



Retired from academia,
Rebecca Penneys
continues to perform
and educate

Acclaimed pianist aims to spread the ‘language of peace’

By KILEY MALLARD / USF Advancement

A CHILD PRODIGY, pianist Rebecca Penneys has been immersed in music since she began playing by ear as a toddler.

It’s a powerful language, she says.

“It’s a language of peace, and I’m definitely an advocate of peace on earth,” she says. “Music makes you smarter.

When you play an instrument, it changes your thinking. The whole idea is that civilization then can go forward in a more peaceful way.”

She has spent decades working toward that end, both performing and teaching. And, while she officially left the classroom in 2017, retiring to St. Petersburg, she has continued educating and supporting student artists through USF.

In 2013, she launched the Rebecca Penneys Piano

Festival, a three-week, tuition-free collegiate piano festival hosted each summer at USF. It draws up to 40 aspiring artists, selected from about 200 applicants, from all over the world. Participants attend private lessons, master classes and concerts — all led and performed by a who’s who of pianists.

Recently, Penneys established the Rebecca Penneys USF Music Fund, which provides two-year assistantships to five music master’s degree students who perform in a chamber music ensemble. Known as the Rebecca Penneys Graduate Collective, it consists of two pianists, a violinist, a violist and a cellist.

It’s a format Penneys is fond of. In 1974, she founded the New Arts Trio chamber ensemble, which won the Naumburg Award for Chamber Music in 1980 and 1982 and was the trio-in-residence at the Chautauqua Institution from 1978-2012.

USF Rising

"That's why I've included other instruments. I couldn't see myself just helping pianists since I still have a chamber music series in New York state. Chamber music is so wonderful to play," she says.

School of Music Director David Williams says the assistantships are great for everybody.

"It's great because the students are on assistantship and their duties are to perform in this group. They're getting an education and a really great experience out of it," he says. "And it's great for the School of Music because we've got some really talented students who represent us — and Rebecca — in the community and performing on and off campus.

"Everybody wins in this arrangement, and it's because of Rebecca."

While most assistantships in the school offer 10 hours a week, the Penneys assistantship is twice that, which makes these spots especially attractive and has helped the school recruit talented musicians from all over the world.

Ji Hae Yun, who hails from South Korea, is a member of the inaugural cohort of the collective. She says as a pianist, she is used to playing alone. "Chamber music helps us understand the other instruments better," she says. "This, in turn, fuels our imagination on our



As a toddler, Penneys would accompany her brother to his piano lessons, then come home, crawl onto the piano bench and play by ear the songs he'd been practicing.



she taught for 37 years. After retiring to St. Petersburg, Penneys chose to invest in students at USF, impressed by the beautiful new music building.

“I think that the USF School of Music is unique compared to other schools of music in the state. It’s a perfect location. It’s a beautiful building. The size is just perfect,” says Penneys, a courtesy Steinway artist in residence at USF.

Penneys grew up as a musical prodigy, playing piano before receiving any formal lessons. She made her recital debut at 9 and performed as a soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra at 11. She won the Special Critics’ Prize at the seventh International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, Poland, at 17. She’d go on to win many other international prizes and perform on every continent except Antarctica throughout her career.

“I’ve always performed, and I’ve always taught. I’ve never felt complete just performing,” she says.

Penneys also studied ballet and always found it easier to dance than to play piano. “When I finally decided, ‘OK, I’m going to be a pianist,’ I thought the only way I could do it and feel good is if I could create the same feeling of floating at the piano that I felt when I danced,” she says.

At USF, Penneys has also supported WUSF Public Media and established a fund to refurbish an antique Steinway piano donated to the College of The Arts. But the festival and the collective remain her focus.

“My hope is these students will latch onto a dream, go out in the world and be involved, whether it’s with an orchestra or playing concerts,” she says. “There’s a big world out there. I think everybody’s voice, if you listen to it, takes you on a unique trip. Everybody needs to give themselves permission to do that. That’s what I do. I go about the world doing that.”

Left: Penneys formed the New Arts Trio with Piotr Janowski, violin, and Steven Doane, cello, in 1974. She formed the Salon Trio in 1997, which performs a five-concert series each year at the Rochester Academy of Medicine.

Penneys, fourth from left, met with students in the initial cohort of the collective, including, from left, cellist Kosuke Uchikawa; violist Joven Aquisap; violinist Gabriel Mendoza; pianist Veerle Winkelmolen; and pianist Ting Yu (replaced by Ji Hae Yun in spring 2023).

own instrument. Sharing different interpretations of the music we play together is also valuable.”

Yun calls being a member of the collective a privilege. “It’s beneficial, because we can really focus on this chamber group, our regular lessons and studio time,” she says.

She hopes to continue performing professionally, and, like Penneys, to one day teach.

“All these ideas are about enriching the community,” says Penneys, reflecting on the festival and the collective.

Penneys’ own career has been a dance between teaching and performing.

She is professor emerita at the University of Rochester’s Eastman School of Music in New York, where

