



Artist/Educator Archive Interview - Dr. Oscar Macchioni

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Each month we feature the personal experiences and insights of a noted artist/educator on various aspects of piano performance and education. You may not always agree with the opinions expressed, but we think you will find them interesting and informative. The opinions offered here are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily represent those of the [West Mesa Music Teachers Association](#), its officers, or members. (We have attorneys, too!). At the end of the interview, you'll find hypertext links to the interviewee's e-mail and Web sites (where available), so you can learn more if you're interested. The current interview is below; other PEP Artist/Educator interviews can be found on our [Artist/Educator Archive Interviews](#) page.



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The August 2007 artist/educator:



**Dr. Oscar Macchioni,
Educator and Performer,
University of Texas
at El Paso, El Paso,
TX USA**

Oscar Macchioni, a native of Argentina, is an active teacher, pianist, lecturer and adjudicator. Upon his graduation from the Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, with three undergraduate degrees in music, he received a scholarship from the Polish Government to study piano at the Krakow Academy of Music. He received his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in piano performance with a minor concentration in ethnomusicology from the University of Arizona in Tucson and his Master of

Music in piano performance from Louisiana State University.

Oscar has performed extensively in his native Argentina, Poland, Mexico, and in the USA, which has included such notable locations as Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, Columbia University, Steinway Hall, and the Donnell Library in New York. Recently, he has been broadcasted live through WFMT 98.7, the Classical Radio Station of Network Chicago, while performing at the esteemed Myra Hess Memorial Concerts at the Chicago Cultural Center. He won several competitions in Argentina and the USA, such as Green Valley Piano competition in Arizona, Promociones Musicales de Buenos Aires and Tucumán National University (composition), and was a finalist in the International Audio-Tape Piano Competition organized by the Germaine Pinault International Music Society in New York.

Although he is a passionate performer of Latin American music, Oscar's repertoire includes a diversity of musical styles and composers from all periods. Recent performances include works by Soler, Beethoven, Liszt, Brahms, Chopin, Szymanowski, Villa-Lobos, Piazzolla, Ginastera, Copland, Barber, Guastavino, and Castro. He enjoys research activities and recently presented lecture recitals at international and national conferences such as the Second International Vernacular Conference in Puebla, Mexico; The International Council for Traditional Music in Brazil; Piano Pedagogy Forum; College Music Society, and the Society for Ethnomusicology.

Oscar Macchioni has been recognized by many prestigious national and international organizations. He has been sponsored by Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. (Fellow Graduate Student, Summer 2000), the Polish Government, Organization of American States (OAS), Leschetizky Association of New York, and most recently he received the Music Teachers National Association "Student Achievement Award" (StAr) and was named "Distinguished Graduate Student" by the University of Arizona Music Advisory Board. In 2004, Oscar was featured in the French Magazine Piano, La Lettre du Musicien.

Dr. Macchioni has served as an adjudicator for the Arizona Music Teachers Association and the El Paso Music Teachers Association. In July of 2006, he was hired by the International Piano Performance Committee of Taiwan to conduct piano examinations to about 1,200 students nationwide. Oscar has also been invited to serve as jury in national and international piano competitions. He is profiled in Marquis Who's Who in America Diamond Edition 2005 and in AcademicKeys Who's Who in Fine Arts Higher Education.

In 2003, Dr. Macchioni joined the faculty at the University of Texas at El Paso. Currently he is an Assistant Professor of Piano and Piano Pedagogy and he also serves as piano faculty at the El Paso Conservatory of Music. Before coming to El Paso, Oscar served as an Artist in Residency, Research Assistant and Teaching Assistant at the University of Arizona; and as a Professor of Theory at the Universidad Nacional de Tucumán.



How did you find your way into music?

I grew up in Tafí Viejo, a small town in province of Tucumán, in northern Argentina.

