

Entertainment

# A life of wholeness woven from music

by John Charles

When pianist Helmut Brauss was eight, he suddenly found himself alone in a darkened concert hall in Munich. The Beethoven concert was over, an usher was waking him up.

"I didn't know where I was," Brauss now recalls. "I had been transported to another world."

That experience, which revealed the profound spiritual dimension of great music to the German lad, is one Brauss has never forgotten. Now a professor of music at the University of Alberta, Brauss is still concerned with the inner qualities of the great Viennese masters — Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann — whose music he studies and performs.

This Sunday, January 18, Brauss will give a recital of Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann in Convocation Hall.

Brauss was born in Italy in 1930, of German parents, and grew up in Munich, Stuttgart, and Berlin. His father was an engineer, and both parents loved music.

"They played Beethoven symphonies in piano versions for four hands," Brauss said, over a cup of coffee. "I grew up with music all around me."

He began taking piano lessons at seven — "but I'd been playing since I was five. People thought I should start lessons right away, but the teacher said, 'No, wait, let him play for the fun of it.' Today, because of the Suzuki teaching method, we know those two years *would* have made much difference. Motoric reflections are learned instinctively in early years. When you're seven or eight, a different type of perception takes place. By eight we should already have our technique!"

Recently, in Japan, Brauss heard a six-year-old girl playing a Bach partita, and says it was "fantastic — those tiny little hands dashing all over the keyboard, making *such* music!"

Brauss describes his music development as "very inconsistent," because of the interruptions of the Second World War, plus a severe illness he suffered between the ages of 17 and 25. Though he had dreams of eventually becoming a conductor, he didn't spend enough time at it. His first public piano recital was at the age of 18, in 1948, and after his illness left his pianistic career blossomed.

Brauss' renowned teachers, Elly Ney and Edwin Fischer, were specialists in the Viennese masters, and recordings of Fischer playing Mozart and Schubert are still collected by connoisseurs, 40 years after they were made.

"They were pure musicians — messengers of a spiritual world," Brauss said. "Fischer once told me, 'If you're going to be true to Beethoven you must be true to him down to the bite on your fork.' Their life-language was what I got to know and love. It's good I concentrated on the spiritual power of that music — I wouldn't be the same person now, not as strong."

Brauss came to Canada in 1966 as a visiting professor at the University of Saskatchewan, then was appointed Professor of Music at U of A in 1969, where he teaches piano, chamber music, and piano literature.

His visit to Canada was an "experiment," he says.

"I didn't come to stay — it just happened, as things in my life have always happened. I have never asked for or aimed at an international career. Playing in Canada, and touring in Germany and Japan have simply fallen into place. I believe in a certain amount of spiritual guidance. Things happen or don't happen, but don't force them. A lot of energy can be wasted. The simple thing is to be open all the time."

Brauss continues to concentrate on the great works of composers such as Beethoven and Schubert because he feels

