

## Menahem Pressler: On Following Your Heart

### Description

E.E. Cummings once said “It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.”

For many years, I didn’t understand what that meant. But it’s starting to make more sense. After all, it’s easy to follow a well-worn path, to do the safe thing, or to take others’ advice when it comes to figuring out what we should do with our lives.

But artists seem to find their own way. Artists learn to listen to that inner voice, and have the courage to follow – even if they have no idea where it will take them.

And whether we fall in love with their art or not, we respect the artist within them. Because we see their courage, and that resonates with the artist within us – which wants only to do the same. To follow our own path.

### Meet Menahem Pressler

Pianist [Menahem Pressler](#) has had a remarkable career spanning more than seven decades. As founding member of the [Beaux Arts Trio](#), he has recorded pretty much the entire piano chamber music repertoire over the trio’s 50+ years.

And in his 60+ years of teaching at Indiana University, he has guided students to prestigious teaching positions around the world and prizes in all of the major international piano competitions.

In this inspiring 30-min chat, you’ll hear the wisdom and insight he has gained from a lifetime of performing and teaching – and what it takes (and means) to truly be an artist.

In addition, we’ll explore:

- How he prepares for performances, and identifies the potential problem areas in advance (0:18)
- The importance of finding your own voice (4:14)
- How he has, for himself anyway, figured out how to connect to an audience (6:07)
- What he is thinking about during a performance on his best days...and on bad days (13:07)
- On dealing with critics and bad reviews (17:42)
- He acknowledges that awards are nice, but identifies something more profound that he finds more deeply rewarding (23:20)
- I ask him if there’s anything he wishes he would have known when he was starting out in his career; he responds with what I think is the best possible answer (25:39)

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**Noa:** You perform so often, all over the place, and with so much different repertoire over the years, that I'm curious about how you get ready for that, or how you've come up with some sort of routine or regimen, if you will, for making sure that when the performance comes you're ready to go.

**MP:** Now, the first thing is that I learn the piece very carefully. I learn it, study it very carefully, and then maybe will have a trial performance. I mean, as a trio, we used to try out, or I, as a solo, would try out a piece until I feel more secure as far as the piece is concerned.

**MP:** Then you always know that there are always places in the work that give you problems, and so you are, in a way, prepared for those problems, which means that when it arrives, that you don't tighten up, that you don't start all of a sudden fear, but that you are somehow prepared for it. Now, somehow, as I said, because what happens in real life is that the problem moves very often.

**MP:** It may be, this is just bother, gave you lots of problems, all of a sudden that part's not difficult at all and another bar seems very, very difficult. So, you are prepared for these things. And then, what is this, for me, the mainstay, and the main reason, actually the main reason for playing, the main reason for still playing, is the love for this piece.

**MP:** So, I do love my repertoire, I do love the repertoire that I'm playing, although I do play an enormous repertoire, which is utterly ridiculous with so many different pieces, but I'm still doing it. Actually, next week that will be in Ottawa. I play Brahms quintet and I play quintet for woodwinds by Beethoven and Mozart. I play a Mozart's concerto. I mean, it's hair raising. The only thing is I don't raise any hair. I wish it was, but I'm just trying to, with all that, play repertoires that I know, while I still have to learn new repertoire, I imagine, at 88, I'm playing now, this summer, the Winterreise for the first time.

**Noa:** Oh, wow.

**MP:** This is, "Oh, wow." You're right. This was a singer who has done it maybe hundreds of times. I'm doing it for the first time. The only thing is, of course, Schubert is not ... How should I say it? Closed book for me on the contrary. I played many works of Schubert. And so, for me, this repertoire, it is a vocabulary. I love him and I love this music. And of course, I used to listen to the Winterreise. But just to tell you what I have ahead of me.

**MP:** And here again, it's the preparation. It is playing it, preparing it, seeing the piece, and then forming inside of you an opinion of the piece. Opinion means the way you would like to hear it, the way you would like to play it. Now, very often, we think we play one way and then we hear a tape of that performance and it sounds completely different. It's like as if you don't recognize your voice on tape, which really often happens.

**MP:** So, you still then identify what is it that's going to make it more your voice so that you will recognize it, that you will do it? Yeah, I can only say one of the most and the most important aspect is preparation.

