

In Memory of Ronald Smith

who died on 27th May 2004, aged 82

**Joseph Long
11th July 2004**

“The thing one must always remember, Joe, is that technique is creative. There are many pianists who have facility, but few have real technique. To acquire technique, one must make a systematic attempt to analyse every problem and find out just what it is that makes each new piece a revelation.”

We were in the middle of what was to be my final lesson, discussing some of Chopin’s Op. 25 Etudes. It was fitting that Ronald Smith’s favourite three themes - logic, pragmatism and exploration - should be spelled out to me once more. These were the themes that had been present throughout all his careful nurturing. They had been woven into the fabric of lessons from the time, some nine years earlier, when the developed musician now sitting at Ronald’s prized Steinway for the last time was a mere novice seeking advice and attending for audition.

On arriving at the house, tired from travel and somewhat nervous from lack of foreknowledge, I was immediately struck by the frankness and lack of affectation in manner of the man who emerged from his studio to greet me. For somebody with a prodigious international reputation as a pianist and a scholar, Ronald Smith seemed much more approachable, practical and at ease than I could ever have expected. Later observations confirmed my first impression. The house was comfortable and pleasant. Ronald showed enormous enjoyment in domestic and family life spent with his wife Anne and daughter Becca (who was still living at home at the time of my audition). With a friendly dog and three affable-looking cats roaming around the house, there was plenty besides music to keep everyone healthily occupied. Ronald gained satisfaction from gardening, which for him was almost a sanctuary away from the piano. “This is fresh from the garden” was a line I would hear very often when sitting down to a meal in the Smiths’ kitchen. The pride Ronald felt in connection with his home-grown vegetables was palpable, as was his pleasure in being able to share with others the results of his horticultural labours.

Regular lessons, once offered and accepted, immediately made an impact on my musical development. Such was Ronald’s individuality that even the most straightforward problem would be given a treatment uniquely Ronald’s own. Few young pupils, coming for their first couple of lessons, can have been aware of why that treatment was so beneficial or why they were experiencing invigorating feelings of accomplishment at the end of each lesson. It is likely that many, in their innocence, may simply have noticed the gains resulting from the lessons and been glad to accept Ronald’s ground rules without further questions. Clear, concise and inspiring instruction was given by Ronald: a neat, unfussy and enthusiastic approach to study was expected in return. On the face of it, these might appear to be nothing

more than the reasonable demands of a reasonable teacher. The fact that this particular teacher seemed so much more than reasonable was, to the unsophisticated pupil, a welcome bonus, but not one that admitted of detailed reflection. Quite apart from the lack of personal acquaintance such a pupil might have had with Ronald, the directness and speed of the teaching would have left them with little time for any woolly musings of this nature.

It is only after an extended period of study with a teacher that a pupil will genuinely get to know the man behind the teaching. In Ronald's case, I found that time spent maturing under his guidance led to a real appreciation of his exceptional personality and abilities. In all of our conversations, whether they were about the differences in approach between Toscanini and Furtwangler, the foibles of the current government or the relevance of religion to today's society, I found a multitude of fascinating insights and a way of manipulating concepts that could not have come from anybody else. Ronald's intelligence was vast. His convictions regarding any subject were always confidently and honestly expressed, and his openness to being challenged by others or asked to clarify his own opinions was always evident.

Constantly on the lookout for stimulation, constantly seeking to develop and refine ideas, Ronald's mind lent itself perfectly to teaching. In turn, Ronald was deeply interested in broadening the minds of his pupils. Invitations to listen to recordings while having breakfast in the studio were a standard part of the education offered, and many pupils were introduced in this way to some of the great historic recordings of piano and non-piano music. Ronald always showed a genuine interest in hearing just what his pupils might make of unfamiliar pieces and interpretations.

