Jeepney Ride:
A Tribute to Reynaldo Reyes
on the occasion of his retirement
from 50 years of teaching
at Towson University

by Sara Davis Buechner
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Fifty years, a full half-century, a large and formidable number. If I think backwards 50 years, I can still see and feel freshly in memory, the black-and-white world of a Baltimore long vanished. When I say black-and-white, it's with a feeling for the righteous suburban order and vision of that era -- when the newest technology around consisted of color television sets, which my family could not afford. I grew up in the northwestern suburbs of Baltimore, where indeed the daily life around me seemed to mirror the television images of Beaver Cleaver and his CBS sitcom world. It was a tidy and socially proscribed time.

It was my mother who saw and heard things in richer shades, and thanks to hear, the interior walls of our bland little house were adorned with copies of impressionist paintings; provocative books and magazines filled our living room; and music -- on the radio, always set to one of the classical channels, or on the baby grand in our living room -- floated through the house. That piano was my own alluring Pandora's Box, and as I could not be kept away from it, a teacher was brought to me, as young as age three. She was a Saint with enormous patience, young Miss Veronika Wolf. When her patience grew thin, and the obligations of her Doctoral studies grew heavy, she took me to play for her own piano teacher, Reynaldo Reyes. The man who became my third parent first heard me in his apartment on Saint Paul Street, when I was five years old. The first piece I played for him was John Schaum's arrangement of the theme from Haydn's "Surprise" Symphony. I always loved the surprise *sforzando* chord in the middle of that one, and sometimes jumped from the piano bench when I hit it. I believe Reynaldo liked that, for I saw him leap from the piano bench himself in concert, many times. To this day, I tell everyone that Reynaldo Reyes is the most exciting and athletic pianist alive.

Ten years later, the last piece I worked on with Reynaldo, before leaving home to attend the Juilliard School in New York, was Tchaikowsky's Piano Concerto no. 1 in B flat minor. Which is to say, in the space of one decade he led me on an amazing musical journey of growth and discovery.

Back in that Saint Paul Street apartment is where I recall my own little world getting its first anti-suburban jolts. There was no television at all in that place, not black-and-white and not color. Only a huge Steinway grand and a sofa, and many books and scores and magazines in every language laying around, seemingly everywhere. The apartment was also, and always, full of people. Seemingly thousands of them, all Filipino relatives, every one of them a sister or brother or cousin or uncle or aunt -- who could keep that straight. They adored me when I came for my lessons, plied me with mango slices and orange juice and cake, read to me from picture books, and patted me on the head and told me how very cute I was. To my childhood eyes, so accustomed to bland split-level tract homes and ammonia-cleansed schoolrooms and fast food drive-ins, that apartment on Saint Paul Street resembled a veritable South Seas Polynesian whorehouse. I loved it.

In the years shortly after, when Reynaldo began to teach me on Saturday afternoons at the old Stephens Hall building of Towson State College, I learned about wondrous telephone interruptions. The ring of the phone would be answered by Rey's response in any number of colorful languages -- English, Spanish, French, Italian, Tagalog, or even Greek, for God's sake -- it was like a Hot Line to the United Nations. I could hardly fathom how Rey could communicate in so many tongues. But in time, as I came to know him well, I understood that his fluency lay not only in languages but in cultures. Reynaldo Reyes was, and remains, the single most extraordinarily cosmopolitan individual I have ever met. He is simply interested in everything, everywhere, and everyone. He is a man who has never tired of investigating the human condition.

One particularly timely conversation with my mother, around 1968, I always recall. Reynaldo had just returned from some recitals in the American south. And on this particular Saturday afternoon, he asked my mother for some advice.

> "Libby, I got to ask you a *question."*
>
> "Yes, Rey," replied my mother
>
> "You know, as I was driving down to South Carolina on the highway, I had to stop at the gas station for some gas, and then I went to use the rest room in the back."
>
> "Yes, Rey?"
>
> "And you know, Libby, when I got there, I saw *two doors.* And one says 'White' and the other says 'Black'."

> "Uh huh."
>
> "So Libby, I look down at my hands, my right and then my left. And honestly I need someone to tell me: what door do I use? ***Because I just don't know where to go."***

That was, of course, another manifestation of black and white, in my 1960s suburban Baltimore world. It seemed naturally assumed, to most of the people around me, that blacks and whites were different, did not get along, should not get along, must not mix, may not congregate together. I felt lucky to be reminded, in my piano lessons every weekend, that all cultures were worthy of honor and study, that all people were deserving of respect, that indeed it was my job to look and listen and learn. That message came through every time Rey defined the French terms in my Debussy scores, or translated the meanings of Beethoven's articulations. Or when he spoke to me of his musical experiences in South America, or took me to see a famous belly dancer, or played the Greek *bouzouki*. Reynaldo Reyes was of Baltimore, but for me he was also of *every place outside Baltimore*. He was my wider world, the world of music I wanted to know.

About 15 years ago, I had the rare privilege of travelling to the Philippines myself, for one of the most treasured concerts of my entire life. A mutual friend, the conductor Eugene Castillo, invited Rey and myself to perform the Double Concerto of Francis Poulenc at the Philippine Cultural Center, with the orchestra of Rey's *alma mater,* the University of Santo Tomás. Obviously it was an event laden with sentiment for us both, and I prepared on that trip to meet another few thousand of Reynaldo's cousins, sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles, or to put it another way, the metropolitan population of central Manila.

