

From Russia *with Love*

School celebrates 20 years of musical nourishment for mind, soul

Story and photos by Melissa Gerr

“Music is an international language. It’s the best present parents can give to their children.”

— Alexandra Suboy, director, Janna Friedman School of Music



When she plays music, Janna Friedman says she enters “a different world,” and as a devoted teacher, she has invited hundreds of young music students to experience that world with her.

Born into a musical family, Friedman began to play piano as a toddler; as a teen, she studied at a conservatory with world-class musicians in her native Kiev, the only Jewish student allowed each year due to quota restrictions.

Her success as a concert pianist grew, and she performed with many famous conductors, but in 1979, also due to restrictions for Jewish citizens, she left Kiev with her husband, Simon, and their two children.

Friedman carried her passion for music to the U.S. and when she arrived in Baltimore she landed at the Conservatory of the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, where she taught for 14 years. But she always dreamed of owning her own school.

In 1994, she founded the Baltimore Music School, now the Janna Friedman School of Music, and many of her Peabody students followed her there, she said. One of her first instructors

Teacher Olga Chala instructs David Guzman, who has been her student for almost eight years.



Instructor Chala runs through musical scales with student Sarah Shapiro, 9.

was Alexandra Suhoy, also an accomplished pianist, who sought out Friedman when she immigrated to Baltimore in 1992 through a mutual friend.

“She was my [music] student in Kiev, I’ve known her since she was seven years old,” Friedman said.

Before she left Ukraine, Suhoy spent several years touring Europe, where she didn’t know many languages but connected and communicated with the audiences through music.

“Music is an international language,” she said about the experience and counts that among the benefits of a musical education. She added that the drill of learning and memorizing complex sequences of sounds develops patience and ear training and said, citing research on math and science performance, music also helps prepare children for other tasks and subjects.

“It’s the best present parents can give to their children,” she asserted.

Depending upon the semester and the classes offered, the Janna Friedman School of Music, with locations in Owings Mills and Pikesville, fluctuates between 10 to 12 teachers and 40 to 100 students, ranging in age from 4 to 18.

“Music really helps me with everything; it helps me be a more well-rounded person” said David Guzman,

15, who has studied with instructor Olga Chala for about eight years and is an acting student at Carver Center for the Arts and Technology. “Playing piano takes a lot of patience and practice. ... If something doesn’t work, you have to be patient and keep practicing.”

Chala said Guzman “always practices with pleasure, and he has something [special] inside with music.” She added that Guzman and several other students from the school compete in, and some have won, the Music-Fest Rising Talents and the American Fine Arts Festival competitions, which include performances at Carnegie Hall in New York City for the winners.

Both Friedman and Suhoy attribute the “perfect triangle between teacher, parent and student” as a large part of the success in a child’s musical education.

“If everybody supports the practice, then it will happen,” said Suhoy, who is also a senior project manager and grants manager for the state of Maryland. “Teachers only see students once a week, so for that time we discuss what we play, we learn, and the homework is given. The rest depends on the child and parent.”

Adequate space to practice in, securing an instrument and the ability



Alexandra Suhoy, director of the Janna Friedman School of Music, says music is the best present parents can give to their children.

to allow for an atmosphere at home to concentrate are crucial commitments from the parents, she added.

Students are taught basics such as how to read music, correct posture and the positioning of an instrument, but they also learn about the lives of the composers and are taught the differences in performance depending upon genre.

There is “classical, early classical, it’s a special way how to play,” explained Suhoy. “When it’s contemporary, like Disney songs, it’s a completely different way to play. So students need to know how ... [and they] will enjoy playing.”

Friedman and Suhoy both experienced “very serious and strict” music instructors in Ukraine, a style that was not adopted at the school. While teaching and practice are taken very seriously, the rapport developed between teacher and student is of utmost importance.

“[It’s] more like a friendly relationship. ... My teachers in Russia, we were afraid of them,” recalled Suhoy. “We talked to them only about music. Here, they can talk to teachers about other things on their mind, and the teacher is like a mentor who supports them not just in music but in everything they do.”

“The goal in being a good teacher

is not only to teach, you also have to be a good person,” added Friedman. “The instructor must be a person who communicates correctly with students, because if a student likes the teacher, they will prepare what the teacher asks. The strict and the kind must work together as one.” *JT*

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JANNA FRIEDMAN SCHOOL OF MUSIC

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