There were not musicians in my family and there was not a piano in my house or in my immediate family. I felt in love with this instrument since I can remember, and I don't know why. My mother took piano lessons when she was young and kept some of her books in a bookcase. I was probably 4 years old when I accidentally came across my mother's old piano books and for years had a fascination with them. At my parents' nap time, I'd go to the bookcase, pull out the piano books, and start copying the music in blank pieces of paper. When I was about 5 (I still remember), my father took me to the store to buy staff paper so I could copy the music (let's say I started as a copyist!). I still have at home some of my "earlier copy works" with big notes and all colorful.

My parents never pushed me to do after school activities, so they waited until I asked them for piano lessons. I was about eight or nine when I had my first piano lessons, including solfege, theory and music history, from a local piano teacher. I also played the recorder and when I was 10, I was composing pieces for that instrument. Now, when I look at those compositions I'm amazed at the sense of form, melody and phrasing I had.

I consider my studies to have come to fruition when I was 17 years old and entered the university. Then, my parents bought me a nice German professional upright piano, which I still have in Argentina.



Who was the most influential person in your years as a student of the piano and why?

I think that all of my teachers were influential in my life - even the ones who didn't believe in me. I learned different things from each one of them. In Argentina, Lic. Lucia Herrera taught me how to focus, to memorize and to concentrate; Lic. Celina Lis taught me to play with a full warm sound. In the States, at the University of Arizona, Dr. Nohema Fernandez taught me to open my heart and my ears to music and the basics of music business; and [Prof. Tannis Gibson](#) gave me the most confidence at the keyboard. But, I must say that a person who created a great impression in my life in a very short time was Dr. Anna Maria Trenchi de Bottazzi. I studied piano with her in New York City for eight months and I learned an incredible amount. I also had the opportunity to perform at various important venues in NYC, thanks to her. She is a tremendous force of inspiration to any one who knows her. I consider her my musical mother.



What do you enjoy most about making and teaching music?

I enjoy practicing a lot, especially when I have time (almost never!) to take long breaks and reflect on what I'm doing. Making music takes us through a journey in which we can learn not just about music, but about ourselves and others too, by teaching them. Perhaps the most enjoyable thing about performing and teaching music is to have discovered things about myself - how I function, how I think, how I feel, and, most importantly, what I have to do and change to be a better performer, a better teacher and a better person. I think that a performer or teacher who goes through life knowing only how to perform or teach is somebody who did not learn the full lesson. It is sad to see some great professionals (in any profession) who have a disconnection between their art and their human and social qualities.

It is also fascinating to see a student's growth and change. Music presents a lot of challenges for a person and to overcome those challenges one must reflect, plan and make the necessary changes to achieve the goal. As a teacher, I feel privileged to be able to form and improve the student's musical abilities. Music doesn't make people smart (as claimed by some) but makes people aware of themselves and their possibilities, learning how to focus and how to be disciplined.



If you had to give a short synopsis of the philosophy behind your teaching to others, what would you say?

To be brief, my teaching is based in mutual respect. Students are first human beings,

then pianists and musicians, so the human aspect is crucial for the development of a great musician. As a teacher, I must respect the individuality and uniqueness of each student, but at the same time I must guide them to unlock their highest potentials by sharing my knowledge and experience with them. I also must help them to develop their own musical ideas and critical thinking. I do require a lot from all my students, but I'm always careful to tailor the instruction to each one of them. Teaching an instrument is not like mass producing a plastic container.



How would you characterize music training in Argentina vs. that in the U.S.?

The training in Argentina is based on the French Conservatory system, private (home) teachers and most institutions. Unlike the private teaching in the U.S, in Argentina most teachers are affiliated to a conservatory which provides the structure, curricula and testing for each level, similar to the ABRSM or Trinity College. Students have to perform for a panel of teachers, which always includes an adjudicator from out of town, giving validity to the testing. The training I had as a kid was heavily based in theory, solfege, and a lot of exercises and technique books like Czerny, Cramer, and Kullak, besides the repertory pieces, of course. This type of rigorous training gives solid bases of musicianship, piano technique and interpretation. The training wasn't flexible and everybody was expected to do the same regardless of their abilities. In the US, musical training is more tailored to the student, to his/her abilities and goals. I think this is very positive and requires a different training for the teachers.