**Noa:** That's hard to get around, being prepared, even in terms of confidence.

**MP:** That, you cannot ... that, you cannot ... How should I say it? There is ... sometimes what life is, sometimes we have to learn a piece very fast. Especially when I was younger, I had to do in order to have the date or something. But first of all, that's not anymore the case. And secondly, I recognize that ... well, I recognize now, by now, truly recognize that it is only the good performances, the ones where you can put your name under it, are the ones that really count.

**Noa:** Is the big thing for you having had the time or the preparation to form an opinion, as you said? Is that really the key to feeling confident about a performance going into it?

**MP:** You know, confident about a performance career, you never can be, because here, it takes two to tango, which meant then you play, you hope that the audience will like you. You hope that there's something in your playing which the audience will like and will respond to. Because I've heard really good performance and the audience ... then left the audience cold. I've heard performance where the ability to get the audience to love them.

**MP:** In a way, I would say that is a talent, too. It is not just that you play better or you play clearer or you play louder or you play softer. It's not that. There is something in which certain performers capable or able to reach the heart strings or the whatever you may call it, the soul, the ear, the relationship, in order to establish that which we call a successful playing career.

**Noa:** Have you figured out what it is that seems to most effectively do that or connect with an audience in that very deep and touching sort of way?

**MP:** I have figured it out for myself, because the things that I love is the sensitivity in the piece, and I do love the beauty of sound. That means how you say it. Now, I have seen that my biggest success was not the fast playing or the loud playing, but was the soft playing. Maybe not the faster; it may have been the slow one. I don't know that part for sure. But there is ... and sometimes I've been [inaudible 00:07:12] when I hear someplace in the Schubert Three, or when I hear myself, there's a new video out and I'd like you to see it, and DVD the concert that I played a few months ago in Paris. You can get it on Amazon.com. It's the DVD of Beethoven Op. 110, and Debussy Estampes, and some Mazurkas of Chopin, finishing it up with the big B flat major sonata of Schubert. Really a big, big program.

**MP:** Seemingly, I must admit, I haven't seen it myself. But I have gotten the input from one of the great composers, a great musician that I regard very, very highly. His name is Kurtág. I don't know if you know the name.

**Noa:** I've heard the name, yeah.

**MP:** Yeah, it's Hungarian. In fact, fabulous musician, really fabulous. Anyway, he will criticize everything,

seems to, in fact. And so, I take his word for it.

**Noa:** Well, that's really interesting because it sounds ... correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds almost like you're saying that whatever the artist finds most compelling, most beautiful, their own definition, whether it's sound, sensitivity, or something else in the music, that's the thing that you're really showcasing because it's so personal to you and meaningful that you hope the audience then responds to what you find beautiful in what you're playing.

**MP:** Yes. I think that you put it in good words, yes. Because you have some others whose brilliance is so overwhelming, and the audience reacts to brilliance, of course, very easy, the sport of instrumental playing. But yet, the great impressions, at least that on myself, too ... and I heard [inaudible 00:09:20] by Schnabel or when I heard playing [inaudible 00:09:24], or I heard ... you know, I heard Rubinstein do some Chopin [inaudible 00:09:32] and not only the phenomenal part of this handling of the instrument, but just the beauty. I mean, Nocturne [inaudible 00:09:47] or Mazurkas I mentioned, have always had on me an overwhelming effect.

**MP:** So, I think I'm not alone in listening to music that way, that there are people on my side of the ... How should I say it? Of the room that will hear it the way I hear it.

**Noa:** It sounds almost like you're talking about being touched by the music as opposed to being impressed by the performance of the music.

**MP:** Absolutely, absolutely, because I do feel the real deep value that is in a performance is that work, which is, of course proved its worth by staying alive 200 years, 50 years, whatever have you, and staying alive by being as direct to your feelings, to my feelings. That's when I hear it as it was when he wrote it.

**MP:** So, I do feel very strongly for myself that the work that's serving the work is in a way more important than how you serve it. I mean, in what clothes you are in. If you can whisper or shout or sing it from the rooftop, what the message of the work is, the message that the composer intended. That, I think, takes times for you, first of all, to find out, too, because there are certain things that you immediately like about a work or that you have heard, and so therefore, you like.

**MP:** But when you start to get to know it deeper and deeper, then you do find some of the works that you use that touch you. Then when you feel that, you may be able to do those works in such a way that you will touch the one who listens to you.

