

Simply Madeleine: The Memoir of a Post World War II French Pianist

by Madeleine Forte, *Gamma Kappa, ACME*

Review by ElmaMae Henderson, *Theta*

A comment by Professor Jonathan D. Bellman of Northern Colorado, just about says it all: “The warmest of afternoon reads.” *Simply Madeleine* reads equally well on an autumn evening, especially because author Madeleine Forte is a distinguished Mu Phi Epsilon member. From her Prologue statement “To the unique one who reads me” to her Postlude’s nostalgic words of reflection and remembrance, her courage, grace, faith, and love shine through. This review offers just a few vignettes from a detailed memoir of an extraordinarily rich professional and personal life.

Early enrichment

Madeleine Forte’s middle class family consisted of an ambitious father who worked as a carpenter, served in WWII, studied law and eventually became a judge; her mother, a talented homemaker protective of her kitchen; and an older brother. Madeleine’s early childhood was enriched by her Aunt Sonia, piano teacher *extraordinaire* who also taught her reading, writing, drawing, and dance. Sonia had given up an operatic career to stay with her mother, and later with Madeleine’s family as a dedicated teacher. She guided and encouraged Madeleine, starting at age three and a half, to become the exceptional artist she is. Madeleine enjoyed practicing the piano, with daily lessons for many years; Aunt Sonia always encouraged her to play with expression. At age five, Madeleine would announce, “I am a pianist!”

A wartime experience

During the war under the Vichy regime, when the air raid sirens

would rend the air, Madeleine’s mother, brother, and Aunt Sonia would run to the neighborhood shelter where the adults would stand shoulder to shoulder talking; the children were frightened and silent. The American soldiers treated Madeleine as their mascot, calling her their “baby.” When the sirens signaled again, the family went home, crawled under a blanket, and secretly listened to a wireless radio.

Learner, teacher, performer

With support from grants, scholarships and odd jobs, as a young adult Madeleine continued her musical studies in Paris and Warsaw. A competition in Rio de Janeiro was a life-altering experience; she won silver, but more importantly, received many performance opportunities. From there she moved to New York to study at the Juilliard School with Rosina Lhévinne.

After earning her master’s, she received several teaching offers and accepted one at Boise State University, where she taught for twenty-six years until retirement in 1997. She performed all over the world and earned a doctorate from New York University with a dissertation about Olivier Messiaen, with whom she maintained a long correspondence. She was married three times – the first difficult and short-lived, the second better but ultimately unsuccessful, and the third to the love of her life – and has two sons. After her retirement, she and third husband Allen Forte traveled the world and gave lecture-recitals as a team for many years.



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A brief review cannot adequately relate the beauty of her descriptive prose or the way the author interweaves her professional and personal experiences. Her Postlude remarks mention the joys and failures of a remarkable artist’s life and loves. The book contains photos of Madeleine and many of the other artists with whom she shared her life and career. It is a memoir of a most courageous, extraordinary woman.

> Bookshelf Contributor

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