

Remembering Martha Bixler

By Judith Wink



Martha called everybody "bünnie." Her husband, her colleagues, her students, total strangers, no matter who they were and how they were connected to her, everyone in her world was a "bünnie." It was a term of endearment that her nanny had used, and it pulled everyone she knew into her circle of affection and belonging. Not everybody saw it that way. "Don't call me 'bünnie,'" her longtime colleague Morris Newman would growl. Martha would apologize and promptly forget. She couldn't not think of those around her as bunnies.

One year her Monday night class designed and produced a tee shirt. Sandwiched between "The Bünnie" and "Consort" was a line drawing of a rabbit with a recorder in its mouth. The night everyone in the group wore the new shirt to class, Martha's usually unflappable husband Dick doubled over with laughter. Martha's reaction was predictable: "Oh, bunnies!"

There are teachers who tongue-lash a student for the most trivial mistake, and then there was Martha. She couldn't bear to criticize. Only once did the Bünnie Consort see her rebuke a student point-blank. "No, Pamela," she said, "that was all wrong." And then, horrified by what she'd done, she started back-pedaling. "But it's a really hard passage, and nobody would have expected a B flat in bar thirty, and the light where you're sitting isn't very good, and it was all Bob's fault."

It was all Bob's fault another time, in a different setting. He was playing platform tennis at a music workshop upstate. For the third or fourth time, his serve went long. Somebody on the other side laughed, "Thanks again, Bob!" Just then Martha and Dick strolled by, on their way to lunch. In the measured, somber tone of one who does an unpleasant but necessary duty, Martha said, "Your serve sucks." Like Dick seeing those tee shirts, Bob doubled over. For the rest of the game he couldn't serve to save his life.

Martha's gentle critiques never had that effect on her students. Those who studied with her could expect to acquire a rich tone, a feeling for articulation, an ear for other lines and a sense that the object of all your hard work was to create beauty.

One Saturday, years ago, when the Guild was still meeting at Teachers College, Martha was going to offer a survey of music by women composers from the Middle Ages to the 20th century. The next to last piece was scored for harpsichord and recorders. Martha had a virginal, nicknamed Percy, that she planned to take uptown for her class. A virginal, if you've never seen one, is the size and shape of a casket for a small adult. Virginals don't fit in taxis, so unless you have a van, public transportation is your only option. Getting a virginal onto a bus is no easy job on a mild spring afternoon. But the day before this workshop, New York had been hit with its worst blizzard in decades. By the next morning the streets were clear but the sidewalks were slippery and the curbs were lined with mountain ridges of snow. A lesser musician would have played the harpsichord part on TC's piano. But Martha had her standards. She and two students lugged Percy to Broadway, hoisted him over an Everest of snow, and jockeyed him onto a bus, watched closely by the driver, who clearly thought we were all insane. The whole performance had to be repeated in reverse thirty blocks later, at the TC bus stop. The piece of music lasted only a few minutes, but it sounded the way the composer intended, and for Martha that was what mattered.

In class she was a perfectionist, willing to go over a phrase again and again, until the articulation, dynamics, tempo and everything else were just right. This could be maddening, but the results were worth the effort. Martha never let her students take a single note for granted.

Obituaries usually end with a list of survivors. Martha's include dozens of colleagues and hundreds of students. As one of the latter, I will remember her with admiration, amusement and deep gratitude.