

The Real McCabe

Profiled by the *New Yorker*, She Made Her Carnegie Hall Debut in Her 20s. But UW Alumna Robin McCabe Faces Her Greatest Challenge Today--Running the UW School of Music

by Nedra Floyd Pautler



Robin McCabe. Photo by Mary Levin.

A chance meeting helped launch both of their careers.

Juilliard piano student Robin McCabe and would-be author Helen Drees Ruttencutter met by happenstance in a Manhattan apartment in the fall of 1973.

McCabe, a Puyallup native and UW graduate then in her early 20s, was earnestly studying piano at the Juilliard School: Her goal was to become a concert pianist. Ruttencutter was a copy editor for the *New Yorker*: Her goal was to break into the "big time" by writing a piece for the magazine.

Ruttencutter met McCabe at a friend's apartment near Central Park; McCabe and another piano student were renting rooms in the friend's duplex. The would-be writer was looking for a compelling topic and thought a music student's years of training and first steps into a career might work. As a young pianist from an obscure town in Washington state, McCabe's experiences could make for high drama.

After following McCabe to school and practice for three years--and after months of careful, detailed writing--Ruttencutter's article appeared in the Sept. 19, 1977, *New Yorker*. An immediate success, it was later expanded into a book, *Pianist's Progress*, and was translated into Japanese. Ruttencutter went on to write profiles of André Previn and the Guarneri String Quartet and was working on a piece on Bill Cosby when she died in 1993.

The article was "quite magical, a wonderful break for me," says McCabe, now 45 and director of the UW School of Music, where she still maintains an active teaching and performing career. "It was a very serendipitous thing." Ruttencutter's profile, coupled with McCabe's winning performances at major piano competitions, prompted New York music critics to attend her Alice Tully Hall and Carnegie Hall debuts.

It was a long way to come for a young woman from an unpronounceable town in the far corner of the country. McCabe is the oldest of three daughters of Edward McCabe, a Puyallup physician, and his wife, Lou. Both parents played the piano and, when Robin was five, they discovered that she had perfect pitch. Soon after, they found a piano teacher and Robin started taking lessons.



Robin McCabe at age 10 playing the organ in her parent's home. Photo courtesy of Robin McCabe.

She showed her adaptability at an early age. Childhood summers at the family cabin on Spirit Lake, Idaho, meant finding creative ways to keep up with piano practice while not missing out on fishing.

"My parents asked me to play for a group of nuns. This meant being coaxed away from fishing, so I found a compromise. I anchored my fishing pole to the dock while the line stayed in the water. As soon as I was done performing, I ran down to the dock, and there was the biggest trout I'd ever seen on that line just waiting for me. I thought God was rewarding me," she says.

A straight-A student at Puyallup High School, McCabe enjoyed tennis and skiing and even ran for student body secretary (she lost to another doctor's daughter). She played glockenspiel in the high school band so that she could accompany the football team to all its games.

At the UW, McCabe continued her academic and musical success, graduating *summa cum laude* and taking courses in art history, literature, French and even economics. When she was a freshman and sophomore, she performed the morning chimes concerts heard across campus. "My friends kept my identity secret, but would tell me how various classmates throughout campus would react," McCabe recalls. "Some of my apparent smash hits were *Norwegian Wood* and *Scarborough Fair*. And, I did an unforgettable *Winchester Cathedral*."

But her love remained the piano. "She was the rare undergraduate who had a clear goal," recalls UW Professor Emeritus Béla Siki, a concert pianist who led the school's keyboard division when McCabe was a UW student.

Siki was in his second year at the UW when Robin showed up in his class. The connection they made has

lasted a lifetime. "I was very happy to have Robin. She knew what she wanted: She wanted the best instruction. She wanted to work hard. Many undergraduate students falter. Not Robin."

Nearing graduation in 1971, McCabe took Siki's advice to audition for the Juilliard School, regarded by many as the premier music conservatory in the country. She was accepted to the doctoral program and studied under Ilona Kabos, Rudolf Firkusny, Ania Dorfmann and Joseph Bloch.

A 40-year veteran of the Juilliard faculty, Bloch counts McCabe among his stable of talented students, which also includes Van Cliburn. "I could go through the alphabet from A to Z and come up with a positive adjective for every letter to describe Robin," Bloch says. "And, I'd end with zeal."

She is among the handful of Bloch's students who became colleagues on the Juilliard faculty and lifelong friends. "She had all the qualities of an ideal student. She was a natural pianist, a marvelous sight reader. She is a very strong lady. Solid. Dependable."

Bloch knows much of the challenges facing concert pianists, especially women. "It is much more difficult for women to be successful in this business," he says of classical music performance and recording. "For one thing, there are 18 women for every man trying for this kind of career. It takes a certain aggressiveness. The extensive travel is physically and emotionally demanding, and there are fewer booking opportunities for women," he says.

Conventional wisdom says that organizations responsible for booking classical pianists are typically women's organizations, and that they prefer to have male performers, Bloch adds. "I'd don't know if this is true or not, but I do know there are fewer opportunities for women."

