

# Portrait of an Artist: My Time with Pierre Bernac

Thomas Grubb



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IT IS HARD TO BELIEVE that this October will be the eighteenth anniversary of Pierre Bernac's death.<sup>1</sup> I can honestly say that not a day has since passed by without my thinking or speaking of him at least once. No one else has marked my life so indelibly, or given me more, than he. The decade during which I knew and worked with him now seems like the kind of dream from which one desperately hopes not to awaken. I look back at the moments spent at his side in the studio, in class, in concerts and at receptions, at table, in the car and, most of all, on our *chaises longues* in the sunset after a long day's work when we delectably translated the late cycles of Fauré and many of Francis Poulenc, all while conversing about just anything and everything. Such highly privileged gifts come only once in a lifetime, if at all.

Pierre Bernac was a simple, almost ascetic man, who yet knew and deeply savored the beauties and pleasures of being alive. He was entirely dedicated to his work which, when I knew him, was teaching. Just about everything I now know about working with singers and pianists on the song repertoire I learned from Bernac. The most important lesson of all those he taught me was to demand the highest standards from myself and every student, and that no one deserved any less.

I also witnessed his tolerance of untalented and ill mannered pupils. Pierre Bernac was always a gentleman with a secure sense of self, something which protected him from any loss of dignity. Yet, he was firm. Bernac taught me as much about life and people as about music and language, not only by his words but by his actions. He was the consummate *maitre* who gave real meaning to the abused term "master class."

I met Pierre Bernac for the first time on the musical Upper West Side of Manhattan in April of 1970. During the winter I had written to him to request his instruction and guidance in my newly assigned French Diction and Repertoire classes at the Manhattan School of Music. His book, *The Interpretation of French Song*, had just appeared, and after studying it carefully I knew that Bernac was the man I had to see. Much to my surprise, he responded immediately to tell me that he would be teaching privately that spring in New York. On Thursday, April 2, 1970 at 3 p.m., Bernac slowly opened the door, his eyes shyly peering upwards, all while greeting and admitting me into his rarified world. He was smaller and more frail than I had anticipated, soft spoken and prone to long silences during which his



Pierre Bernac

strong and warm spirit pervaded the room. His attire was truly drab: a tan linen jacket, gray gabardine slacks, white shirt and muted tie, and those light brown cloth shoes with rubber soles that he always wore.

That afternoon my singer<sup>2</sup> and I presented the first three of the *Fiançailles pour rire* of Poulenc for Bernac. To her he spoke of *legato* and the importance of *singing*, NOT speaking, every note, while with me he dwelled upon getting the right sonority for Poulenc's pianism by means of deft pedaling. We returned to work with Bernac again the following Monday. It was then that I dared ask him whether I might assist him in his classes at the Blossom Festival that summer. Again, he answered me immediately in the affirmative. For the next three months, I spent all of my spare time procuring, studying, and practicing the countless *mélodies* that I did not yet know. I so much wanted to be worthy of the privilege granted me.

For six weeks that summer Bernac gave a four-hour class in the afternoon every weekday and coached privately on Saturdays.<sup>3</sup> I never ceased to marvel at his patience and persistence, as well as his energy and generosity with the class. At first Bernac expressed dismay at the presence of so many "bébés," his affectionate term for young beginners, but I promised to prepare them rigorously during the mornings before and evenings after class. A few voice teachers<sup>4</sup> in the class assisted me

in prodding these neophytes to action so that by the end of the second week the hum of excellence, or at least the striving for it, was in the room. On the 14th of July, we all decided to sing the "Marseillaise" for Bernac as a surprise tribute to the French national holiday. As I began the anthem at the piano, the class joined in, robustly singing the first better known lines, only to diminish in both volume and conviction as the hymn progressed. By the time I reached the end of the first verse, I was playing alone, yet there was Bernac, still standing at attention, his huge blue eyes cast upward, thus transforming our rather frivolous gesture into one of profound solemnity. His deeply felt patriotism stunned us Americans at a time when cynicism was so rampant here. A mere two months before on the lawn not far from our classroom, student demonstrators had been fired upon and killed by the National Guard. The reverence that Bernac so simply but eloquently displayed to us that day for his beloved France impressed us greatly. Indeed, it was a lesson in patriotic humility.