**Noa:** Which brings up a related question for me in that, when you're actually playing, whether it's one of your favorite parts of the piece or a bridge to another part, what do you find yourself thinking about when you're having one of the best days?

**MP:** When I have the best days, I don't think about anything. I listen. I'm inside the music. I sing it, I play it, I don't think of anything. On a bad day, of course, I think, "My, I should have practiced more," or, "For heaven's sake, why didn't I pay attention here? The left hand is not clean." I mean, I hear it and the red light goes on in my brain that tells me now to watch out. Most of the time, I am capable of watching out. But some of the time, I'm not.

**MP:** So therefore, at that moment, thoughts enter your mind which have no place in a performance. In a performance, you should not ... I mean, you shouldn't think in details, you react spontaneously. Your ear is your guide. Your feeling is the guide for the ear. Your hands are operating out of those feelings, and of course, through their training. We know that you can't exaggerate because your hands are not capable to do what Mr. X's hands can do, but you can tell the message as well as X, if you are concentrated of the way ... you see, like they each have a different face and each have a different size, and each of us have a different ... no need, let's put it this way.

**MP:** So, there is that need. And so, then you ask what I am thinking of. Of course, that's what I am thinking of during sometimes, but there has been I'm not so happy or the acoustic is not very good, or the piano is not responding or the action is not right. Oh, look, the upper register is out of tune. There's many different things that can ... but on a good day, none of that matters. Also, even if the piano's out of tune on a good day, you're not even concerned with that.

**Noa:** Have you found a way to keep your mind stuck or more focused on ... You talked about singing, using your ear as a guide and really listening carefully and being immersed inside the music as opposed to being on the outside of it. Have you found any ... I don't want to call them tricks, but have you found strategies or ways of helping yourself?

**MP:** Not really. I mean, you do a number of things and many of the things, of course, especially when you're an old teacher like me, I have had to ... in order to explain it to a student, I would have had to put my finger on it. Now, when you do it for yourself, there isn't a feeling where it says, "That's the right thing," or, "This is the wrong thing." You don't talk to yourself. You don't explain to yourself. But of course, having gone through the process, the explanation in a way do stick to you, too. But it still is the instinct. It is the sounds that you produce. It is the feeling that you have.

**MP:** I, for instance, just now played the slow movement of the Schuman quartet and I deeply adore the piece and have had a long history with the piece, having recorded it twice and whatever. It still moves me to a great extent. It moves me all the way and I feel that I can, in a way, convey that to someone who listens to me playing it.

**Noa:** Are there times where you have had to deal with audiences that aren't coming along for the ride or just aren't responding, or critics even, who just don't seem to understand where you're coming from with the music?

**MP:** Of course. Everybody has that. I was at a thing when [inaudible 00:16:53] once said to me, he said, "When 51 of the critics write well about you, you're a success. There is no one that doesn't get bad

reviews.” The bad part very often is that neither the good or the bad one are written by people with deep knowledge. I will say this, when I started to play, of course, the critics were old, and therefore I had deep respect for them. They’ve heard a lot, and when they say, “This is not right,” or, “This should be done,” I was very apt to listen. But the older I got, the younger the critics got. Then I had some critics that I would never even take into my class or listen to their musical opinion.

**MP:** But of course, it’s printed black and white. And so, very often, you do have to revisit, even though you feel inside [inaudible 00:17:57], or you feel not even giving it a second thought. It takes this, and we have found out that of course, anything that is black and white, that remains. It’s all good or it’s a stain on your picture that is there for anyone in the world to either make dirty or beautify it. And it is true that sometimes at times you feel that you didn’t play at your best and you get the most wonderful write up. Then when you feel you played at your best, you get a terrible write up. That has happened, too.

**Noa:** In that regard, I was curious about people who’ve had, by any measure, a successful career, and what they themselves actually consider to be the most successful aspect of the career or the most difficult part of the career to swallow. For you, what would you consider to be one of your greatest successes over the 50 plus years of performing and all the different awards and nominations and accolades.

**MP:** None, I will tell you. I told you before that the last DVD was seen by Kurtág, a man that I adore. Because he showed me ... Once, I was playing as a trio. He has written pieces for my trio. Now, he has even written a piece for me. But he came once in Amsterdam and we played for him a Beethoven trio, which probably ... I don’t know if anyone in the world has played that piece as much as I have. I’ve recorded it twice. I’ve taught it many, many times.