I see a big problem in the US with the abuse of positive reinforcement. Some teachers create a cloud of unreality which is broken when students get into college or workplaces. Just think: It can't be that everything we do is "great", "fantastic", "amazing." There are other ways to encourage students; they must be told the truth. I choose honesty and work ethics. As a kid, I didn't have stickers and smiling faces in my books. I was told to move to the next piece when it was learned properly. I still don't use stickers with my students. I show my content with affection (hugs, big smile, great happiness), not with material things. Once I asked an 8 year old transfer student what she preferred after a good lesson: stickers or a hug, she answered "a hug" and knowing that I was happy for her.

At the university level in Argentina, the curricula were still very intense. I had 5 complete years (no semesters) of theory followed by 5 years of harmony, form and analysis, and 4 years of history. At the end of each academic year, the piano juries were full programs, lasting some times more than an hour, not just 15 or 20 minutes.



You teach both at the University of Texas-El Paso (UTEP) and in your own private studio. Aside from age of students, what factors are different in teaching in the university environment vs. the private studio? Are there any unique aspects of each?

It is very different to teach privately than at a college. In an institution there are very specific tasks a student needs to achieve in one semester and through the years in a program. In other words the timeline is constrained and not too flexible. Teaching privately, I can tailor that timeline to each specific student. Furthermore, the goals of those students are often different. College students major in piano and that is what

they choose for their lives and career. On the other hand, private students have different goals, such as just enjoying playing an instrument or to prepare for college.



UTEP is known for, among many other things, its multicultural diversity in student population. Do you find that the diversity affects your teaching of piano and music in any way?

Not really. Although I must say that being at UTEP presents a different scenario for teaching than other places. It is a true international frontier and students from Mexico commute daily between both countries to attend classes at UTEP. But the teaching of music is universal and a diverse place like El Paso should enrich that experience. I feel that my obligation as a teacher is to make students improve and excel in their field. As our chairman, Dr. Lowell Graham, says "a b-flat in El Paso is the same as a b-flat in New York City..." But I must add that I see a great population of Hispanic males studying music in El Paso, more than any other places I have been.



What "deficiency" in training or technique do you most often find in students of the piano?

The most common one is the lack of practicing habits and practicing techniques. Most students are unaware of steps to follow to accomplish different technique and musical tasks. I think they just sit at the piano for hours, repeating without any goal or direction, without listening to themselves, then that's how they play too. Another deficiency is the lack of knowledge of the musical language in general, I don't see they have a total comprehension of how music works and a 4 years college degree cannot usually fill up the gaps. But the one that bothers me the most is the lack of curiosity. I think that the new generation is too passive and content with just a little. That said, I believe that a teacher's job is to initiate that fire and to provoke student's curiosity.



What general advice do you give to students of the piano?

- To listen to themselves
- To learn as much repertoire as they can.
- To think that the piano is a singing instrument, not a percussion one.
- To read, to exercise, to laugh, to live, to be part of their culture
- To be a complete person and musician not just a "piano player."
- To be honest with who they are.

And to practice a lot!



You are a busy educator and performer. Can you give us your reflections upon music as a career?

When we are students, we don't realize what a music career is and what it entails. Nobody teaches us the business aspects of music. We all have the dream of performing in the most famous halls and teaching the most talented students. Today's reality is that a musician who only knows how to play well it is not a complete one. Today's musicians need to be versatile and have other areas of interests and expertise. A teacher/performer must know also how to present him/herself well, how to speak, how to write properly, how to interact in a working

place and society, how to sell him/herself. The image of the self-absorbed, bohemian, antisocial musician doesn't work any more.