MCCabe experienced this subtle discrimination first-hand at her Alice Tully Hall debut. One New York critic spent most of her review condemning the color of McCabe's dress, rather than critiquing the performance.

It was a publicity nightmare that tuxedo-clad male performers don't encounter, and that McCabe--and other female performers--can't forget. "It's terrible," she says. "A man puts on a good-looking tux and a white shirt and he's set. But a woman comes out in a dress somebody doesn't like and the dress gets reviewed more than the performance. When I read that review I was ready to get a dagger, silk pillow and a kimono and just finish myself off. I met that critic years later and she sort of apologized. She said she didn't mean to hurt me. I told her it was a pretty low blow. It was a bitter pill, but we all have a few of those."

Experiences like this have made McCabe philosophical about the music business. "I tell talented music students to be as open as they can to everything," she says. "Life will give you some winners and some losers, but open yourself up to experiences. To make it you have to have talent, resilience and good breaks. There is no question in music that you need help; you need people who will believe in you and sort of grease the wheels for you. My first record came because someone believed in me and helped me get an audition with the record company.

"I'm not saying you have to charm everybody, but raw talent is not enough. The person with the explosive talent and the sociopathic personality who goes to the post-concert party and says all the wrong things is not going to be asked back."

In the 18 years since the *New Yorker* article appeared, McCabe has proven her staying power. Today she can select her piano students and her concert performances. Recent seasons have seen her performing

with the Prague Symphony, the St. Louis Symphony, the Seattle Symphony and the Tokyo Symphony. She is especially popular in Asia, and her concert tours there often inspire Asian students to study at the UW.

Her recordings on Vanguard and the Swedish Grammafons BIS labels have won accolades. Of her CD recording of Bartók piano works, *Stereo Review* wrote, "The recording is all we have come to expect--which is to say--first rate!"

But her recording and concert career looks tame compared to her latest new experience--leading the UW School of Music, a position she assumed last June. Money is tight and getting tighter, space is at a premium, much of the public is unaware of the array of services the school performs, and its _____ professors don't always agree on the school's direction.

"I'm a performer. The School of Music, to my knowledge, has never really had a performer as director," McCabe says. "But, I have enough academic background that I feel comfortable here. I think that is the reason the faculty urged me into this chair. We had 10 years of a very different kind of director, so maybe it was time for a little bit of the other side.

"The school does many different things with many different brushes. We have ethnomusicologists, some who concentrate in very specialized areas like Nepalese music; we have violinists, performers, composers dedicated to computer music. Sometimes bringing everyone together can be a problem."

Part of the answer, she tells the faculty, is similar to what she tells her students: Be open to change.

"There are ways to make a living in music that were not viable 20 or 30 years ago," McCabe says. "The field of music technology changes as fast as computer chips change. Now there are careers in managing, arranging and business. The UW School of Music is in a better position than the traditional music conservatory to offer the type of interdisciplinary education now sought. It is important that our students be aware of that, and that our training reflects new career opportunities."

She has several concrete plans with that end in mind:

- * Offer a performing certificate program for graduate students who are talented performers but may not have the scholarly abilities or desire to be in high-level academic seminars.
- * Increase the visibility of school performances, including the much-improved University Symphony.
- * Increase interdisciplinary projects, such as the five-performances of *West Side Story* that the school staged with drama and dance last month.
- * Increase fund-raising efforts, particularly for scholarships.
- * Increase the school's participation in international music by hosting more competitions and conferences.

The music faculty recently rewrote its undergraduate curriculum, changing some requirements and giving students more flexibility. The most popular undergraduate degree in the school--the bachelor of music degree--is a five-year program preparing students for careers in teaching and performing. The school offers another degree for students who want to focus solely on performance.

"I am hoping there can be a real morale boost within these halls even with the economic anxiety we are experiencing. I want people to know they are appreciated for what they do," McCabe says.

"But we need to stop thinking of ourselves as some kind of rarefied item. I think the arts are just as important to life as water. People will come to appreciate the arts the more they are exposed to them."

The pressures of running the school, teaching piano students and performing might crush some artists. But years of success as a concert pianist, teacher and an administrator have boosted McCabe's confidence. "I've found it also helps to have a sense of humor," she says.

Some of her fans might wonder why she now sits behind a desk more often than behind a keyboard. "I have spent so much of my time sitting at a piano or playing it somewhere in the world or preparing to play it somewhere. And, recently, I've been sitting next to young, good pianists who are trying to do the same thing. It is interesting to take yourself out of that and look at the bigger problems--collegial problems, curricular problems. I've always loved the University environment."

Does taking on administrative tasks mean an end to her concert career? Not on your life. "Obviously, I have to cut back, but I have two excellent associate directors who are a tremendous help to me. So, I will be able to perform some. The ideal career for me is playing and teaching," she says.

"If someone told me I could not play piano in public for the next five years, I would die."

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