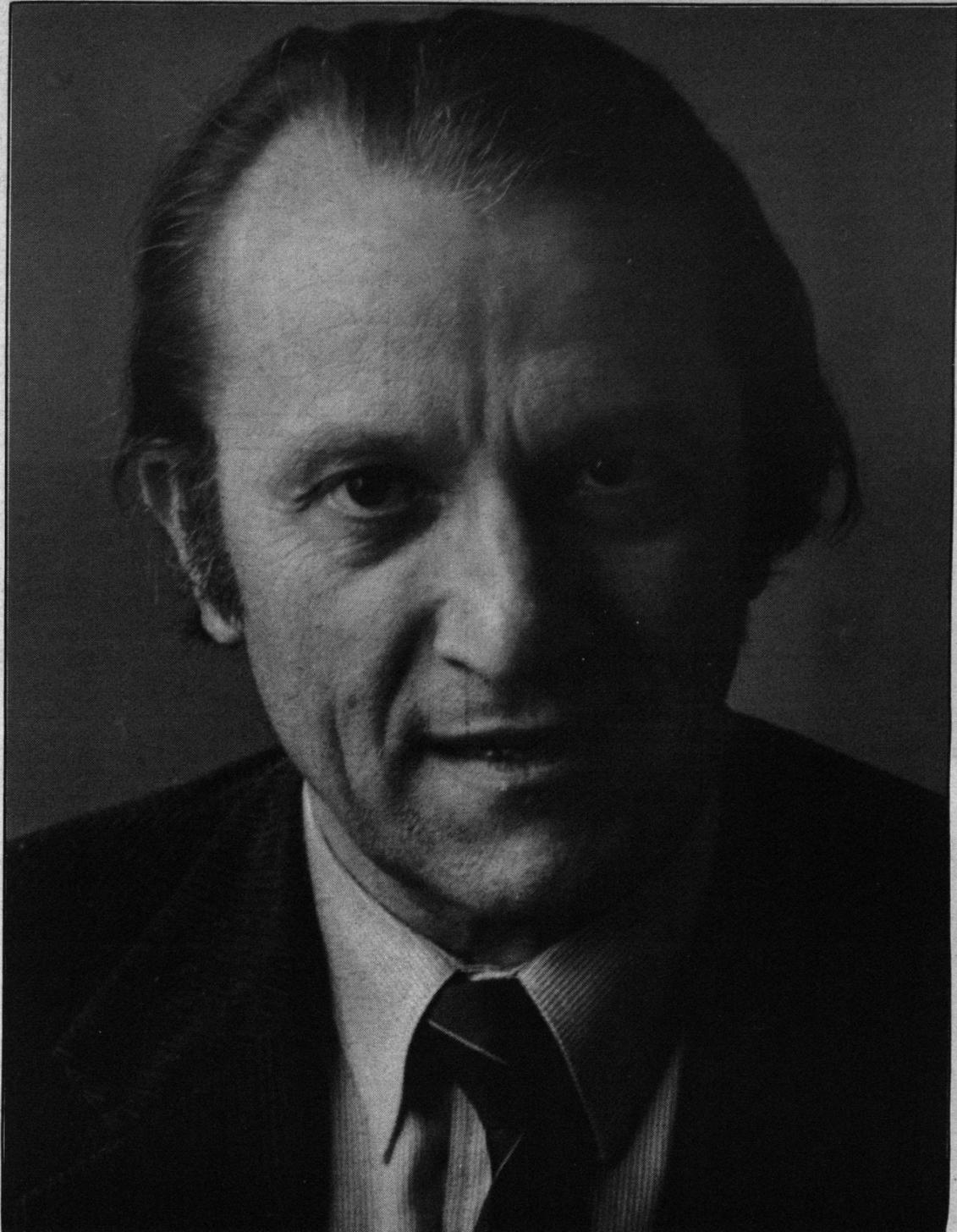


photo by Ron Checora

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the spirituality of their music is something we need in our lives.

"In many modern works the intellectual, manipulative aspects come to the fore. That wasn't the case with Beethoven," Brauss states. "It's something our age hasn't necessarily lost, but we don't cultivate it as much. Speaking with the heart; an unreflective judgment of how things fall into place — that's something children have, and the old masters, but I don't hear it in most modern music."

Brauss stresses his conviction that music is not just entertainment, but embodies deep values which cannot be attained "like buns at the bakery. These truths are not lying in the street, they're the qualities which left me in a trance as a boy. When you've heard such music, such interpretations, you may be a different person. Something has changed you."

In 1982 Brauss made his first journey to Japan to give recitals and master classes. There he met Kuniko Furuhashi, who was coaching students at the same school in the German *lied* (songs of Schubert, Brahms, and Hugo Wolf, to name some masters). They are now married, and Furuhashi is a sessional lecturer in the Music Department, sometimes giving joint recitals

with Brauss, as she will on February 22.

"Some pianists say it's difficult to shift from solo work to accompanying, but I never personally found that," Brauss observed.

In the last decade Brauss has studied and performed some modern composers, Bartok and Hindemith are two with whom he feels in touch. And Edmonton composer Malcolm Forsyth, who wrote a remarkable piano concerto for Brauss, is presently completing a solo piece which Brauss will premiere in September.

"Malcolm's music has that sense of emerging from a vision," Brauss said. "I can play it because I can do it from within."

As for most other contemporary composers, Brauss feels that a younger generation of pianists, who are perhaps "more embedded in the present can bring this music to life better than I can."

Brauss gives at least one major Edmonton recital each year, but also plays chamber music with such groups as the Debut Quartet and the Garneau Trio. On Jan. 22, with the Trio, he'll perform Brahms' *A-Major Quartet for Piano and Strings*. In May he and Furuhashi will return to Japan, and visit China for the first time.

Probably most satisfying, however, is

Brauss' work this summer. As artistic director of the newly created Valhalla Music Centre, in New Denver, B.C., he and Furuhashi will provide master classes and instruction for some 20 students.

"It's a retreat on Slocan Lake, and there'll be time for everyone to think, meditate and enjoy nature. It's not going to be a busy study-and-performance summer camp like Banff," he said.

Brauss is especially pleased that Valhalla is designed as a meeting ground for Canadian and Japanese music students. The site was a detention camp for Canadian-Japanese during the Second World War, and Brauss sees the music centre as "positive redress" for what was done during those dark years.

As teacher, scholar, performer, and husband, Helmut Brauss has succeeded at finding within music a life of wholeness.

Brauss' Con Hall Recital, Sunday at 8, includes: Beethoven's *Sonata No. 13*, op. 27, no. 1; Schubert's *Four Impromptus*, Op. 90; and Schumann's *Fantasia in C*, Op. 17.