

St. Louis WOMAN

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Keys to Success

Concert pianist
Orli Shaham wows
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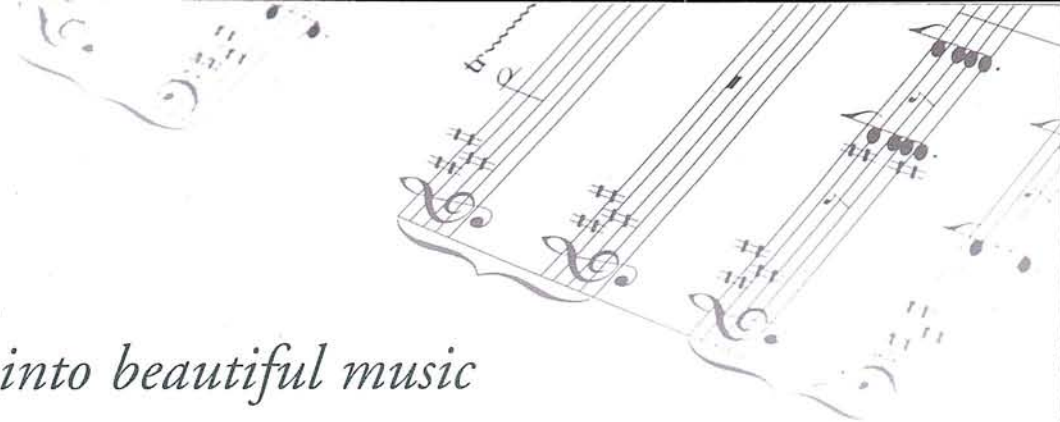
HEALTHY HEART

HANDBOOK






At Home



*For Orli Shaham,
passion translates into beautiful music*



by Marcia Ellett

On the Piano

Photography by Steve Truesdell/Jacquin Studio Photography

Hair and makeup by Darin Slyman

CONCERT PIANIST ORLI SHAHAM

has traveled the world, seen the inside of countless concert halls and hotel rooms and performed musical scores of many great past and present composers. One thing is certain: Wherever she goes, she is at home on the piano.

Shaham was born in Israel and lived in Jerusalem with her parents and two older brothers until she was 7. Then the family moved to New York City.

"That was a real culture shock for me," Shaham says.

She remembers, back then, Jerusalem was a very small, safe place to be. Family and friends dropping by unannounced was a common occurrence.

"I have a lot of those kinds of childhood memories," she says.

But New York was a very different experience. It was big, and people never stopped by without calling first. And Shaham didn't speak a word of English. Though her brothers had been in the United States before and spoke a little English, she initially found it difficult to grasp.

"I remember I had this alphabet coloring book," she says. The first picture was an alligator for A and "I could not say that to save my life."

AUSPICIOUS BEGINNINGS

Back in Israel, Shaham seemed destined to get into music.

When her parents first got married, they started a tradition. "Every Friday night, they would buy a record. By the time I was born they had about 300 records," Shaham says.

"My parents just loved music so much," she says. "Their enthusiasm for the music just rubbed off on all of us." It's no wonder her favorite toy as a child was her Fisher Price record player.

*My parents just loved music so much.
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just rubbed off on all of us.*

Shaham says she's not sure that playing the piano was what she really wanted, but circumstances may have pushed her in that direction.

"My oldest brother, Shai, was a pianist, and Gil was a violinist. He was very possessive of his violin; he wouldn't let me touch it," she says. Shai, on the other hand, couldn't carry the piano with him. That and the fact

that "I think I was jealous that my brothers had something to do after school," is how the piano became her instrument of choice. Her parents took her to one of her brother's concerts at the music conservatory and a piano teacher there offered to instruct her, beginning her steady climb from novice to world-renowned concert pianist.

Within a year of moving to New York, Shaham entered the pre-college music program at Juilliard on Saturdays. And when she was older, she began a joint program between

Juilliard and Columbia University. She majored in modern European history and got credit for her music classes at Juilliard.

Attending Columbia also gave her the opportunity to teach, a task she thoroughly enjoyed.