A supreme lucidity, born of years of reflection and experimentation, is the trait that many have singled out as being quintessentially Smithian. Complex or even sublime ideas could often come to seem simple and comprehensible. This never led to a sense that the difficult might be rendered commonplace or trivial. Instead, a ready attainability of what would ordinarily be considered exalted or high-flown fuelled a passion permeating all of Ronald's teaching. Sometimes this passion was expressed through a contagious enthusiasm for adventure and discovery; sometimes it manifested itself more gently in periods of contemplation. At all times Ronald's direct, positive, down-to-earth voice was there, continually reminding his pupils that if they were willing to take trouble over their work, if they were willing to approach their practice with discipline and diligence, and above all, if they were willing to remain optimistic in outlook, they too would be able to attain artistry of the highest calibre.

Anybody who has heard Ronald Smith on record or in concert will know that the inspirational qualities of clarity, rigour and excitement seen in his teaching were equally abundant in his playing. To listen to a Smith recording is to be surprised by the inevitable. It is to be uplifted by the simplicity that can come from distilled experience. It is to be drawn along on a fascinating journey whose purposeful and inexorable progress leaves one wondering why other pianists have not immediately and instinctively adopted the readings presented. The logic of Ronald's interpretations never fails to astound and delight the listener. Those who have examined Ronald's seminal biography and précis of the music of Charles Valentin Alkan will find the same characteristics in his writing. There is a sense of excitement in dealing with the new. A penetration of understanding is shown in all argument and intellectual enquiry, and a gift for explaining and communicating ideas in a clear and succinct manner is always present.

It is of little value to ask whether a mind such as Ronald's is a product of its own occupations or whether the occupations with which it is habitually engaged are a result of innate predisposition. Certainly Ronald's life was full of stimulating activities that must have afforded him opportunity for intensive and varied mental exercise, whether from the sheer effort of learning and performing over forty concertos, from the rigours of preparing pieces for recording to such a level of perfection that they could be committed to disc in a single take, from the broadening experience of undertaking multiple concert tours of America, Canada, Australia and the Far East, from the numerous collaborations with other artists of distinction such as Henry Wood, Edwin Fischer, Adrian Boult and Malcolm Sargent, or from the often-overlooked interest he showed in composition. Each of these pursuits must have made its mark on Ronald, and the fruits of such diverse activity are to be found in the recordings, writings and memories he now leaves behind him.

"I can't understand, Joe, what drives those people who get absorbed in thinking about how they'd like to be remembered when they're dead. I couldn't care less how I'm remembered. I won't be able to know what people think so it's of no interest to me. Can you think of a reason why people become excited by this?"

We were in the kitchen drying dishes after one of Anne's beautifully prepared meals which itself had followed my lesson on the Op. 25 studies. Ronald was making a characteristically vehement speech on the futility of indulgence and theatrical navel-gazing. I had heard him say similar things in the past and had agreed with them, but this time I thought it might be fun to play devil's advocate and rise to the challenge implied in his question.

"Aren't you already making yourself too important by saying that?" I asked. "Aren't we all just part of a process, the direction and purpose of which we can't understand? Surely our influence on the process is there, whether we like it or care about it or not."

He was silent for a moment and I could see that he was enjoying my attempt to turn the conversation into a mock-contest to see which of us might show the greater self-subjugation. Finally he said "I know I'm just part of the evolutionary process. You see, Joe, I've always had an image in my mind of humans evolving from simple creatures like snails, evolving to a state of perfection coinciding with the present time, and then devolving again until we're snails at some point in the future. Who knows? Things may actually turn out that way. I don't think it matters. All we can know is what we've got now. We can try to influence the future, but we stand no chance of being valuable to anybody unless we work with what we currently have. Life's too short to worry about things we can never know."

That was all that was said, but I remember thinking that this was common sense of a kind we can all do with a dose of from time to time. It was common sense, above all else, that made Ronald such a great artist. It was his clear-headedness, his unwavering ability to remain focused and free of distraction, his capacity to cast aside the irrelevant and concentrate only on what really mattered, that led to the transcendent splendour of his finest achievements.