

William J. Browning, pianist, teacher

By John von Rhein
TRIBUNE MUSIC CRITIC

William J. Browning of Darien, 73, a celebrated concert pianist, teacher, accompanist, musical coach and competition judge who was one of the major links with the great piano pedagogues and soloists of this century, died of a stroke Sunday in Hinsdale Hospital.

He had suffered a stroke earlier this year and had been partially paralyzed in one arm since then, said Tom Schuntz, a longtime friend.

Great performers do not necessarily make great teachers, but Mr. Browning was a notable exception. The technical finesse and deep musical feeling he displayed at the piano shone through in the dedication of his teaching.

"He taught in the grand manner of the 19th Century," said Dr. David Gehlhoff of St. Joseph Health Centers and Hospital in Chicago, one of Mr. Browning's many pupils.

For many years, Mr. Browning, who was born in Lawrence, Kan., taught at the American Conservatory of Music, Sherwood Conservatory and Chicago Musical College of Roosevelt University, all in Chicago. More recently, he taught privately in his studio in the Fine Arts Building in the Loop.

Many of his former students are pursuing careers and teaching.

"You can always identify those pianists who were Browning students by the extraordinary quality of their playing." said Eileen Deneen, the Chicago singer and voice teacher who frequently collaborated with Mr. Browning.

Those who were close to Mr. Browning found it hard to separate his courtly manner and sensitivity from his music-making.

He was the official accompanist for WGN's Illinois Opera Guild Auditions of the Air, a now-defunct vocal competition whose winners included Kathleen Battle, Sherrill Milnes and Vinson Cole. As a recitalist, chamber music player and soloist with symphony orchestras, Mr. Browning performed extensively throughout North America, Britain, China and South Korea.

Especially noted for his performances of works by American composers, he gave the world premiere of Chicago composer William Ferris' Piano Sonata (commissioned for Mr. Browning) in the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington in 1976.

He also played many American works as pianist of the Flancel Quartet, a group he founded and led in Chicago during the 1960s.

He studied piano with Carl Friedberg (a pupil of Brahms' and Clara Schumann's), Will Humble, Hans Heniot and Gui Mombaerts, taking undergraduate degrees from Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kan., and a master's degree in musical performance from the American Conservatory.

During World War II, he served with Army Special Services in Gen. George Patton's 3rd Army division.

Survivors include a brother. A memorial service will be announced at a later date.

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Chicago Sun Times OBITUARIES Wednesday, November 12, 1997

William J. Browning, pianist, teacher

William J. Browning, of Darien, a pianist, teacher and author, died Sunday at Hinsdale Hospital. He was 73.

The cause of death was a stroke, said Tom Schuntz, a friend. Mr. Browning had a stroke in March, recovered and started teaching again "for his last encore," Schuntz said.

Mr. Browning appeared with the Flancel Quartet in the Chicago Symphony Music Series and was broadcast on many WGN and WFMT programs. His was the piano accompaniment behind WGN's "Illinois Opera Guild Auditions on the Air."

He taught at the American Conservatory of Music, the Sherwood Conservatory of Music and the Chicago Musical College of Roosevelt University. He maintained a teaching studio at the Fine Arts Building in Chicago.

Mr. Browning was a participant in one of the first cultural missions to the People's Republic of China in the 1980s. He took his master classes, recitals and lecture demonstrations throughout the United States and to England. He was a member of the Chicago Musicians Union.

In addition to his lifelong friend, Schuntz, he is survived by a brother, Eldon. A memorial service will be announced at a later date.

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Pianist returns to PSU for benefit recital

By NIKKI PATRICK
Reporting from Faculty Living Editor

Pianist William Browning has returned to Pittsburg State University to present a special benefit concert for the PSU Solo and Chamber Music Series.

The concert will be presented at 8 p.m. today in McCray Hall.



Browning, Chicago performer, forms frequent recitals across the country, teaches and serves as a vocal accompanist, and for 26 years was associated with WGN Radio in Chicago.

Browning. He holds both a bachelor of science and bachelor of music in piano performance from PSU, and attributes much of his success to the sound musical background he obtained from the university and the late Will Humble, longtime PSU principal piano teacher.