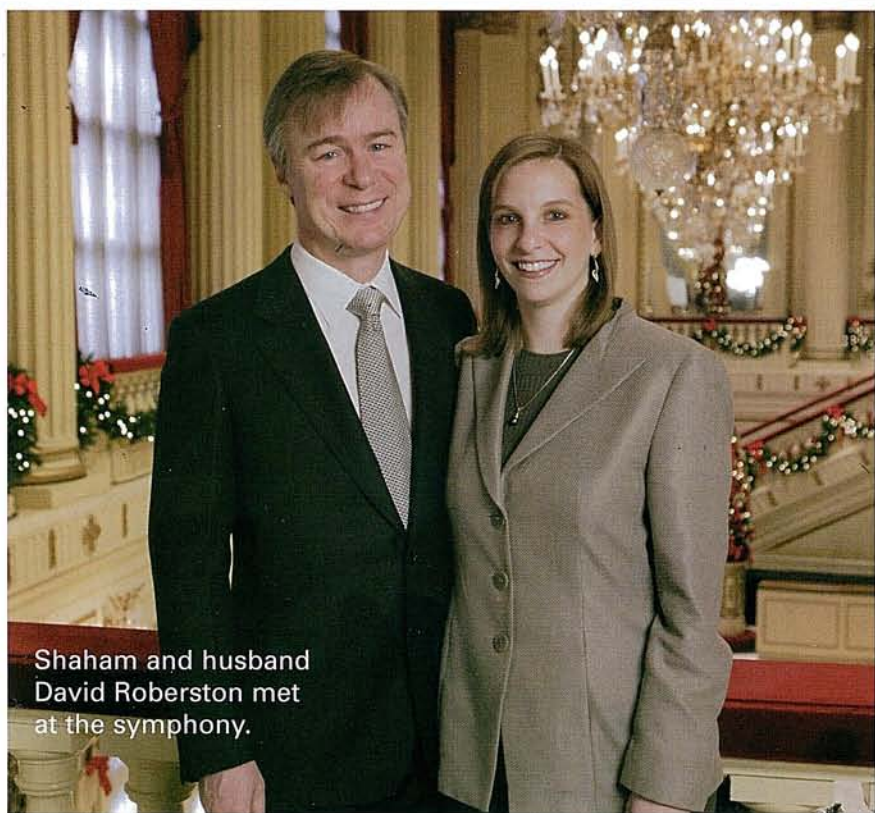
"I've been very lucky to get to teach at Columbia," she says. "They have a course there called Music Humanities. It's actually part of Columbia's core curriculum," which means all students, regardless of their focus, have to take the course.

Shaham became a grad student in musicology specifically because she wanted to teach that course. She describes the challenge as 14 to 16 weeks with 20 to 23 kids who may or may not have an interest in music. "I just found that so inspiring to get these kids and show them this music you think you're not connected with is very much a part of your lives and intended for you.

"Music is not elitist," she says. "It's for everyone." And Shaham has made it a point to pass the music on.

Post college, Shaham travels too much to have regular piano students, but has led many master's classes taught over a short period of time.

"I love the rush of having three or four different students in a three-hour period. You have to figure out how to teach them in such a way that they get it," she says. "It's very stimulating. I always find that I learn about my own playing so much when I try to articulate it to a student."



Shaham and husband David Roberston met at the symphony.

MASS COMMUNICATION

Shaham has found another way to impart music knowledge, too. She pitched several ideas to the Classical Public Radio Network, and they settled on Dial-a-Musician, or as she likes to call it, "everything you always wanted to know about music but were afraid to ask."

Listeners call in to the show, which airs Wednesday and Saturday mornings at 6 a.m. and 8 a.m., to ask questions about music. Shaham then calls one of her musical colleagues to answer each question.

"That's just been a blast," she says of the show, "and it has really taken off way beyond my expectations."

The beauty of radio is that shows can be pretaped and there are radio stations everywhere. That means her travel schedule doesn't interfere with the show. And the format is equally conducive to her distinguished dial-a-musicians, because it would be next to impossible to get all those experts into the studio, Shaham says.

She adds that she's learned a lot from the experts she calls, and the questions are as varied as the number of instruments and musical scores out there.

One listener recently asked, "What is really in the conductor's score?"

Shaham says the truth is, "It's loaded with information," detailing the composer's intentions, personal markers, etc.

Shaham has probably glimpsed a conductor's score on more than one occasion. She's married to David Robertson, music director for the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra. The two met eight years ago at the symphony before a performance where both were making their St. Louis debuts, she as the piano soloist, and he as conductor.

"We first met in the green room," Robertson recalls, "which is where you habitually meet soloists. She was the soloist slated to play Chopin.

"That gave us a sense of camaraderie just from the get go," he says, and remembers her as being "very buoyant and full of energy.

"When we got out to the orchestra," Robertson says, "I introduced her and she said, 'Wow, you pronounced my name right.'

"It was a really nice collaboration right from the start."

After the concert, Robertson called his agency and asked if they could suggest Shaham whenever someone requested a soloist;



Shaham relishes her role as radio host on Dial-a-Musician for the Classical Public Radio Network.

and the rest is what moving concertos are made of.

"Powell Symphony Hall is the most romantic place on earth," Shaham says.

Her marriage to Robertson brought two more blessings to Shaham's life, as well. "I have two really wonderful stepsons," she says. Peter, 16, and Jonathan, 15, go to school in New York, so the family divides its time between St. Louis and New York, when not on the road touring.

Shaham says both boys are musically inclined. "Peter is a violinist and a very good singer, and Jonathan plays the drums," she says.

"I've learned so much from having them in my life," she adds. "You learn so much from kids."

For the time they cherish in St. Louis, Shaham and Robertson "have chosen to live downtown in an area that is undergoing a major urban renewal," Shaham says, though the decision wasn't an easy one. The whole county has so many different neighborhoods, she says. When they were looking, the couple narrowed down their search to about 25 of those neighborhoods and eventually settled on a downtown loft.

