

# American pianist Peter Serkin is dead at 72

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Peter Serkin, the son and grandson of illustrious musicians who found his own path to an international career as a pianist and teacher, died on Feb. 1 at the age of 72, at his home in upstate New York. The cause of death was pancreatic cancer.

The passing of Serkin, at a relatively young age, leaves the musical world deprived of a pianist of intelligence, passion and integrity. He performed as a solo recitalist, a chamber musician and with orchestras all over the world. Among the conductors with whom he collaborated were such figures as Claudio Abbado, Daniel Barenboim, Robert Shaw, Pierre Boulez and James Levine. Serkin also taught at various points at the Juilliard School in New York City, the Yale School of Music, the Curtis Institute and most recently at the Bard College Conservatory of Music.

His extraordinary number of recordings include performances of Bach, including five separate recordings over a span of decades of the *Goldberg Variations*, as well as of Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Dvořák and other 19th century masters. A particular focus of Serkin's attention was music of the 20th and 21st centuries, and his recordings include compositions by Bartók and Schoenberg, dating from the first half of the century, Olivier Messiaen, and more recent composers such as Elliot Carter, Stefan Wolpe, Charles Wuorinen, Toru Takemitsu and Peter Lieberson, whose work spanned largely the second half.

Peter Serkin was born on July 24, 1947. His parents, Rudolf and Irene Busch Serkin, were refugees from Nazism. Rudolf Serkin (1902–1991) was a legendary pianist whose performances of the late Beethoven sonatas made an impact that many listeners can recall decades later. The elder Serkin had been born in Bohemia, into a Russian-Jewish family.

Serkin's maternal grandfather, Adolf Busch, though not a Jew, was a fierce anti-Nazi. He left Germany for Switzerland, along with his future son-in-law, as soon as Hitler took power in 1933. Busch, a famed violinist and conductor, when asked to return to Germany in 1938, replied that he would "return with joy on the day that Hitler, Goebbels and Göring are publicly hanged."

The younger Serkin began his career in 1959 at the age of 11, performing with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in

Philadelphia. He was soon performing with ensembles like the world-class Cleveland and Philadelphia Orchestras.

In the late 1960s, however, Serkin found himself alienated from the musical establishment, perhaps pressured by what was expected from the son of one of the world's most famous musicians. This was also a time of revolutionary upheaval around the world, and Serkin was undoubtedly influenced by the period.

He took a break from his career, living for some months with his wife and baby daughter in Mexico. Returning after several years, he began to take up where he had left off, but with some major changes.

Many of these differences found expression in the chamber group TASHI, formed in 1973 by Serkin, violist Ida Kavafian, clarinetist Richard Stoltzman and cellist Fred Sherry. The group lasted through the 1970s. TASHI deemphasized formal attire and some other conventions of classical music performance. Its unfamiliar configuration corresponded to the instruments in the unusual and inspiring *Quartet for the End of Time*, written by French composer Olivier Messiaen while he was a prisoner of war held by German forces in 1941. This work became closely associated with TASHI, which also performed a wide range of the classical repertoire, including contemporary as well as older classical music.

Serkin left the group in 1979, saying he felt it had accomplished most of its goals and that he wanted to devote more time to solo piano music. The remaining instrumentalists continued TASHI, but for only a few more years, although each of its members continued with an extremely successful career.

Serkin later credited TASHI with having restored his joy in performing. "For me," he said in the early 1980s, "the group represented a new way of preparing and performing music. Before that, I had been having a lot of trouble performing, and sometimes there wasn't that much enjoyment. I've always loved music tremendously and enjoyed working on it and playing ... It was somehow very reviving in terms of just enthusiasm, enjoying traveling together, almost as if for the first time really enjoying playing concerts and the experience of sharing music. It

turned my head around, and inspired me to try to have some of that same enthusiasm for other things, such as playing with an orchestra.”

In a later interview, with the *San Jose* (California) *Mercury-News* in 2012, Serkin suggested some of the reasons why TASHI had appealed to him. Asked about “the commercialization of the classical music scene” and the publicity that goes along with it, Serkin replied, “I have something of an aversion to that kind of an approach. There’s something that seems to miss the point when there’s too much emphasis being put on the individual who’s performing the great classic works. If there’s so much emphasis put on the performing of it, it seems to detract from ... the actual experiencing of the music itself. And it can even be a distraction for the performer, performers can start to think of themselves too seriously and start to manufacture performances and interpretations, other than letting the music lead them.”

In the same interview, Serkin said that “maybe I was brought up that way, to have tremendous reverence for the great composers and not to make too great a deal out of those who play the music.”

This was indeed a guiding ethos of the world-famous Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont, which was founded by Rudolf Serkin, Adolf Busch and several colleagues nearly 70 years ago. Peter Serkin literally grew up in the atmosphere of passionate collaboration in chamber music, far removed from the usual considerations of hierarchy, ostentation, formality and wealthy patrons. At Marlboro, established instrumentalists work together with young students in an annual summer festival. The results are almost always impressive, and sometimes magical.

Rudolf Serkin was later quoted as acknowledging that he had perhaps not fully understood the younger man’s abilities when he was growing up. Peter Serkin, though recognizing his father’s “very critical style towards his sons,” nevertheless said that he learned much from him through his formative years. At the same time, as a teacher the younger Serkin “[tries] to be more encouraging—not to smooth over issues. But basically the reason we’re together is (for me) to try to be of help, and I think encouragement is a big part of that, because it’s kind of an act of bravery to play classical music. And I’m very open to my students being my teachers, as well ... The things they do that may not have occurred to me. That can stimulate ideas, so it really goes both ways.”

A democratic sensibility on Serkin’s part was also shown in his frequent appearances, as a recitalist and chamber musician, at the low-cost Peoples Symphony concert series in New York City. This listener heard him there several times, including in a wonderful recital, with sisters Madalyn

and Cicely Parnas, of Beethoven’s “Ghost” Trio, Brahms’s First Piano Trio, and Ravel’s Piano Trio.

Peter Serkin was also well known for performing and in some cases commissioning works by “difficult” composers, including many atonal works and others that don’t get frequent performances. He once explained, “I’ve always been very interested in music that’s being written today and in recent music. That was true even as a child, when that was somewhat discouraged. But it was just a component of me somehow—inquisitive...”

He told one critic that he disliked being called a “champion” of contemporary music, however, because of the connotation that it should be seen as a separate and segregated category.

The WSWs has previously discussed some of the issues and problems raised with contemporary music. There can be no argument with Serkin’s curiosity and his insistence, in agreement with violinist Anne-Sofie Mutter and other well-known musical figures, that classical music has to find expression in new work if it is to be a living art form.

Another example of the pianist’s openness to other forms of music was his love of jazz. He once referred to its “rhythmic energy and wildness and freedom ... the quality of making something up on the spot, based on a real sense of discipline at the same time, which is something I really admire in classical music performances, too ... there should still be that sense of spontaneity, that it’s happening right now, on the spot.”

Serkin’s concern for new music did not lead to any neglect of the older canon. Very often the pianist would program works from the 19th century alongside contemporary pieces.

Serkin’s technique, his understatedness, what he called his “reverence for the great composers,” and his attempt “not to make too great a deal” of himself, can be seen and heard in his many recordings. Some performances are available on YouTube, including the amazing piano four-hands rendition of Schubert’s March in G major, Op. 52, No. 2, by father and son, Rudolf and Peter Serkin, in 1988 as well as this stirring performance of Beethoven’s Choral Fantasy, with Seiji Ozawa conducting, and Mozart’s Adagio in B minor.



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