

Rosemarie Wright – An Obituary
by Duncan Honeybourne

“A real musician among pianists” – Die Welt

Rosemarie Wright (1931-2020) was one of the leading British pianists of her generation. Blazing a pioneering trail for British artists abroad, she enjoyed much of her early success on the continent. In 1962, *The Times* noted that “Miss Rosemarie Wright...while living in Vienna for the past seven years...has been able to disprove the general rule that English musicians do not win prizes in international contests – in 1960 she made history by being the first British pianist ever to gain the Bösendorfer Prize of a grand piano, and special bouquets have come her way for her Mozart, Haydn and Schubert playing.” However, she was no less cherished in her own country where, for 40 years, she was one of the most frequently broadcast pianists on the BBC and, in 1994, BBC Radio 3 gave Wright the rare honour of a special tribute commemorating her four decades of continuous broadcasting. Returning to Britain in 1971, she became a professor of piano at the Royal Northern College of Music and the Royal Academy of Music, and in later years toured the world as an adjudicator and examiner alongside a busy concert schedule.



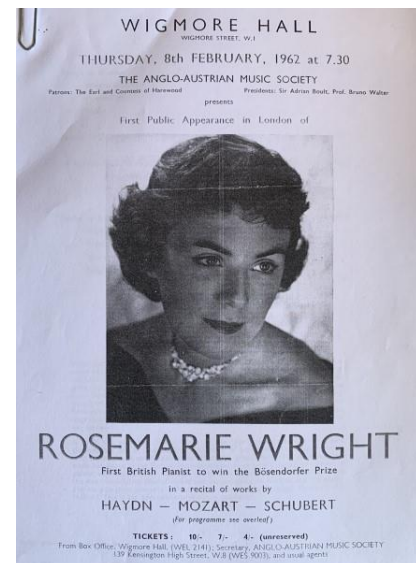
Rosemarie Margaret Wright was born on 12th December 1931 in Coppull, near Chorley, Lancashire, where her father – later to command the first ambulance train sent into France after D-Day - was a general practitioner. After the Second World War, her family settled in East Sussex, where she had to make the choice between tennis and the piano, appearing at Junior Wimbledon but enrolling at London’s Royal Academy of Music in 1948. There she studied first with Patrick Cory and then with Harold Craxton, winning many prizes including the Albanesi Prize, Kate Steel Prize and the Chappell Silver Medal in 1953. On 2nd June 1954, while still a student at the RAM, she gave her first broadcast recital for the BBC Northern Home Service, playing Bach, Mendelssohn and Rawsthorne from the Manchester studios. Later that year, supported by a Tobias Matthay Fellowship from the Academy, she moved to Vienna where, speaking no German, she set about learning the language with characteristic grit and resourcefulness. At the Vienna State Academy, Wright studied with that renowned pedagogue Bruno Seidlhofer (teacher of a galaxy of brilliant Viennese pianists) and won a special prize for Mozart interpretation as well as gaining her final diploma with the highest honours. She also studied piano with the German pianist Wilhelm Kempff, chamber music with the great cellist Pablo Casals and, between 1954 and 1958, worked extensively with the legendary Swiss pianist Edwin Fischer, who wrote of her, “Each time I listen to Rosemarie Wright she plays better and better, so we can be sure that the magnificent artist in her will come out more and more and bring great joy to her listeners.”

In 1959, Wright won the Haydn Prize in the International Haydn-Schubert Competition in Vienna, and Haydn’s piano music was to remain a lifelong preoccupation. The following year, the prestigious Bösendorfer Prize not only put the final seal on Wright’s international recognition, but brought a brand-new grand piano as well, direct from Bösendorfer’s Vienna factory. The *Musical Times* remarked that “Viennese critics all acclaimed the excellence of her performance”, and Wright was awarded the accolade by eleven votes to one.

In 1960, she gave a much-lauded debut recital in Vienna’s Grosser Musikvereinsaal - the Golden Hall of the famous Musikverein - standing in at an hour’s notice to replace an indisposed Martha Argerich. Such was her success, that she was immediately offered numerous engagements throughout Austria

and Germany, as well as recitals in Switzerland, France, Italy, Portugal, Denmark and Holland. After a recital in Manchester in 1961, *The Guardian* reported that “Schubert’s A minor Sonata was given a gripping interpretation.” The following year, after her Wigmore Hall debut, *The Times* commented that “it was her searching intensity of expression that gave her playing its individuality and distinction.”

Throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s she toured throughout Europe, the USA, the Far East and Australasia in a wide recital and concerto repertoire, broadcasting from over 30 different radio stations worldwide. She gave recitals at many major festivals including Vienna, Darmstadt and Cheltenham where, in 1966, she gave the premiere of Arnold Cooke’s Second Piano Sonata, a work she repeated at the Wigmore Hall in 1985 as part of a concert broadcast on BBC Radio 3. Wright appeared as concerto soloist with the London Philharmonic, the Philharmonia, the English Chamber Orchestra, the London Mozart Players, the Vienna Symphony Orchestra at the Musikverein, and the orchestras of Danish State Radio and Radio France. On tour in Britain and Ireland, she played concertos with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, the BBC Orchestras, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and Sinfonietta, and during the Ulster Orchestra’s inaugural season in 1967. Wright made her debut at the BBC Promenade Concerts at the Royal Albert Hall in 1971, playing Beethoven’s Second Piano Concerto with the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Sir Adrian Boult.



Intensely industrious and committed to the classical repertoire – she played the complete piano works of Haydn, Mozart and Schubert and all but one of the 32 Beethoven Sonatas – Wright had an extensive and searching repertoire far beyond that. She broadcast a huge range of neglected piano music, championed British piano music at continental festivals and gave many world premieres. Wright was an energetic advocate of the sonata by Richard Rodney Bennett, which she worked on with the composer and broadcast for Swiss Radio. Always a sought-after chamber musician, she played piano quintets with the English String Quartet and gave recitals with cellists Georg Donderer and Moray Welsh and violinists Eduard Melkus and Yossi Zivoni, with whom she gave the London premiere of Rubbra’s Third Sonata for violin and piano at the Wigmore Hall in 1985 at a concert commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Composers’ Guild of Great Britain. She broadcast frequently during the 1970s and 80s in a trio with David Butt and Ross Pople, respectively principal flute and cello of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Together they gave the first performance of the Anthony Hedges Trio no.1 for flute, cello and piano at Southampton’s Turner Sims Concert Hall in 1985, with a BBC Radio 3 broadcast the following year.

Wright’s immaculate technique, warm-hearted musicianship and diverse repertoire made her a popular choice with radio producers throughout her career. She recorded over 150 solo recital programmes for the BBC alone, and also continued to broadcast for European broadcasting networks well into her sixties. Jillian White, a senior BBC producer with whom Wright frequently worked, recalls “her sincerity and integrity...I remember Rosemarie as being very, very conscientious and dedicated to music – a language which we both shared as being a major conduit to world understanding!” White reflects: “I always thought there was a synergy, in tonal colours, that Rosemarie found with her pianistic touch – she had a tender heart...which showed in both her choice of repertoire as well as touch.”

In 1984, with Jillian White as producer, Wright made an admired recording of piano music by the American composer Edward MacDowell, followed a decade later by a series of Haydn sonata CDs recorded on an original 1799 Broadwood fortepiano. Her growing interest in the possibilities of the fortepiano demonstrated Wright’s enduring appetite for new challenges, as well as the fascination

Haydn's music continued to hold for her. She gave many complete series of the Austrian composer's 50-plus keyboard sonatas, broadcasting them worldwide. Later recital tours included the Far East, Australia and New Zealand, where she was frequently invited to give lecture recitals and masterclasses at leading universities.



She was deeply concerned with the musical education of young people, and was a devoted and dedicated teacher whose influence, kindly but firm, was widely felt. Quietly insightful and gently probing, her insistence was always on rigorous discipline (she herself practised eight hours a day for decades) and the deeper meanings within the music of the composers she loved. She gave generously and unstintingly of her wisdom, warmth and wit, and her polished technical resources were an inspiration to those in her charge. Nicholas Brown, one of Wright's RNCM students, comments, "I well remember her playing perfectly articulated scales with a pencil over her second and fourth fingers but under the third."

As Pianist-in-Residence at Southampton University from 1972-80, Wright gave the first piano recital in the newly opened Turner Sims Concert Hall in 1974. From 1972-78 she was a Senior Tutor in Keyboard Studies at the Royal Northern College of Music and, from 1978-96, Professor of Piano at her own *alma mater*, the Royal Academy of Music.