The same level of performing shown on the stage should show up in all aspects of life. I was fortunate enough to have excellent mentors at the University of Arizona, who not only taught me the performing aspects of music but the business, as well.



What do you do in your private studio when you have a student who seems to be losing interest in piano?

This situation is different with each student, but I'll always talk to the student. I have had excellent results from even very young ages by talking and asking them what is wrong. Sometimes you will have to give them the answers to choose from: "is it the repertoire?, is it the practicing schedule?, is it me?...etc. You will be able to read the answer in their faces. A change in repertoire and lesson activity always helps. As a teacher, my first goal is not to make a very young student a concert pianist but to "lure" the student in enjoying music so much that they will do the effort to succeed in their lessons. Patience is very important and it needs to come from the teacher, student and parents. Eventually, if everything fails, there is nothing wrong in letting that student go, but always on good terms with the piano and their teacher.



We sometimes get letters at PEP from children asking us how to convince parents to let them take lessons. How would you answer such questions, based on your own experience?

It is unfortunate that children have to convince parents to let them take piano lessons; it should be the other way around! Fortunately, I haven't encountered that situation yet. We should try to understand why a parents doesn't want their child to take music lessons. If the reason is economic, they can always negotiate with the teacher and there are teachers for every budget. If it is ignorance, then the problem is more complicated. There are several researches that show why music lessons are important for children. Music lessons help to develop abstract thought and develops attention span and concentration level among other things. All these are important skills useful in any discipline and career and parents should take note of that.



Your performing repertoire is very broad, including well-known classics and, perhaps, less well-known "classics of the future." However, one interesting element in your repertoire and interests is the Argentinian tango. Can you tell us more about your interest in the tango?

My interest in tango started when I left Argentina to study abroad. I grew up listening to *rock nacional* (progressive music, national rock) and even attended several bands' concerts with my friends. The tango was considered "for old people." Being in a different culture made me reflect on what I was missing the most from my country. Of course, the food was one of the first things I missed, so I learned how to cook Argentinean dishes. But, I also missed the music. I wasn't a tango fan before but I started listening to Piazzolla, and before I knew it, I was hooked with his melodies and harmonies. Of course, Piazzolla is not the traditional tango, it is modern tango, therefore my interest in the tango in art music. The defining moment for my research on tango was in the summer of 2000 when I was awarded a Graduate Smithsonian Institution Fellowship to study the impact of the Argentine

tango in the US.



Do you have a favorite pianist and, if so, what attracts you to that person's performances?

I have many favorite pianists. Some are good for certain styles but not for others, like great for Beethoven but uninteresting when playing Debussy. But the one pianist that never disappointed me is Martha Argerich. It is her fire, her musicality coming from the stomach not the brain that makes her perhaps the most important pianist alive.



Your respectful comments about the work of Ms. Argerich suggest that you must respect her "musicality." Do you emphasize musicality with your students and, if so, how do you teach or encourage it?

For me musicality is the most important thing in making music. Of course, technique is important, but the meaning of music is to be found in musicality, not in technique. Technique should serve as a tool to achieve a higher purpose, which is to express and transmit a message. Performances that are conceived to be only "technically perfect" deceive the purpose of music. We humans have the opportunity to make each performance different and we should. I laugh when students tell me that they are bored practicing the same piece. How can somebody be bored when they have the ability to play differently every time they practice the piece....?

Musicality is the most difficult thing to teach. A teacher can explain, show, demonstrate, but if the student doesn't feel it inside, in the stomach, with the core of the body, he is she is only copying but not really feeling it.

I recommend to my students to sing their music. The voice is perhaps the most flexible instrument, the one that allows the most variables in phrasing, and it is within us! Singing help us to feel the music inside out bodies. I'm a horrible singer, really, but I love to "sing" my music while I practice. Feeling the ups and downs, the big stretches, gaps, and the variability of volumes and colors. I always put "nonsense words" to the melody and rhythms, which allows me to feel them at a different level.