During the fourth week of the six-week session, nine singers from the class, which numbered about fifteen, were selected by Bernac to perform with me at the piano in the Recital Hall of the university. Even today the difficult and sophisticated program seems daunting to me:

Fauré: *L'horizon chimérique*

Fauré: four of *La Chanson d'Eve*

Debussy: three of the *Ariettes oubliées*

Debussy: *Quatre chansons de jeunesse*

Debussy: *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*

Caplet: "Forêt"

Milhaud: *Chansons de Ronsard*

Poulenc: three of the *Fiançailles pour rire*

Poulenc: four of the *Chansons gaillardes*

A program "en toute simplicité," Bernac murmured with a feigned nonchalance. I, the pianist for the evening, was even more terrified than were the singers, since most of the music was brand new to me, not to mention that Pierre Bernac, John Wustman, and Aaron Copland were in the audience. Of course, our *maître* had laboriously prepared us during hours of extra coachings outside of class, especially on the *Bilitis* songs which still remain what I play best in the French repertoire.<sup>5</sup> Bernac was always highly attentive to the pianist in his insistence upon just the right sonority, attack, and dosage of pedal. His ears were so unbelievably keen, especially since they

were those of a singer who was listening to an instrument. I am persuaded that Bernac taught me more about the piano than any one of my piano teachers, especially as concerns the production, matching, and mingling of my sound with that of any given voice. As was his wont, he never hesitated to let me know, frankly but gently, that I had a tendency to pound a bit in solo passages, much to my shameful dismay. Indeed, with Bernac, there was always more work to be done and more progress to be made, something I can now finally understand after my many years of teaching. Also, I sensed that the ultimate lesson he was offering to us was the same demand he made of himself. Sometimes after a class he would turn to me and sheepishly say, "I fear that I was boring today, please forgive me." This humility and self-chastisement in Bernac I now perceive as the essential ingredient of any truly great artist. Since Bernac, I have met few others who demonstrated the same objectivity of purpose in their work. Bernac's approach to teaching was both rigorous and tireless, but he always led us to believe that we were capable of improvement and, perhaps, even greatness. I should add, by the way, that Pierre Bernac was never boring, not even for a single moment.

Bernac was a complete musician who loved all kinds of music, instrumental as well as vocal, unlike many other singers and voice teachers. Wherever he gave a class with me at his side (and we went on to do many more in New York, at Tanglewood, in Canada, and in France), he insisted upon our attending concerts whenever possible. We heard Alicia de Larrocha play Granados with the Cleveland Symphony at Blossom, the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood, and the Rachmaninoff Second Piano Concerto in St.-Jean-de-Luz.<sup>6</sup> After each concert, Bernac was much more animated than usual in his conversation about the performance he had just heard. His judgments on music were always cryptic and extreme: Any given performance was either "sublime" or "disappointing," and some were "execrable" while most were simply "mediocre," this being the most damning critique of all to my ears. Tepid mediocrity was the most deserving of his noble disdain, revealed simply by his tone of voice.

Pierre Bernac was neither *gourmet* nor *gourmand*.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, his most common pronouncement concerning food was "Je n'ai jamais eu faim."<sup>8</sup> He often marveled at my appetite and wondered why I so much enjoyed eating. Toward the end of his life he was deprived by his

doctors of salt, something he very much resented, yet he never sat down at table with an expressed appetite in my presence. This was perhaps one of the reasons why his health failed so rapidly in the mid-70s. I well remember how I prepared our suppers in the elegantly renovated early nineteenth century farmhouse near Tanglewood lent to him by wealthy New Yorkers. "Qu'est-ce que vous désirez dîner ce soir?"<sup>9</sup> I would ask and he would respond: "Oh, n'importe quoi, merci, tu sais que je n'ai jamais faim."<sup>10</sup> Actually, his favorite was a concoction of mine of all the leftovers in the refrigerator. One evening, between bites, he lifted his strangely young eyes to say, "Tu sais comment ça s'appelle, cette salade?"<sup>11</sup> When I asked how, he responded while looking stupidly at his plate, "Une salade poubelle."<sup>12</sup> I often wish that New York restaurants of the very best quality and reputation would boldly list such a salad on their menus.

