Memories of Harold Bauer as a Teacher

An Interview with Raymond Hanson

By

John Mortensen

Raymond Hanson studied piano with Harold Bauer at the Hartt School of Music (later part of the University of Hartford, Connecticut, USA) from 1946 until Bauer's death in 1951. Hanson served on the piano faculty at Hartt until his retirement in 1992.

This conversation took place in January of 2003 at the Massachusetts home of Mr. Hanson.

John Mortensen: Why don't we start by talking about how you met Harold Bauer and began to study with him?

Raymond Hanson: I met Harold Bauer when I came into the Hartt School, in, I forget the month, but in 1945 at the end of the Second War. And I didn't know where I was going to go, but I hadn't been to music schools so I walked into the Hartt School of Music one day and stood out in the lobby, and my future boss Moshe Paranov walked out into the lobby and looked at me and said, "Can I help you?" And I said to him, "I don't know. I'm just looking around." And he said to me, "What do you play?" and I said, "Well, I used to play piano." And he said "Come in my room." So I followed him and he was a very powerful personality and I walked in and the first thing he did was he said, "There's a piano; play it." And I said, "I cannot." He said, "Don't tell me what you can't, show me what you can." I didn't know what to do. I hadn't touched a piano for five years. All I could think was 'yah bah baaahm' [sings the opening phrase of the Toccata in D minor of Bach], in unison. And, what he didn't understand: I had been on a rock-cracking gang for twelve hours a day, seven days a week down in the Smoky Mountains, so I started that piece. I nearly destroyed his piano, I was so strong. And he stopped me and put his hand on my shoulder and said, "What's the matter?" And I said, "Well, I was trying to tell you. I might as well tell you; I've been thrown out of so many places, one more won't matter all that much. I'm a C.O. in the war." He said "What's that? Some kind of a minority?"

And I laughed and another man came running over, and I didn't know who it was and he said, "Moshe, that's a Conscientious Objector, and young man if I were your age I'd be right with you. My name is Harold Bauer." And that's how I met him. And the fact that these influences met at that flashpoint, and because my future boss said before, "Well, I'm Jewish." I loved to him for that because he considered himself a minority and I was another minority, and we were bonded by that already. And we talked for a bit and he found that I played already with the Chicago Symphony and a few other orchestras and I'd only had 7 years of lessons. And then the war came and interrupted that. And I remained at that school for the next 47 years.

JM: Right from student to faculty?

H: From that time until I retired. It was a day in the age of great empathy and understanding, and perhaps a more civilized society than we see today. And he got another young girl who was in the future to become the librarian at the school, and told her, "You go get the boy's things and bring him to the house." We went out 40 miles to where I had been working as a quasi-nurse at the state hospital in Middleton, Connecticut, and got a shoe and sock and brought them to his house. That was about all I owned. We got about 2 dollars and a half a month during those five years so I didn't save much. And he took me into his house and for one year, he fed me and clothed me and helped me get my hands back.

And Bauer came in every week and I was first introduced to him in a small class where he talked to us a good deal about his life and what had happened to him. We got to know a little bit about his philosophy. We found out that he had been a violinist, that evidently he wasn't good enough that people flocked around him for that purpose, but as he unfolded the story he said that for relaxation he would go play a little on the piano. Not having lessons or anything, but it pleased him. And a young girl who was a singing student asked if he would play for her and he was very grateful because that would put a hamburger on his plate. So he played for her and other people heard and they liked it and soon he was playing for a whole bunch of singers. Some violinists asked him and he had to practice much harder.

In this process he witnessed someone choreographing, and it hit him like a bolt. He had never seen something of that kind before, and it awakened all the departments within him. As he said to us, as he watched those graceful moves, they were moves that expressed certain areas in life. He began to expand on what he saw. And he ran out and went home and began practicing the Ondine of Ravel which was dedicated to him, not with vertical fingers, but with this kind of choreographic move and he was thrilled. But his mind didn't work like ordinary minds about things. To him that was the first step, and he said "If that's true for that, then if I've got an angry passage…"and then he took his right hand fist and pounded into the palm of his left hand. He said, "That's the stroke I want for anger. And on the other hand if my little baby child (He didn't have children, but he envisioned them) lying face down on a hot summer day with no clothes on, one month old, the hand on that little innocent skin, the warmth of it." And he could feel the intimate legato, the warm legato. And he said that resonated with him. Then it began to dawn on him that every possible thing that he saw in music needed definitely a concept before he put his hands on the piano. So he would know what kind of a touch he was going to use because this then became the foundation for technique. Technique in his thinking was the ability to make music beautiful. Not to see how fast can I go or how loud can I go. It was all built in. It could be fast because that is what the concept required. So we began.