I understand that you have received a grant to develop a piano technology lab at UTEP. What factors motivated you to seek funding and start such a lab there?

When I arrived to UTEP in 2003, I encountered a "vintage" piano lab from the 70's. Immediately, I started to work on a proposal to renovate and upgrade that lab. I thought about and planned every aspect of what I needed in order to teach group piano in the twentieth first century. Of course there are some limitations, mostly related with the physical space where the lab is located. Besides the electronic pianos, this lab will be all integrated, being heavily equipped with audio-visual aids, like cameras capturing the teacher's hands in different angles and feet, a smart board that can project in four quadrants enabling the teacher to show pedaling, hands, and music on the same screen. It also encompasses an observation room and piano pedagogy library and it is all capable for broadcasting. I worked very closely with UTEP's architect Gregory Cook and audio-visual specialist Glen Kelly to maximize the space and the functionality of the lab. I'm also very thankful to the Brown

Foundation and UTEP's administration for their support and hard work to get the \$250,000 the lab is worth.



What do you consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of technology for teaching and learning the piano, as it currently exists?

Today we can have and do almost any think imaginable using technology. The weaknesses is to fail to implement that technology according to the student's needs and to think that technology can substitute a teacher.



Why should a teacher consider incorporating computer teaching tools as a part of the private studio curriculum?

To serve as a teaching tool and to enhance learning, NOT to replace the capacity and preparation of the teacher. Today's students are bombarded by technology and they feel very comfortable around it. Students can benefit tremendously from technology if used appropriately.

I saw many private studios with amazing technology, but a very poor quality of teaching. Technology won't cover up the deficiencies in a teacher's education. A teacher should consider investing FIRST in his/her education, educating themselves, which will enable them to become better teachers, then in technology.



Is there a "right way" or "wrong way" to use technological tools in learning to play piano, both for teachers and students?

First I must say that technology won't make someone play the piano. Technology can help in general training like theory, oral skills, history. The right way will be to use technology as a tool to enhance teaching and learning. The wrong way will be to think that technology will make it up for the teacher.



What aspects of piano training can a computer and other technological tools do "well"? Are there any better left to a human teacher?

In this regard, I'm old fashioned. Leave the piano training in hands of good teachers. I do not believe that a program can properly train a pianist, *per se*, although there are some programs in the market claiming that! With today's technology we can see exactly how we played, and it could be exciting to show a student, for example, that a passage "wasn't played full legato" because the program would show rests between the notes. But what is better than to show is to LISTEN. We must learn how to listen, this is perhaps the most difficult task to teach but one of the most valuable ones.

On the other hand, computers and electronic instruments can help to develop ear training, among other skills. There are some great programs in the market for every age and level which are engaging and provide excellent training. We must remember that the great musicians of the past were eager to have and use the latest technology of their time, mainly better instruments, but they didn't compromise their art. We can use amazing technology today but the art of teaching still in the human hands.



What advice would you give to a teacher or parent in starting a

computer aided teaching system for piano? Are there any pitfalls to avoid?

Again, I don't believe a computer system can teach piano, but technology can be used in teaching ear training, composition, orchestration, history, etc.



In closing, what would you like to say to an audience of pianists, teachers and students worldwide?

Teaching and learning piano is a very rewarding experience. Contrary to many, it takes discipline, time and much patience. As long as we are alive, we are all students. Learning never stops - not even with a terminal degree. Teachers should constantly study and learn. The day we think we know everything is the day we die as teachers.

It is very important to have the right teacher. Parents and students should invest time to interview teachers and don't be afraid to ask for credentials and their goals in teaching a diverse group of students. The right teacher/student relationship is extremely important for the success as a student.

To learn more about Professor Macchioni and his piano art and teaching, please visit his web site at <http://www.oscarmacchioni.net>. You can address e-mail to him at omacchioni@utep.edu.

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