

Notables

Episode 11: Anne-Marie McDermott

TRANSCRIPT

Anne-Marie: For any kid having the opportunity to be able to be creative in whatever way. So it's not going to always be music for every kid, maybe it's dancing, maybe it's art, right, but to not afford every kid that opportunity is a really profound loss. I think, you know what I mean, I'm just so deeply grateful that I was able to discover this, thanks to my parents allowing me to explore.

Noah: You are listening to Notables, an Education Through Music podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and I'm joined today by Anne-Marie McDermott. Anne is a classical pianist and member of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. She is also the artistic director of several music festivals, including Bravo Vail Valley Music Festival. Now, without any further ado, Annie, thanks so much for being here.

Anne-Marie: It's a joy to be here and to talk about such an important and fun topic. Thank you for the invitation.

Noah: Of course, what I know about your early childhood music experiences is that your first concert you attended at the age of five, and I know that your first performance at Carnegie Hall was at the age of 12.

Anne-Marie: Right.

Noah: And so I'm very interested in what happened in those seven years interim?

Anne-Marie: Yeah, yeah, that's a very good question, right? So I grew up in a non-musical family. Both my parents were non-musicians. I have two sisters, a brother. And my mother, for my life I'm so grateful to her, she, around the age of five, exposed all of us really to music. I played the guitar, I played the piano, my sister played the violin and the mandolin, my brother played the tambourine and we sang songs. But also I took Irish step dancing lessons, I did gymnastics. I was a high diver. So just a busy, fun exploration, as a kid, of possibilities with my life right. And so all my sisters and I, we all studied with the same teacher on Long Island, Joseph Constantino. So he was kind of a jack of all trades. He was wonderfully fun and approachable and not too disciplined at all. This was just make music, have fun, challenge yourself, communicate. And so you know, every holiday in my household growing up, every holiday involved music making. That was just normal. That's what we did, is we all played music together, the whole family, relatives, all of this. So you know, we just kind of plugged away. I have to say I was very drawn to playing the piano and this is why I have such a passion for exposing kids, when they're really young, to an instrument. For me, the first concert I went to when I was five I don't remember who the performer was or what the piece was, but it was a piano concerto and I just remember this visual image of a big, shiny black instrument on stage in front of an orchestra with a spotlight on it, and to me at that age I thought this is the most powerful and the most glamorous thing I'd ever seen. It just wow. I just want to be that powerful,

right. Then you go through life and you learn a lot better. You get humbled along the way, but at any rate. So you know, as in those intervening years we all entered small little local competitions and I always loved performing. The great thing about being a kid is you don't yet know about having fear when you get up and perform. You're just kind of brave, you just go do it, right. And so it got better and better by the age of 10, then I started going to the Manhattan School of Music pre-college division in the city and so that was very...that was like a real feather in my cap that I got accepted. All my whole family, we all, started going there and I started working with a very disciplined Italian man, Dalmo Carra, and I was a very obedient student. So I loved, I loved having the structure of what he taught me, putting a fingering on every note, all this and then I had an opportunity of performing Mendelssohn's G minor concerto. I think it was just the first movement at Carnegie Hall when I was 12. And again, the great part of being that age it was just like, okay, yay, let's go do this, like no fear you know.

Noah: Right.

Anne-Marie: And then life progressed from there and, but I'm so grateful because it was a very happy, fun, creative childhood.

Noah: Yeah, the idea that a very disciplined teacher could be exactly what a student is looking for. That's not always what you hear, but I suppose there is a place for all of these different approaches and all of these different styles amongst students, and as long as that is what the student's looking for, that can be a great thing.

Anne-Marie: Really beautifully put. I had never really thought about that, right, because everything's within context of everything else, right. My first teacher who taught all instruments was completely undisciplined and that was great because it gave me a fearlessness, it gave me a joy. By the time I was 10, I was kind of playing like a pig, you know, because I wanted to play. You know, give me a score of music. Just, the more black notes, the more I wanted to play it right. The harder the piece, the more I wanted to play it. And so what I needed was the skills to be able to play these pieces, because that's what my passion was and I didn't have the skills. So that's why I say, when I then switched to a teacher who I was ready for, was ready for such a disciplined approach, right, and I think there are... you brought up such a great, profound point. I don't think there's any one "correct" right. Every kid's different and you know my path in the ensuing years after the age of 12 was very, very unusual. I only studied till I was 18 years old. I never studied again after the age of 18. I don't say that to advocate for it, right.