All of which is to say that Pierre Bernac had a sense of humor of the driest and keenest variety. Above all, he had the French "sense of the ridiculous," a quality which he also secretly savored, thus enabling this *petit bourgeois*,<sup>13</sup> as his close friend Simone Girard used to call him, to revel in the "Dada" irreverence of his youth. A fervent Catholic (he never missed Mass on Sunday), Bernac was able to enjoy the naughtiest of jokes, as long as they were in "good taste" (his expression, of course). It was then that I understood his artistic partnership with Francis Poulenc, Bernac's exact opposite in both character and upbringing. Each man possessed the intelligence and sensitivity to appreciate the qualities of the other while living in two different moral worlds. All that they had in common was their love for French poetry and music, the human voice and singing. Poulenc composed almost ninety of his approximately 145 songs for Bernac's voice that they premiered in their joint recitals around the globe. It is clear that Poulenc's vocal style blossomed with a new lyricism as soon as the two began their collaboration in the mid-1930s. Although Bernac denied it publicly, he did admit to making "discreet" (his word) suggestions to Poulenc in the interest of vocal beauty, impact, or ease to which the composer happily agreed.

Since the very beginning of my collaboration with him, Pierre Bernac became my mentor. During our intense correspondence throughout the academic year, we both looked forward to the coming summer when we could again work together. By the winter of 1972 we had

begun to share life problems like father and son: Bernac revealed to me his concerns about health and finances while I confided in him those of career and sentiment. He always made it poignantly clear to me that my well-being and personal happiness were highly important to him. The following summer, when I told him that I had lost my father, Bernac said to me quite simply and quietly: "Ne t'inquiète pas, mon petit Tom, maintenant c'est moi qui suis ton père,"<sup>14</sup> as we were enjoying a drink together on our *chaises longues* in the late afternoon sun. Gratitude and sheer emotion subdued me to an inarticulate silence while his understanding glance reassured me that words were unnecessary.

By the mid-1970s, Bernac's health was so poor that he was unable to make his habitual transatlantic trips. For the time being, our active collaboration came to a standstill, much to my chagrin. He had suffered two heart attacks, now had a pacemaker, and his legs were failing him seriously. Eventually, I made trips to Paris at Christmastime to see him, while, during our separation, our correspondence continued with a renewed intensity. Still, I greatly missed working with him in a public forum where he was always at his most inspired, performer that he was at heart.

It was during that important summer of 1977 when, due to improved health, he accepted an invitation to give his annual class at the Ravel Academy in St.-Jean-de-Luz that September. Once there, he wrote me of his qualms about maintaining his own standards of teaching the class. As I read between the lines of this desperate letter, I decided to join him there, and even managed to bring a few good singers with me. As it all turned out, Bernac asked me to play and coach the class along with an English pianist hired by the Academy. How happy I was to see again his close friend and confidante, Simone Girard, and meet the eminent pianist and pedagogue, Gaby Casadesus, another faithful colleague of Bernac's. The four of us spent many hours and dinners together and, with the passing of each day in St.-Jean, Bernac seemed more and more radiant and youthful. Nothing did him more good than hard work among good friends. His classes glistened with vitality and overflowed with information and insights. His faithful public, *style vieille France*, on vacation in this seaside resort which was both the birthplace of Maurice Ravel and the location of the marriage of none other than Louis XIV, very much

admired Bernac's superb pedagogy and interpretive insight while delighting in the pertinent anecdotes with which he sprinkled his teaching. Bernac's real message, however, was always directed to the singers and pianists. For him, the audience was a mere adrenalin booster; indeed, it worked admirably.

In that last summer of our collaboration, Bernac managed to perform complete songs and even cycles as he demonstrated for the class,<sup>15</sup> but only after apologizing for his voice, and every time we all erupted with robust applause for his unique and unselfish artistry. His book on the life and songs of Francis Poulenc had just appeared and he was visibly pleased with it.<sup>16</sup> That September, his usually pale, pinkish skin glowed with a tan that perhaps came from a deep and inner contentment with his work, as well as an immense gratitude to be able once again to do so. To my knowledge, this was the last master class he was to give in his lifetime.

In early August of 1979, Simone Girard telephoned me from her villa in Villeneuve-lez-Avignon to tell me that Bernac was under intensive care in the hospital there. Her message was clear. Within twenty-four hours I was at his bedside where close by he kept my newly published book, *Singing in French*, which he had overseen since its inception a good five years earlier.<sup>17</sup> Bernac was intensely proud of it and, in truth, he appeared to think of it as his own, which, indeed, it was, since its contents reflected so many of the principles he had taught me since our fortunate encounter nine years earlier. Bernac had painstakingly corrected every page for both detail and style (I sent him twenty to twenty-five pages of galleys at a time, which he sent back to me with crucial annotations in his miniscule hand). His uncanny command of the English language never ceased to both amaze and humble me. To boot, Bernac wrote an eloquent foreword for "our" book and also granted me the right to use his revered name on the front cover. Who could ask for more?