But I remember the first time I walked in his office. The first thing he wanted to know and required me to do was totally unexpected, but luckily I had done a lot of it already,

not really knowing why I did it, but he asked me to play a 24 bar improvisation in an ABA form. So, I sat there for a little bit. It demanded that I get my whole self together because I hadn't done that for this whole interim of five years. I guess I did it moderately well, I don't remember.

Then every Thursday afternoon they had a master class that he ran along with Alfred Einstein in this college. They were quite a pair together because Einstein would often bait him. And he was the Mozart authority. At that time the greatest one around. Einstein would talk to Bauer and say, "You know, Harold, in Opus 7 of Beethoven, in the slow movement, there are certain issues which tell you to put a little crescendo on the quarter note going to the eighth. Which singing would go [sings] teeee-yumm. Now you know, Harold, you can't crescendo on the piano." And of course Bauer would put on a show and he would say, "Alfred, of course, let me show you." And he got up there and he put his hands down on that C major chord and he let his body lean forward. He used body English that made us all believe that he had crescendoed. It was very cute, very telling. In other words, there's an answer to every problem.

So, in front of the whole student body (which wasn't very big in those days) these were immensely impressionable little visitations that they had because they dealt with the realities of music making, and Einstein, being a very perceptive person, sort of forced Bauer into answering questions that young minds would never have thought: How to do such a thing as that. Bauer, being a violinist, in those classes really related everything to bowing. He would up bow or down bow. When you thought like this it was possible to express a concept of anger or tenderness or warmth or whatever.

And I remember during that class when he described all those conceptual ways I said, "You know you have excited me so much because in my years in the Smoky Mountains I built my own little cabin in a place called Cate's Cove. It's about 30 miles from Gatlinburg in the mountains. I would walk every day with a lone ranger. We'd walk 20-25 miles, and clear paths and cut trees and this kind of thing. One night when I walked out I turned my floodlight on and it was snowing heavy. It was absolutely beautiful. I was the only person within 30 miles. I was telling Bauer and the students that one of the most wonderful things happened to me at that moment. In the silence of that picture I watched that snow come down with the brilliant realization that I could hear the snow when it touched the snow. And that's where I learned how to play pianissimo. Bauer said "BRAVO!" [claps hands loudly]

And gathering on all of the facts of Bauer's teaching was sensitizing your perceptions in everything you do, and don't take anything for granted. You shake hands with somebody you're going to feel a legato, or you're going to feel a crescendo blow to your hand, or a limp hand. Any other experience you have in life. You're turning a door knob, or coming in late at night your feet are not going to bang on the floor and wake people up. You are going to learn to walk intimately legato, and you are going to put your feet into the floor with at totally melting into the floor feeling. We need that in the touch as well. So every little concept that came along was something that was applicable to piano

playing, and that eventually becomes your friend, your guardian, and allows you to play music beautifully. It teaches you legato. When it's written legato, suddenly you are aware of the touch of that child and the laughter of that child. I began to be enthusiastic. I heard Lhevinne one day. And again this communicates the quality in the way people heard it: we went out for intermission, and we were talking and one girl would say, "I'm going to give up playing." It was so wonderful. It didn't affect me that way. I couldn't wait to get home. It awakened something in me, and some people they wanted to shoot themselves. Interestingly as soon as the lobby bells went off and I went back to sit down and we waited. And the lights didn't come on. And 15 minutes went by, and 20 minutes, a half hour, and we later found out that after having played as magnificently as he did that he was unhappy and they found him up in the small recital hall practicing his head off. Something he was unhappy with. And many times Bauer would say, "The best time to practice is when there's a crowd." Now you know what's the matter, what needs tending. He never played for me in a lesson. He never demonstrated.

JM: Taught from a chair?

