over the last 18 months, and that only for performances.

"This is sort of upside down," said Mr. Molzer. "The State Council on the Arts gives money to performing, but not to teaching. It ought to be the other way around. Once you teach the kids something, then you'll get some good performers."

Although he is supposedly semiretired, Mr. Molzer maintains a full schedule. Besides the twice weekly rehearsals for "Street Scene," he teaches 27 private music students in organ, piano, vocal development and composition. He also conducts the conservatory's children's chorus and is the music minister at the Church of the Nativity in Fair Haven, where he directs two choirs and plays the organ for two or three Masses each weekend.

For the 40th time, he will return to Vienna this summer to teach a course on the history of opera for Hope College of Holland, Mich. This year, he will also be teaching a course on musical politics in Austria and Germany between 1933 and 1945.

"Especially now it is relevant," he said. "The political developments in Austria call for somebody to do what some religious denominations call witnessing."

At home in Little Silver, Mr. Molzer also continues to compose both sacred and secular pieces. "I can't do it every day, but it's a need, a need to express myself," he said.

Reflecting on his career, Mr. Molzer recalled, "I was asked at the age of 17 what I wanted to do with my life, and I answered, 'I want to be a music teacher in a village and play the organ in church on Sunday.' "

"I have fulfilled my life's ambition. I just didn't know it would be an American village."

Photo: Felix Molzer has operated the Monmouth Conservatory of Music in Red Bank since 1962. Below, he accompanies Leigh Nash, as Kate Hart listens. (Photographs by Frank C. Dougherty for The New York Times)