For a week in late August of 1979, I visited him daily in the hospital with Simone Girard, who, on my last day there, managed to take Bernac out in her car to spend the afternoon in the garden of her quietly elegant villa, replete with its view of the Palace of the Popes in nearby Avignon. Bernac always referred to this garden as his *paradis terrestre*.<sup>18</sup> That day, he seemed to savor it as never before, until fatigue overtook him. More than forty

years earlier, Simone had invited Bernac and Poulenc to Avignon to perform in the series of concerts which she directed there. Now Bernac and she, like brother and sister, idly chatted in the benign afternoon glow of the Midi. Without Simone's care and affection, he would have been utterly lost in those final years.

I spoke with my *maître* for the last time on Saturday, August 18, 1979 when I called him just before departing from Paris to New York. His voice sounded strong and clear as he reassured me that he was feeling much better. Although I badly wanted to believe him, I knew down deep inside that he was protecting me from the raw emotion of an *adieu*. He warmly asked me to come see him again at Christmastime and I promised him I would do so. For a moment, all seemed possible as we said, "A Noël."<sup>19</sup>

But the world, and I, lost Pierre Bernac on October 17, 1979.

### NOTES

1. This article was written sometime in the early fall of 1997.
2. Lynne Milstein Frost, a colleague of mine at the Manhattan School of Music, who became and still is, an "old friend."
3. On the campus of Kent State University in Kent, Ohio.
4. Including Carol Kimball, the renowned author of books on art song.
5. Sung by Carol Kimball, then professionally known as Carol Ann Harris.
6. St.-Jean-de-Luz is a resort town on the Atlantic coast, south of Biarritz and not far from the Spanish border.
7. A *gourmet* is a connoisseur of good cuisine but a *gourmand* simply loves to eat (a lot).
8. "I have never been hungry."
9. "What do you want to eat this evening?"
10. "Oh, it doesn't matter, thanks, you know that I am never hungry."
11. "Do you know what this salad is called?"
12. *Poubelle* means "garbage can."
13. "Lower middle class" (see above in the article for more information on Simone Girard).
14. "Do not worry, my little Tom, I am now your father."
15. For example, *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée* of Maurice Ravel.
16. *Francis Poulenc, the Man and his Songs* (London: Gollancz, 1977).
17. Schirmer Books/Macmillan, 1979, still in print.
18. "terrestrial paradise."
19. "Till Christmas."

**Thomas Grubb** is the author of *Singing in French: A Manual of French Diction and French Vocal Repertoire* (Schirmer Books, 1979, with a Foreword by Pierre Bernac, still in print and now distributed by Cengage Learning). From 1986 until the recent past, Mr. Grubb was a member of the coaching staff of New York City Opera where he assisted in the preparation of the French productions. Also, he has often served as French coach of the Houston Grand Opera, the Opera Society of Washington, D.C., the Oratorio Society of New York, and the Collegiate Chorale of New York, among other organizations. Since 1985 Mr. Grubb has been a member of the faculty of The Juilliard School where he conducts classes and private coachings in French Vocal Repertoire and Diction. Previously he served on the faculties of Manhattan School of Music (1964–1985), The Curtis Institute of Music (1970–1977), the Academy of Vocal Arts (1977–1983), and the Peabody Conservatory (1984–2007).

From 1970 until 1977, Thomas Grubb assisted the renowned *maître* of French song, Pierre Bernac, in his master classes throughout the United States, Canada, and France as both pianist and coach. Mr. Bernac eventually became his primary mentor and the inspiration for his specialization in French Vocal Repertoire.

As a performing pianist, Thomas Grubb has appeared in recital with Elly Ameling, Benita Valente, Eleanor Steber, Elizabeth Mannion, and Dawn Upshaw, plus numerous others. He also made two North American concert tours with the French trumpet player, Maurice André, as both pianist and translator.

Mr. Grubb has given master classes throughout the United States, in France, Germany, Lithuania, Korea, and annually in Taiwan from 1991 until 2006. In May 2002, he was decorated as *Chevalier dans l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French Ministry of Culture in Paris for his advancement of French culture throughout the world.