H: Absolutely. He stood, and taught from a chair. I do remember I played the Waldstein Sonata, and he came running over and he said, "Stop! Do that passage one more time." And he said, "Hanson (he never called us by our first name) I have to confess something to you. I've been playing that note wrong for twenty years." Or maybe thirty it was. But he was very honest and forward; now you felt like he was a colleague, and not a man guarding you in the state prison. There was encouragement because he had done hosts of chamber music playing. I had never done any at that point in my life. He began encouraging that, and the same with lieder. He said, "What do you want to learn?" I said, "I want to learn the last B-flat Schubert Sonata." Bauer asked, "Young man, have you done Schubert lieder?" "No." Have you done any Schubert chamber music?" "No." You can see where this is going. And Bauer said, "When you have done some of this, come back and see me, because the lieder and the chamber music are going to teach you things through their course about the violinist and the cellist." And I must say that I found when I started doing a lot of chamber music that it fulfilled the very promise that he had told me about because I began to play, for many singers and instrumentalists, music by Schubert, and Wolf, and Brahms, and so forth, and it taught me what singers do, and I want to close in on that so they can't tell the difference between me and the singer. Similarly with the violinist. I saw him come down on a down bow, and it made me come down with my hand like a down bow. I entered the fray and actually, in many ways as he said to me on occasion, "You're going to learn more from playing with good violinists and good singers, than from your teacher, because you're going to listen, and you're going to mesh, or you're not going to mesh. You'll simply play the piano for them, or you're going to arrange your hands so that when they go: [he sings a phrase] Deee yah dum--you're going to do that on the piano, and that's going be your test." That's exactly the way it came out.

Then I remember, I went down to New York in 1951. I didn't know he was so sick. I had to play up in Boston with the Boston symphony, the Schumann Concerto. He said, "Hanson, I'm sick." I didn't know that. He said, "Let me just tell you one thing. My

most successful performance of that piece was with Nikisch, and in the last movement, whoever conducts, tell him, in the last movement in that place--" I knew exactly where he meant— [he sings] yum bum bum dee dum bum "--tell your conductor to beat one beat every other bar. If you do this [sings and claps] the violins come in a little too soon. But this [sings theme but claps once every other bar] makes them relax." Just from that little experience—a sad one—he was helpful right up to the end.

JM: Did he know he was dying?

H: Well, he was about 77 or 78. So, I only knew him for about 6 years at the school.

JM: How many years did you study with him?

H: Only for those 5 years but he didn't really teach me.

JM: He didn't dig in and say: use your third finger on B-flat.

H: No. He was a coach. He's not going to tell you how to do something, he's going to tell you to find out how to do it, but be sure you are led by the proper authority within you. You sing the phrase within you in the most wonderful way; you know how to sing it and see if you can match that.

JM: Now in his book, his autobiography, is obviously very witty and funny. When you read that book does it remind you of the way he spoke? Clever jokes and things?

H: No. He didn't do that. Whether in a lesson or in a class it was all serious, except for, "Crescendo to that quarter note." That was funny. The coachings (not teachings) were very serious. Just points and in a way, generalities of what he found that needed attention, and he would make the analogies, like how to play like a violin. It made you think differently. I guess the background of everything I told you was that he was a self-made musician. I think of Nathan Milstein: He lived life till he was 82 and still played wonderfully. I was so pleased because he was asked in an interview, "What do you tell young violinists now?" He said, "Don't just practice. You invent ways to do it better and it may mean that in a performance you are totally aware that maybe another fingering will do this passage better than the one you had before." And he would change fingerings right in a performance, because it suddenly opened to him at that moment that this could be better. So he is not trapped in his rote practicing. He is able now to be spontaneous.

In that regard Bauer was very good every time he put his hands down on a keyboard. You are finding a new touch and a new feeling about what it is you want to do with a phase. You are not trapped by yesterday or the day before. One of the big problems nowadays is I find that kids come in and play, and the next week they come in and they do everything the same. Maybe they have improved something over there on page thirty, and that's good, but the rest of it's remained the same. Like I jokingly said to you, we're

in the same trousers for thirty years. It's fun to change clothes once in a while, and to make new things in life happen.

Every Sunday when I was young, we had church and all 40 of us parishioners went to one of the homes and after the women cleaned up in the kitchen we all went to the living room we got our scores out, I went to the piano, and we played the Brahms Requiem. And the next week we went to another house, got our scores out, and sang the Mozart Requiem. I thought everybody did that. It was what we put into it, and it taught me immense, wonderful things. I am ever grateful for that kind of a time. But again, it fit right in with Bauer, borrowing from that choreographer moves that he could make that made his technique represent something that he felt was precious.