Noah: Right.

Anne-Marie: For me that's what I needed because, again, I loved the discipline but I wasn't taking ownership of what I was doing artistically. So yes, a teacher said, play it like this, ownership of what I was doing artistically. So yes, a teacher said, play it like this. Again, I was very obedient. Irish Catholic. Yeah, I'll play it like that. Sure I can do that, but I wasn't actually making decisions, and so I had to, at a certain point, kind of free myself of all that structure, put all the pressure back on myself to figure things out.

Noah: Yeah, so you had these five years with a sort of less disciplined, not undisciplined, probably..

Anne-Marie: Of course, right.

Noah: But less disciplined teacher that allowed you the space to realize what your own personal goals were.

Anne-Marie: Yes.

Noah: And they involved finding more discipline so that you could play more black notes per square inch.

Anne-Marie: Absolutely, it's so true. Yes, yes.

Noah: And then you did the drills, you gained the skills, but then you realized you didn't have the ownership of your musicianship.

Anne-Marie: Exactly, exactly I didn't have a personal voice with what I was doing musically. And I felt, you know and it's an interesting transition because you don't really know if you actually have a powerful musical voice until you really start experimenting and taking ownership of it. But I also... I think part of my whole musical journey was having siblings also play music. Right, that we... I played a lot of piano, four hands with my oldest sister, a ton of repertoire for violin and piano. Then, when my oldest sister switched to cello, then we were playing piano trios. I was "forced" to play concertos with both sisters. So I'm learning these orchestral reductions right. So there was a really nice balance between competitiveness and having fun together, and I don't find anything wrong with a little dose of competitiveness, right? I really don't. And I think you know life is long a life with music in it. It's a whole lifetime, right. So you're going to go through your ups and downs and phases. But more importantly, I think, for any kid having the opportunity to be able to be creative in whatever way, so it's not going to always be music for every kid, maybe it's dancing, maybe it's art, right, but to not afford every kid that opportunity is a really profound. Yeah, I think you know what I mean. I'm just so deeply grateful that that I was able to discover this thanks to to my parents allowing me to explore.

Noah: And now for a short break. This podcast is made possible by Education Through Music. ETM's mission is to positively impact student motivation, achievement and self-confidence by partnering with under-resourced schools to integrate music education into the core curriculum. To find out more or to support ETM in its mission, go to etmonline.org. As the piano playing sister, you were the highest utility musician in the group because you were accompanying everybody.

Anne-Marie: For sure. For sure.

Noah: And so how did that I mean..Obviously, it prepared you to then take on a lot of work as a musician. Whereas if you're strictly a soloist, you probably don't play as many concerts every year as...

Anne-Marie: If you are a collaborative artist. Yeah, play a collaborative pianist. Yeah, you know, it was really circumstantial for me that I mean, of course, I was playing with my sisters cellist, violinist, we were playing piano trios, I was accompanying them for everything. I even was forced as a child to practice intonation with them. So you're a violinist, so here I am sitting at the piano as you're learning Tchaikovsky concerto, playing every note on the piano. So my sister could play it in tune. I did that, the sacrifices we made and I certainly didn't always love it, okay, but it absolutely gave me the skills and the confidence that then when I grew up in a family with very little money, right, so at a certain point I wanted to start making some money. So I put myself out there, starting when I was like 16 of I'll play your jury with you, your recital with you, your audition with you, whatever. And I actually did really well. I didn't even have a bank account, people just pay me cash and I was very busy accompanying everybody on the planet and it was really good. And again, that was one of those periods of time where I just had endless courage. Because I remember one example of a cellist who was going to Manhattan School of Music, the college division. He approached me two days before his recital. His pianist got sick and couldn't play with him. He needed me to play his recital program and one of the pieces was Rachmaninoff's Cello Sonata. This is like a piano concerto. This case it's hard. I never played it, I didn't own the music, so I sure, yep, I'll do that and learned it in two days and like and I would never proclaim that I always made the best choices, but I was brave, I was doing that and it's real...So that created the foundation for what became a very big component of my career as a professional musician, which is chamber music, right, but it also this has been a revelation to me those years of just playing with everybody and the lessons I learned the non-musical lessons I learned were really. They stay with me to this day.