"I came to PSU in 1941," he said. "Will Humble was absolutely everything to me. I've performed across the world, in England and Europe, and so many people I've met know who

On Tuesday

he was. I've had other very fine teachers as well, and they've all asked me how I did something, or worked out something difficult, and it was always because of what I had been taught by Will Humble."

After graduating from PSU, Browning went into the U.S. Army. "I had three years with General George Patton," he said. "It was not good for the fin-
gers."

Upon completion of his military service, Browning entered the master's degree program at the American Conservatory of Music at Chicago. He said that he, and other PSU students, were well prepared for the rigorous program at the conservatory, including the conservatory's notoriously "difficult" requirements in the area of musical theory.

"The students from Pittsburg were the only ones accepted at the conservatory without remedial work, thanks to the excellent background we were given in musical theory," Browning said. "Dr. Walter McCray built this music department, and it

built it solidly. This school's credit hours were good all around the country."

Browning's first good job in Chicago was at WGNK FM Radio. "I was responsible for two half-hour recitals a week, and also accompanied all the singers who performed over the radio," he said. "It was wonderful — it paid for my rent, clothing and food."

He received a master's degree in music performance from the American Conservatory, and was invited to join the faculty as well. He taught there for 32 years.

"My first love is teaching," said Browning, who will be teaching two masterclasses Wednesday at PSU. "It's rather like being a good dressmaker, fashioning a garment from a piece of fabric. Sometimes what looks like not a good piece of fabric may turn out to be one of your stars."

He also enjoyed working with promising new talent as the official accompanist for the WGN Illinois Opera Guild Opera Auditions of the Air, a radio search for new American vocal talent. "Nearly every one of our win-

ners went on to the Metropolitan Opera or recording careers," Browning said.

He was also worked with other WGN offerings, including "Essays in Music." As a vocal accompanist, he has worked with many artists, including Sherrill Milnes, Martina Arroyo, John McCollum and Donald Gramm.

Browning also appears frequently as a solo recitalist, and as a member of chamber music groups. He has been a soloist with orchestras in Europe, Great Britain, Canada, the United States and the People's Republic of China. As a member of the Finché Quartet, he has appeared on the Chicago Symphony's Chamber Music Series.

Under the auspices of Exxon, the National Music Council and the National Federation of Music Clubs, Browning premiered the William Ferris "Piano Sonata," which had been commissioned for him, at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. That concert was part of the Kennedy Center's Bicentennial Parade of American Music.

He continues to be so busy performing that "for the first time

this year I have not signed a contract to teach. I'll probably be back teaching at Roosevelt University in Chicago next fall, but I'll be gone for two months of the teaching year this season, and that's just not fair to students."

However, Browning does continue to have a private teaching studio. "Most of my private students are professional pianists, and it won't hurt them for me to be away for two months," he said.

For his PSU recital, Browning has selected a program including "Sonata in E-Flat Major" by Mozart; "Variations on a Theme by the Composer, Op. 21" by Brahms, which he will dedicate to the memory of Will Humble and his sister; "Andante Spianato and Grande Polonaise Brillante in E-Flat Major, Op. 22" by Chopin; "Sonata-Fantasy, Op. 19" by Scriabin; "Symphonic Metamorphosis Upon 'The Artists' Life Walzes'" by Johann Strauss and Leopold Godowsky.

The final selection has a special meaning for him, Browning said, because Will Humble had been a student of Godowsky. "Godowsky was perhaps the

greatest pianists in history, and was court pianist for Emperor Franz Josef," Browning said. "Most of the teaching he did was in classes and he had very few private students. Will Humble was one of them. I've found that what he taught was not great big secrets, but common sense, based on hard work."

The pianist, who participated in Solo Vocal Literature and Accompaniment Masterclasses three years ago at PSU, said that he enjoys returning to his alma mater. "I'm so impressed with the university," he said. "It has kept up with the times more than most music departments. The new radio station, KRPS, is just wonderful."

Browning also enjoys returning to his native Southeast Kansas roots. "The town of Cheyopa was founded by my great-grandfather, Ross Ventle," he said. "His house and the house that he built for his mother-in-law are still standing."

Tickets for the benefit concert will be available at the door. The concert is made possible, in part, by a major grant from the Kansas Arts Commission.