All of those things resonated within me. The resonance really complimented everything when I met Bauer. It all began to fit in. As it was with Milstein, he was always aware. As I told you, my fingers were always going because I was always imagining how would I do this phrase. If it was a string quartet, how would it sound? What would the cello do to in that bass voice? I became more aware of all the interplay in the voices, hopefully complementing each other.

These are thoughts that I give you. I've always attached all these things even prior to meeting Bauer, attached them in my strange way to him and his philosophical approach to music making: not taught, and if not taught, then not on lend-lease; it's just his property--taking up residence within him. He owns it. Everything that he said grew out of him. Not, "Someone said to crescendo here." Or "Careful, don't play so loud. It's says *piano*." What an idiot. You don't need to pay fifty bucks for someone to tell you there's a *piano*. But, you can't pay enough money for somebody to inform you how to take care of a phrase so that your soul touched your fingertips.

JM: There really was no one else like him ever who had really no significant piano teaching.

H: There may be, but I don't know who it is.

JM: Yes. That we've heard of.

H: Yes.

JM: And after hearing that Beethoven recording [Sonata Op. 27 no. 2], it's incredible really to think what he must have done to figure all that out.

H: Not just to figure it out. He begged, borrowed, and stole from everyone around him. He played with Casals. He played with Kreisler. He played with Thibault. Every time he played with somebody he picked up something. Every singer he played for he picked up something. You watch how they do it and you can't wait to get back tomorrow to do it with them because hopefully you always choose somebody better than you to play with.

When you do that you get better. When you get somebody worse than you, then you are able to help stimulate their abilities and the reactions in them.

JM: You said he had retired from the stage when he came to teach at Hartt. But, had you ever heard him when he was concertizing?

H: Oh yes. I had heard him in Chicago many times all through my growing up. That's what I said when I first met him. I said, "It's a total honor to meet you because I have heard you so many times." I heard him play two-piano recitals with Gabrilowitsch, and also solo, and I thought I could talk to him now since he had had helped smooth the course about his war position that he agreed with me and so forth. That crossed a lot of barriers and I could talk to him now.

JM: Did you recognize him when you came into the room that day?

H: No. It was too sudden. I hadn't been to a concert for five years or had anything to do with music.

JM: Did you gradually realize who he was?

H: No. He told me who he was and then it was instant.

JM: What stayed in your mind from those concerts in Chicago when you heard him?

H: I don't know. I only remember that in his whole person, everything, you knew, made perfect sense. He wasn't bowled over by things; nothing "in your face." It was always just pure music making, and he wasn't trying to do anything special to get your attention. It was special because he wasn't trying to make it that way. He just tried to be Harold Bauer and the accumulation of all the events in his life that had made him who he was.

Gabrilowitsch, on the other hand, played like an angel. If you get the chance to read the book his wife wrote about him – beautiful. I once played at the Mark Twain house and shared half a program with bassist Gary Karr. There were a bunch of politicians there to make money for restoring the piano, which they had already done--Mark Twain's piano. We split a program, and two days later I got the letter thanking us and saying after I left the curator went back in the archives and found a letter the old boy had written in which he said, quote, "There's a damn piano player coming here tomorrow, and I'm upset because if there's anything I don't want in my house, it's a piano player." That piano player happened to be Gabrilowitsch, who eventually married his daughter, which must have pleased him immensely. But she wrote such a lovely testimonial about him and their life together and many references to Bauer. They both had a good sense of humor but in sessions it wasn't evidenced because he basically was a very serious person about life. He talked that way in the book. He and Gabrilowitsch had serious talks, but they liked other subjects that were involved in those things because they only enhanced music, not squashed it.

Bauer once remarked publicly, “Ossip and I have been the closest of friends for 25 years. We’ve traveled together, had deep discussions about many many things and we’ve found ourselves in agreement on just about everything.” Gabrilowitsch said, “That’s true. We’ve agreed on just about everything except on the many, many occasions when Harold was wrong.” That kind of humor crept in at public meetings, but I never saw him like that in the private coachings.

JM: It was all music – serious.

H: Yes. You know a lot of times with other people he wanted to do the best he could for you. He was very nice. I played the Third Rachmaninoff with the orchestra and he was told about it and wrote a wonderful letter because I had not played it for him, and his greatest accent in the congratulation was that I had achieved it without the aid of anyone else. And evidently from all his behavior in that letter that I had read about him and knew about him that was the way he thought things should be. You’re the tree, you’ve got the branches, and you see that they all grow healthily.