From Reynaldo, in addition to so much pianistic knowledge, I inherited a taste for cultural *wanderlust,* and in every place I have travelled on this planet, I have endeavored to learn some language, some customs, some ways of daily life, and also to amass from such places a formidable library of musical scores. So it was for me, on my first trip to Manila. I informed the Dean of the University of Santo Tomás one afternoon, that I was going to take a long day's hike in the city, would leave the grounds of the college around noon and return around 6 p.m. She grabbed me forcibly and told me she would hire a car and driver. "You will surely be kidnapped," she informed me, pointing to my blond hair. It certainly did make me stand out.

Such earnest concern only proved frustrating to me, but as I didn't think a few years of incarceration in a terrorist compound in Mindanao would be helpful to my resumé, I obeyed her dictate, for the moment. Later, however, I turned to my former teacher for assistance.

"Rey, I want to see this town a little," I told him. The place was laden with history and the polyglot cultures of Southeast Asia, Spain and America. Incredible architecture, cathedrals, food, dance, music, artifacts. And the streets of Manila were fascinatingly clogged with the most God-awful contraptions I had yet seen in the Orient, mini-buses forged from converted former U.S. Army jeeps. Filipinos cleverly refer to them as *jeepneys* (a mix of *jeep* and jitney*).* Garishly painted with advertisements, depictions of American pop stars, and neon-laced images of the Virgin Mary, these rust-bucket vehicles grumble all over the road with passengers hanging on for dear life to their rear running boards and support poles. I told Rey that I simply *had* to ride on the back of one of these things.

The next morning, Rey took me out for breakfast to the Manila Hotel, where General Douglas MacArthur and his staff once reigned supreme. Orange juice and coffee on linen tablecloths amidst palm trees and lazy ceiling fans, that was elegance personified. Then it was time for the flip side of humanity. As soon as our meal was over, Rey took me out into the street and waved down a jeepney. He picked one that was so crammed with passengers, it didn't look like even a chicken could fit into it.

"Let's go," he grinned at me -- you know, the *famous* little boy grin that stretches back beyond both ears. And he ran towards that jeepney with my hand in his, and we both jumped onto the back and grabbed the rear poles. In seconds, we were hurtling down the filthy, congested streets of Manila, our lives precariously in hand, riding the best roller coaster ever invented.

Rey peered into my eyes. "You see," he grinned again, "I made your dream come true."

That's a delicious memory now, but not my most penetrating one from that trip to the Philippines. Reynaldo took me on another, longer, journey, at that time. We took a four-hour drive to the province of Batangas, where I saw the village and home in which he had grown up. Rey's boyhood took place during the Japanese occupation, and he shared with me some very personal, agonizing stories about that time. I won't share those here and now, for tonight is an occasion to exult in celebration. But Rey's experiences resonated with other remarkable stories I have heard, of survival and resilience by musical teachers and friends of older generations -- my own first teacher Veronika, running barefoot through Hungarian forests away from Soviet occupiers in

1956; or my Juilliard teacher Rudolf Firkušný escaping in turn from Prague, then Paris, then Lisbon, as the Nazis advanced through Europe; or the childhood of Vietnamese pianist Dang Thai Son in Ho Chi Minh City, punctuated by napalm bombings. Jeepney rides are a delightfully jarring diversion from quiet music study. But the grip of war, the noise of violence, the atmosphere of fear and the smell of death -- that is music's very antithesis.

Those are distractions that the place and timing of my birth gave me the good fortune to avoid, on my own life's journey. It gives me great pause, every day of my life, to witness that music somehow manages to survive -- given the state of our times, the values our leaders espouse, the desensitized technological glorification that defines our current era.

Seeing Reynaldo's childhood piano and his proud competition certificates on the walls of his family home -- diplomas of excellence from Paris, top prizes from Italy, France and Brazil -- spoke to me profoundly that day, of the devotion and sacrifice which forms a major part of the calling of music. I never, ever, refer to music as a profession. In the hands of the anointed, it is, in fact, a saintly undertaking, a daily sacrifice to the beauty of art as a conduit to the betterment of humankind. Reynaldo Reyes is one of those rare individuals who has selflessly given all of himself to that calling, every day of his life. In his spectacular concert work, his glorious chamber playing, his vivacious and dedicated teaching -- he has been far more than a role model to me. I came to know him as my musical father. And so many of us here this evening, have also come to know him in that same way.

Reynaldo, indeed you filled my life with magic. You made my dream come true, not only on the back of a jeepney, but every time I sit down at the keyboard to practice, to play, and especially to teach.

I owe you more thanks than it is possible to give in a speech, but here are a few notes of gratitude. Think of it as payback for the jeepney ride.

> Thank you for teaching me, from the time my feet could not even reach the pedals.
>
> Thank you for challenging me to never, ever be satisfied. To know that every performance is just a study for the next, better one.
>
> Thank you for drilling me on my scales, my arpeggios, my Czerny, and my Bach.

Thank you for urging me to the utmost, to know that the sound of every note I touch can be beautiful, if I strive to hear it and make it so.

Thank you for phoning me in Brussels at 2:00 a.m. when I made the finals of the Queen Elisabeth Competition, just to remind me to practice slowly.

Thank you for phoning me in Vienna at 2:00 a.m.when I made the finals of the Beethoven Competition, just to remind me to practice slowly.

Thank you for phoning me in Moscow at 2:00 a.m. when I made the finals of the Tschaikowsky Competition, just to remind me to practice slowly.

Thank you for phoning me... well, you get the idea.

Thank you, especially, for sharing all of your boyish wonder and musical delight, with so many people, so many generations of musicians, so many generations of music lovers. You are adored beyond measure, you know.

So much beauty you have given us all, fifty years and counting.

The jeepney ride isn't over yet!