"Every time we go out of town for a while, when we come back, there's a new restaurant that's opened up," she says.

"It also means we're walking distance from Busch Stadium, which we have taken advantage of," Shaham says. "I'll tell you, ballpark hotdogs, they're still the best."

That's quite a compliment coming from a woman who judges the cities in which she performs by their food offerings.

"You never know whether the hall, the orchestra or the piano is going to be to your liking," she says, "but if you have a great meal after the performance, you know you're going to have a good time."

Her enjoyment of food also has translated into a love of cooking. Her prowess as a chef took off while the family was living in Leon, France, where Robertson was music director of the symphony before moving to St. Louis.

"I'm a big believer in having a home-cooked meal for dinner with the kids," Shaham says. But she notes one very important detail when you're a pianist and a cook: Have protection for your hands. Shaham's husband bought her a protective glove for her left hand after an accident left her with seven stitches.

LOOKING DOWN THE ROAD

In her early 30s, Shaham has already racked up an impressive list of concerto performances.

"As a pianist, I probably have about 40 different concerti that I've performed," she says, adding, one of the nice things about being a pianist is there's so much music written for her instrument. "It's really limitless."

One of the nice things about being a performer is I can take someone else's creation and interpret it.

Shaham says she's had a few concerts to date "that I can say will stay with me forever." One of those memorable events took place at famed Carnegie Hall in New York. She was the piano soloist, her husband was conducting and the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra was there, too, to perform John Adams' *Century Rolls*. Shaham knows the composer, she says, but he hadn't heard her perform his piece yet.

"It was just a spectacular evening," Robertson says. "That was a very special

concert. She had been wanting to play that piece a number of times."

"It went great," Shaham agrees. "The orchestra played unbelievably well. That helped me take it to the next level as well."

Robertson recalls a number of donors were there from the St. Louis area and came up to say, "Maestro, you were wonderful, but your wife is incredible."

On still being early in her career, Shaham says, "I'm hoping I get to go into my 80s." She keeps a mental list of pieces she wants to perform in the future, citing Brahms' *Piano Concerto in B Flat* as one she hopes to master. It's "sort of the holy grail of piano playing," she says.

"I don't have a favorite composer, but if I did, it would be Brahms," Shaham says. "He's able to be intellectual and thoughtful almost to the point of being intimidating, and yet at the same time completely filled with emotion."



Shaham enjoys making music with her brother Gil.

Photo by Christian Steiner

"For an overthinker like me, it's really inspiring to see somebody who can be an overthinker and at the same time let go of emotions.

"One of the nice things about being a performer is I can take someone else's creation and interpret it," she says.

SIBLING REVELRY

Interpreting music as part of a duo is something Shaham enjoys doing with her older brother, Gil.

It gives them an opportunity to enjoy each other's company as adults, she says.

"Actually, our parents were very smart; they wouldn't let us perform together throughout our childhood," Shaham says, laughing. "We never performed in public together until I was in college."

WNYC, a classic public radio station, asked if they would perform on a show together, she recalls. Someone from a record company heard them and suggested they should record together, and they did.

"That actually started a very nice collaboration," Shaham says. "We probably do a big project together once every two years."

Following a recording in studio, the brother and sister team generally tour together for one to three weeks, an undertaking Shaham calls "a whole lot of fun."

Even though they didn't grow up playing music together, she says, "I wish I could put my finger on it; our communication is instant. Growing up and listening to the same recordings, just talking as kids — we have an understanding of each other as people."

Gil agrees. "Our sibling bond has definitely helped our music making," he says, "and I also feel that making music together helps our sibling bond."

JUDGE ORLI

Despite the appearance of living and breathing music, Shaham has surprisingly varied interests.

"Most people probably don't think that musicians really are interested in anything outside of music," Robertson says. But for his wife, who is secretly enamored with law, "her real dream job is being a justice of the United States Supreme Court," he says.

Shaham also enjoys a good book. "If I'm on the road, I love reading," she says. "I'm always in the middle of some great novel that I've managed to take with me (usually a paperback)."



Family dog Milo is a constant companion when Shaham practices the piano at home.

When she isn't traveling for work and exploring the cities she visits on foot, you might find Shaham at home with the family's puppy, Milo.

She explains they named the miniature dachshund Milo after a chocolate malt drink they discovered in Australia. "It's kind of like Ovaltine, but it's really, really delicious," Shaham says. "Milo is the color of the drink and the boys love it, so we figured that would be the perfect name."

Milo likes to sit next to her feet when she's playing the piano, "sometimes on my feet," Shaham says. When a piece requires her to

press the piano pedals, "that means my calf muscles get a great workout," she says.

Shaham feels very blessed to be living this life. "It's an interesting life being a musician," she says. "It's very regimented and completely flexible all at the same time. My schedule is never 9 to 5."

But perhaps best of all, she says: "All I know how to do is play the piano, but I get to be a soloist on stage, a soloist with an orchestra, I get to teach, I get to have a radio show.

"I knew I couldn't live without the piano, so I'm glad it has all that to offer." 🎵