Noah: As a collaborative pianist, as opposed to someone who's strictly playing solo repertoire. How does that inform your approach to Bravo Vail and some? Of the other festivals that you direct.

Anne-Marie: Great question. And I mean first, I think, through doing a lot of collaborative piano work, it informs my solo piano work, right, this is a crazy thought that I had some years ago. But I mean essentially, when you're playing solo piano music, it's chamber music in a way, because as a pianist we have to do lots of voicing and any musician does, but particularly at the piano right and so it's almost you're dealing with all 10 fingers, both feet, and playing chamber music kind of brings you outside yourself. When you're just doing solo repertoire, you're in this little orbit of playing the piano, but you're not able to actually step outside that and hear what you're doing actually.

Noah: And everybody else has to kind of fill in around you.

Anne-Marie: Yeah.

Noah: ...as a soloist.

Anne-Marie: Right. And when you're doing chamber music, you're forced to be listening to other people.

Noah: Right.

Anne-Marie: Right, you're doing a piano trio. You and everybody else has to kind of fill in around you, have to hear how the cellist the timing of how they're phrasing their phrase, or the violinist is doing this. You have to think about voicing. You have to think about pedaling outside of yourself to make it blend with these other instruments and for the greater good of the piece of music, right. That's always been an incredibly helpful skill. But the very first artistic directorship I got was a tiny little community in Florida called Ocean Reef. It's a private gated community. I've been running this sweet week-long festival for 18 years now and it's just a week long. Maybe I go down there with like eight colleagues, something like that. So it was a great introduction to how to put a music festival together and the number one focus has to be the music and the integrity of the music you're presenting, right. That has to be number one, right, and the quality of what you're presenting has to be number one. But it was my first experience of people outside of music giving me their passionate opinions about what I was programming. It's like please don't program anymore, Shostakovich, we hate that. You know that kind of thing, right as an example. And so it was really interesting to me how I reacted when I first encountered that kind of a thing of no, we only want to hear Chopin and Mozart, and I think it was Shostakovich Piano Quintet, which I mean, of course, is a very, very dark piece of music. I get that.

Noah: Yeah, an acquired taste, maybe.

Anne-Marie: An acquired taste. Absolutely, right. And you learn as you go. But anyway, I remember a gentleman coming up to me after that performance, very, very upset about this, and my reaction to that was tell me. I asked him, tell me why this upset you. I want to understand when you're listening to this music. What did it evoke in you that made you get upset and fired up about it? Because this is the great thing about music is it speaks individually to all of us. Right, I may love Chopin third sonata, you may not, and we're both musicians, right? And that's the great thing. Music speaks about things that words don't suffice in speaking about right and to me, having a patron very upset was a challenge of like wait, what is it? And then we ended up having a long conversation about it and having a beautiful hug at the end of the conversation and it was like it was kind of a revelation of like I think he maybe just had never heard Shostakovich before and on first hearing he was like I'm not gonna waste my time listening to this, but in talking it through he realized well, actually the darkness of this piece was evoking. You know, some painful memories from my own past and like you know, so in general, the qualities that we learn through music making of picking your battles. So you're going to want, if we're playing, you know Brahms G major sonata you're going to have certain phrases that you're going to want me to do your way and I'm going to have certain phrases I want you to do my way, right. We can't win every battle. We have to figure out which ones, which priorities, and when you're running a gigantic music festival like the Bravo Vail Festival this is a seven-week festival with four orchestras, those challenges are always there. That I have to pick my battles,

okay, and I always just equate it back to music making. That right, okay, no, I'll give you this phrase, if you give me this phrase, as long as we're both within reason.

