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## **Swan song**

# **Pianist Findlay Cockrell continues his 'farewell season' with flourish**

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES UNION

PIANIST FINDLAY COCKRELL came to Albany to join the faculty of the University at Albany's new music department 40 years ago and has been at the epicenter of the Capital Region's classical music scene ever since.

He's a pianist who needs just one name: Findlay. A singular personality and an inescapable presence in the Capital Region's music scene for four decades, Findlay Cockrell is as peripatetic as he is dedicated. If he's not on stage at a concert, dashing off some Bach or Mozart, show tunes or ragtime, then he's probably in the audience with his wife, Marcia.

Although he's designated this year as his "40th and farewell season," Cockrell, 70, has hardly slackened his pace. He's been surveying his most beloved classical repertoire in monthly recitals at the University at Albany, where he'll become a professor emeritus at the end of the spring semester. He'll also appear with the Albany Symphony Orchestra on Saturday at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall as soloist in Morton Gould's "Interplay."

"I'm a huge fan," says ASO conductor David Alan Miller. "He has such an insatiable appetite for music and plays with great sophistication and elegance."

Cockrell has a natural flare for works like Gould's jazz-infused "Interplay" and is especially known for Gershwin. But Miller views him as more than a specialist or

merely a hometown talent.

"It would be too simple to say that he's an American-style pianist, even knowing what an American gregarious guy he is. He's an all-around wonderful pianist and musician," says Miller. "Because he happens to be local and to have done so much here, we in the music community run the danger of taking musicians like him for granted."

### *An early start*

Certainly Cockrell's talents have been seen and heard outside upstate New York. A native of Berkeley, Calif., he was performing solo in the Bay Area by his early teens. His flare for theatrics was recognized early on, notably when he was asked to be the opening performer in the first Junior Bach Festival, a Berkeley tradition that has continued for 53 years since.

"The gal who created the thing wanted to start with a bang," recalls Cockrell, who was a high school senior at the time. He launched the proceedings with Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, the grand and halting tune popularly associated with Halloween.

Cockrell went on to study music at Harvard, where he took a class with composer Randall Thompson and also sang in the Bach B Minor Mass with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under conductor Charles Munch. Studies at the Juilliard School with pianist Edward Steuermann followed.

In spring 1965, Cockrell made his New York City debut at Town Hall, playing Bach, Chopin and Liszt in a recital presented under the auspices of Concert Artists Guild. That was the same season he was a contestant in the Chopin Competition in Warsaw, Poland. Marcia Cockrell recalls it as both a triumph and low point of Cockrell's career.

"Warsaw Hails U.S. Pianist," proclaimed a small wire report in the Feb. 24, 1965, edition of The New York Times. The notice prompted telegrams of congratulations from family, but Cockrell was devastated to be eliminated after the first round.

Just as his teachers had warned him, the politics of the Cold War infiltrated the judging process and none of the Americans made it past the first cut. "He played

beautifully, but it didn't matter what you did," says Marcia. "They chose the right winner though." The Argentinean pianist Martha Argerich ultimately triumphed.

### *Smitten with UAlbany*

"I applied for (only) one college job," recalls Cockrell. It was for a faculty position at the newly established music department at the modern uptown campus of the University at Albany. With their newborn daughter, Dorothy, the couple felt settled on Manhattan's Upper West Side, Marcia with a secretarial job and Findlay with private students scattered across the city. But something drew them up the Hudson. A visit to the future campus sealed the deal.

"Washington Avenue was dirt just beyond Brevator Street, but I saw fabulous architecture," recalls Cockrell, who arrived at UAlbany in 1966, though the university's Performing Arts Center wasn't completed until 1969.

An early pleasant chore for the university was going shopping at Steinway Piano on Long Island to select the instruments that are still in use by faculty and students. After pointing out the half-dozen or so grands that pleased him, Cockrell recalls adding, with a flick of the wrist, "and throw in 12 uprights."

Throughout it all, Marcia has been a faithful supporter, yet not just of Findlay's sundry enterprises but of the greater cultural scene. Currently she's an active board member of both the Albany Symphony and its support wing Vanguard, as well as the Albany-Tula Russia Alliance and the Friends of Chamber Music.

"They are at the epicenter of Albany's musical life," says the ASO's Miller.

### *Spreading his talent*

Helping to christen the halls at UAlbany as well as at The Egg and broadcasting a 28-hour radio series, "Keyboard Masters," on public radio station WAMC were some of the ways that Cockrell made himself known to the larger community. He also started a series of noontime concerts, first at the Empire State Plaza, later at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall.

For three seasons Cockrell even ran his own ensemble, the Amadeus Chamber Orchestra. "I needed it," he says. "I wanted to play those Mozart Concertos."

While his industry was obvious, it took longer for his mischievous side to show through. After a Gershwin recital in the early 1970s, there was no turning back.

For the finale, "I Got Rhythm," Cockrell recorded the second verse in advance and hid speakers behind the curtains. "I played the first chorus live, then got up and did a soft shoe around the piano (to the taped accompaniment)," recalls Cockrell with glee, "and ended with a kick from behind the curtain."

According to Marcia Cockrell, Findlay wasn't faking the steps. He'd been going to New York to study tap with the great Sandman Sims after being wowed by a Sims performance at The Egg.

### *Valuable lessons*

Energy and good-natured antics are now a typical part of Cockrell's daily life, especially at UAlbany, where he has taught both private lessons and courses in the rudiments of music. He's known for riding to campus on a scooter in good weather and for bursting into practice rooms when he's impressed by what he hears from the hall.

"People think he's crazy, but they recognize him as an authority," says Jared Shepard, a senior majoring in music and economics, who studies privately with Cockrell. "He's given to whims, and that's part of his personality."

That's not to say the affects of his teaching are transitory.

"I found what he had to say about music and playing often more valuable than (what I got from) more weighty teachers I had at the Curtis Institute," says Matt Herskowitz, who studied with Cockrell from ages 9 through 12.

Today Herskowitz, 37, is based in Montreal and balances a career in both classical and jazz. Cockrell's own wide embrace of music provided him an early example. He remembers Cockrell showing him "an almost obvious common sense of music that a lot of teachers don't get."

*Won't slow down*

Although retirement is just around the corner, the Cockrells have been too busy to really discuss what's ahead, besides an early summer trip to Greece and Germany with their daughter and granddaughter.

Duties at the university will come to an end, but Findlay will continue giving private lessons and he'll doubtlessly pop up on concert stages.

"My life completely centers around the Capital Region," Findlay says. "I'm a regional artist, and I really like that term."

Marcia is confident that he won't slow down. She still observes in her husband the same characteristics she saw when they first met as teenagers at a church social: "A love of life and enthusiasm and naivete," she says. "It's strange for man of his age but I don't think he'll ever grow up."

*Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union.*

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