She adjudicated numerous festivals and competitions, including the Southern Arts and BBC Young Musician Competitions, and the Hong Kong Piano Competition. She examined for the ABRSM for over 20 years, undertaking many lengthy overseas tours. "Sadly, she started to struggle with her hearing", reflects her son Philippe Brandt, "so began to find examining harder and harder. So she went back to her first love of just playing the piano, which she did religiously at home on her beloved Bösendorfer for up to three to four hours a day." Wright was always a gifted and imaginative programme planner and, in retirement, put together many recitals for the Hastings and Rother Voluntary Association for the Blind, playing at Healey House Care Home in Hastings. Given that her advice to her students was always to have a programme "on the go", and that the sharing of the music she treasured was far more important to her than the prestige of the venue, this generosity of spirit was entirely characteristic.

She was a kind and loyal friend, quietly witty, self-deprecating and refreshingly direct. Outside music, she had a passion for 19th century painting and, when touring Australia, was thrilled to have the opportunity to see an exhibition of the work of Arthur Streeton, her favourite Australian artist. In her later years she took great delight in the company of her two grandsons.

In 1961 she married the conductor Michel Brandt, for many years a Senior Lecturer at the Royal Northern College of Music. She is survived by Michel, their sons Philippe and Christophe, and their grandsons Tom and Freddie.

Duncan Honeybourne

Rosemarie Wright (Brandt), pianist

born Chorley, Lancashire, 12th December 1931, died Hastings, East Sussex, 25th April 2020, aged 88

BBC Radio 3 broadcast a tribute to Rosemarie Wright on Friday 29th May 2020, at 8.45am, featuring an archive recording of her playing Three Preludes by the Russian composer Lyadov, recorded in 1988.

**Rosemarie Wright – a personal appreciation by her former student Duncan Honeybourne
(www.duncanhoneybourne.com)**

Rosemarie Wright came into my life when I was 12 years old. She was announced as an adjudicator for the Weymouth Music Festival and, shortly afterwards, unwell and away from school one Thursday morning in November 1989, I excitedly spotted her name in the *Radio Times* and listened to her giving a recital of Russian piano music on the radio. I loved the playing, and looked forward to meeting her the following March. To my disappointment, pianists in my age group were assigned to a different adjudicator, but I discovered Rosemarie was giving a masterclass during the afternoon of the Festival. I signed up, and played the Brahms G minor Rhapsody, op.79 no.2.

I immediately took Rosemarie to my heart. She was warm, encouraging and said “I wish I’d had you in my class this morning!” She said I produced a good range of dynamics and encouraged me to intensify the drama in my playing. I remember her making me play the ending - which dissolves into a whisper only to be punctured by a brutal loud chord - and encouraging me to shake the listeners from their seats in surprise and alarm! Then she jumped backwards as I played the chord with the required force. “There, you can do it!!” she smiled. After the class, she wished me well, and I hoped I’d see her again.

A year or so later, I took my Grade 8, with a prize for gaining the highest marks in the country that session. My local teacher in Dorset thought the time had come for me to go on to a more advanced teacher, and Rosemarie Wright was the clear choice. My teacher, the late Jennifer Sanders, wrote to Rosemarie, who said she remembered me well and would love to take me on. I was thrilled, and my journey towards being a professional musician began. Rosemarie suggested I come to see her on Saturdays at the Royal Academy of Music. For the next five years, Saturdays were a time of heady inspiration. I would leave Weymouth on an early train and my lesson with Rosemarie would last at least two hours. Exhausted and invigorated, I’d get home in time for bed.

Rosemarie suggested I would benefit from the additional opportunities offered by the RAM’s Junior Academy: chamber music and other supporting classes. I won a scholarship and duly started attending for the full day. During my teens I gave recitals all over the south of England, lunchtime concerts at many London churches, and played several concertos under Rosemarie’s supervision, starting with my lifelong favourite, the Schumann, with the local orchestra at home in Weymouth. Rosemarie herself had played the Schumann Piano Concerto as a student at the Academy, and had studied it with Harold Craxton, doyen of the London piano teachers of his day. She often referred to him when we were learning it, and imparted to me a treasury of insights which I still draw upon regularly in my own teaching. We went on to study the Beethoven 1st and 3rd concertos, the Rachmaninov 2nd, and the Franck Variations Symphoniques. Rosemarie’s first-hand experience of playing the works we learned, with many of Europe’s most distinguished orchestras and conductors, made for a heady and vocation-affirming apprenticeship.