Noah: Some consensus making.

Anne-Marie: Some consensus. That's exactly it, actually that's it. And then being able to really communicate. So if you want to do a phrase a certain way, if you don't know how to describe it to the group you're playing in, you're not going to get anywhere. So, understanding how to advocate for an idea that you have, and sometimes, in my experience with Bravo Vail, this will be my 14th summer coming up now, so it's a long time and sometimes I've pushed an idea too soon. I didn't plant seeds for the idea of, the big idea for me was I wanted to have an international chamber orchestra at the festival, but I came on too strong at first and so I kind of got shut down. And then I realized, oh, first of all I was a little too passionate about it. I didn't socialize the idea over a little bit of time right, so that I think, as an artistic director, you're a leader in a lot of ways for the organization. So you have to be willing to always show your passion for what you do, because that pulls people. When we talked about that addictive quality that pulls people into this world of music, when they realize really all you need to do is open your heart, open your ears, that's it. You don't need to know a thing, that's it. It's music. Just listen, just react, right, so that being disciplined. You know, I program probably at the Bravo Vail Festival. Well, there are 21 orchestral concerts and probably another 20 concerts, so it's probably about 50 programs or 45, 50 programs every summer, yeah.

Noah: Over seven weeks.

Anne-Marie: Over seven weeks.

Noah: That's incredible.

Anne-Marie: Yeah, so it's like if you're not disciplined in your process, you're sunk.

Noah: Right.

Anne-Marie: Not going to go well, not going to go well.

Noah: Yeah, you can't procrastinate and then expect to pull that off.

Anne-Marie: No, you just can't. You just can't, right. When I think about the importance of music education in young people's life, it's on so many different levels, right. So for me when I started at five I didn't know I was going to become a musician, right. Between the ages of five and 10. But I was able to open up as a person, kind of find confidence with myself through music. For me that was an avenue where I could kind of just feel valuable as a person, and every kid needs that right. And I think you know, there's all these amazing studies talking about the impact that a music education has on a young person. Right, and that they're better at school, they're better at math, they're better at friendships, they're all of this, and I absolutely believe all of that. But on top of that, I think for a kid to have access to learning about anything actually is important. So at

the age of 18 or 20, they don't have a fear of going to a science fair because they don't know anything about science. Why does that not apply to music? So they don't have a fear of going to a classical music concert because they're feeling like, oh, I don't know how to act, I don't know anything about music. How am I going to react If you think about what this world and unfortunately we all got to experience what this world would be like without live music? We all experienced that during the pandemic, that to me, I think that is a recipe for lots of psychological issues, because words just don't speak to everything that we feel as human beings. Art does, sports don't. And listen, I'm a tennis lunatic, but sports don't speak to that. Music and art speak to that, right. But one other lesson I've learned along the way is and I always say this to young musicians, whether they're going to become a musician or not, the business of being courageous in your life and willing to take chances it's a very big turning point in my life was when my mother died, when I was 14. And that, you know, that again impacted the path that I took because it was so devastating, right? I think that's why I stopped studying at 18. But between the ages of 18 and, when my 20s, my career was up and down, some good years, some terrible years, you know, with concerts, of years, I just would get very few concerts and I was trying to support myself and all of this. Then, when certain opportunities and artistic directorship first came up in Ocean Reef, Florida, I had never done this and in fact all my friends kind of were making fun of me because they said at that point I was terrible at returning phone calls and or writing back to people, or like I was terrible, right. But I also wanted to kind of see what's behind that door and take a chance, and it's really because of the chances that I took on my journey I think that I've been able to have a successful career for, you know, decades, right, because I wasn't set that this is one path that you have to take, and I think the greatest gift we can give to any kid is that that courageousness, that sense of freedom that learning is such a gift in our life, right? And how can we dare not allow kids to learn about music? How is that possible that we wouldn't prioritize that? I don't. I don't understand that.

Noah: Well, Annie, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me today.

Anne-Marie: Oh, it's awesome the work that you're doing and it's a privilege to be able to talk to you about such an amazing and important topic. Thank you.