Rosemarie was a mentor as well as teacher; not for her was my supervision “just a job”, or a task to be taken lightly. For her, playing the piano and making music was a precious and privileged calling, carrying a vast responsibility to the great music and the composers to whose profound utterances she had devoted her life. Nothing was about the glory or glamour of the performer, all that mattered was honest and humble fidelity to musical truth. For me, that is what is so special about Rosemarie’s own artistry.

During RAM holidays, Rosemarie would give me extra lessons, lasting hours, in London studios, firmly refusing to accept any more money than the hire charge incurred by the venue. When on tour in the Far East she would write to me once or twice each week, telling me all about her examining assignments and the sights, sounds and tastes of distant lands, and enquiring with interest and concern about my progress at school and, most importantly of all, my practice regime. I would send her a report of each concert I gave, and I would send recordings where possible. Almost always by return of post,

her lengthy “Kritische Bericht” would arrive, giving me a frank assessment of how I had acquitted myself. Rosemarie guided my programming, but she always gave me space to be myself and to explore my own paths. She was a kindly, firm adviser, but she was never dictatorial, and she sought never to stifle my own wayward creative flame. That, to me, is great teaching.

Rosemarie knew I had my own voice and a strong personality, and she also knew that I would make plenty of errors of judgement along the road to find my own way. She had the wisdom, and the faith, to guide and support me while I ploughed my own furrow, gently suggesting and probing, but always quietly knowing that I was a determined figure who would get there in the end and that my playing would speak for itself. She never attempted to smother or control me, and she took warm and reassuring care of me when things didn't work out quite as I'd hoped. And she always believed in me, which was a lifeline.

What Rosemarie didn't know, and nor at the time did I, was that I was autistic. She knew I struggled, but she listened, she never judged and she always found time for me. My learning methods and behaviour patterns were unorthodox and they baffled and infuriated many of my teachers, but Rosemarie met me on my own terms. I found big social environments overwhelming and unsettling and, in trying to rise to them, I often struggled to cope and found myself burning out my limited capacity to function happily and effectively. Rosemarie wasn't an effusive or overly social person, she was quiet, measured and constant, and all this made her the perfect levelling factor in my turbulent pianistic apprenticeship.

I started with Rosemarie a gifted but undisciplined pianist. She built my technique, guided me towards musical maturity and helped me to work extremely hard and in a highly structured way. She influenced me enormously in repertoire building, and she played a big role in shaping my musical tastes and aesthetics. My own teaching has evolved with her inspiring and insightful example constantly in mind. And Rosemarie showed me a potent, tangible example of the inner humility and discipline that is a requisite for any quest towards truth in art. Without a doubt, she made me the pianist and teacher I am today. I have enjoyed a deeply fulfilling career for twenty years, and Rosemarie has been the biggest single influence on that. I always say that thanks to her I know my job, and can independently solve most challenges thrown at me, whether as a player or in my cherished role as a teacher.

Rosemarie frequently made reference to her own teachers and when I left her, at the age of almost 19, she announced she had a present for me. It was a first edition of that wonderful collection of essays by her own beloved teacher, the legendary Swiss pianist Edwin Fischer: *Reflections on Music*. It is inscribed, in her distinctive hand: “A few thoughts to accompany you on your musical journey. With my warmest wishes for your artistic fulfilment.” The book is among my most closely treasured possessions.

I don't think Rosemarie entirely agreed with all the choices I took as my career developed, but she respected and trusted that I was an individual, and that I had the vision and the strength of character to find my own route. That is not only great teaching, but it is also great friendship, and Rosemarie was ever loyal and supportive. What is more, I am glad she lived long enough to see how things worked out for me in the end. I followed in her footsteps teaching at the University of Southampton, and she was always interested to hear about my work there.

A year or so before she died, I sent Rosemarie a postcard from the Yorkshire Dales to let her know I was playing on the radio. I received a card in reply:

“I managed to catch your BBC broadcasts and I thought you played very well. And it was good to see you in the Radio Times.”

It made me smile as I cast my mind back 30 years, to the times when I'd spot Rosemarie in the *Radio Times* and make time in my childhood week to listen to her.

Rosemarie will be greatly missed, and I can't quite think of her not being around somewhere. Her spirit most assuredly is, and her legacy lives on in the many students she taught, in the memories of her marvellous playing and in the recordings she has left. For me, as long as I am still playing and teaching, Rosemarie Wright will be looking over my shoulder, helping me to play right through a phrase or, as she sometimes encouraged me, "play it with a smile".