**MP:** And then he spoke about some of the things inside the music and found something that absolutely staggered me on the inside, that he had that helped me to understand the piece deeper. Now, when I get a compliment for him or I got a compliment from Richter in this memoirs, and that’s something that I didn’t know about, because he never taught me that directly like that.

**MP:** Now, I am, of course, thrilled, thrilled to no end, because from where the compliment came, yes, otherwise, of course I’m thrilled. I was thrilled just the other day, a few weeks ago, on the 12th of May. I was in Madrid receiving the Menuhin Prize, which is a very, very big award, by the queen of Spain. In New York, I got the highest award to American music teachers. This was very thrilling and very rewarding. And...what should I tell you...or the book that came out about my teaching was a big success. It’s actually still a best seller. Or, the biography, which came out...is doing so well.

**MP:** All that is fun and is a pleasure, but that what is, of course, the main space of those people that in your life, you look up to and that mean a great deal to you in that respect. And so, when you hear something from them that touches you, that is a confirmation like when I speak. And this is very true. To all students that write to me, that after 40 years are telling me how much it meant to them to be away and still look at the music the way I taught it, the way I looked at it myself. And so, that was very, very rewarding and is very, very rewarding.

**Noa:** It sounds like to be...for the effort and the thought and the study that you’ve put into developing

something.

**MP:** You know, you feel understood in a way that you could convey that which is meaningful to you in the music, to someone else, who then, it becomes meaningful, too. And to actually continue in that way. And so, if you're looking in a secret way to immortality, this is truly a way in which you find that your idea somehow seemed to generate not enough of seeds that they stay alive, and they bring that way that you've found the content of the music that has been so important to you, and has now become very important to some other people. You are rewarded. You feel grateful in a way, because somehow, that is what you do. That's what you want to do. Because by now, especially by now, you don't do that to make a living. That is not anymore the reason for teaching. That's not anymore the reason for trying to have a more successful career so that the income is good. That is really, in a way, secondary at this particular point in my life. The important point is to reach out and to give that which has given my life a reason to be alive to other people.

**Noa:** It seems like one of the themes throughout what you've talked about today has been love. I mean, love for the music, sharing that love, making sure the beauty of what you find beautiful is effectively conveyed to the audience and now conveyed to other colleagues that you respect and students that carry on afterwards based on what you've opened their eyes to.

**MP:** Yes, yes.

**Noa:** I want to be sure to let you go, and thank you for your time. But the one last thing, if it's okay to ask, was, is there anything that you wish you had known many years ago when you were just starting out in your career that, if you'd only known that then, maybe you would have had something different?

**MP:** You know, if I had known that ... you do know it, but you don't. It's true. But if you go your way and you are consistent and faithful to yourself, that you will make your way. You don't have to satisfy Mr. X or Ms. Z in order to get ahead, which seems sometimes the case. Or at least that one fears, that likely would say to me many, many years ago, "But how can you be in Indiana? You can't make a career from Indiana. You have to stay in New York to be able to do that."

**MP:** No, you don't have to stay in New York. You have to stay focused. If you're in Indiana or if you are in Illinois, you don't have to ... It is not the city that makes you. It's not the hall that makes you. It is you that make you, and it is you, by being consistent ... of course, the important aspect you have to bring with you, which is talent, that is the one thing that only God can give you, or the lottery of the genes of your father and mother can do that.

**MP:** But otherwise, it is talent. It is ... you're in the discipline and you're out of discipline. It is that which in the performance really give you the pleasure, not the applause. It is, in a performance where you have reached out and you have felt that you have reached someone. When you ... you know that you are on the right track. I must admit, I've never felt, "Oh, this was fabulous and I was thrilled to ..." No, I've never felt it. I was always critical. I was always critical, even when we made records. When I made records, I was always critical because I felt there is much more to be found and much more to be.

**MP:** And I was right. That's what makes a life in music so wonderful and rewarding, because you are ... at this time in my life, I'm still out on the way of discovery. But there are certain things in the sensitivity, in the love, in the way of listening, that has not been explored. You have still ways of looking. You have still ways of feeling. Yes, you get older, you lose one part, but you also gain a part.

**MP:** So, if you ask me if I would recommend to become a musician, to have that life, I would fully and wholly recommend it. Not because it was a successful ... I would recommend it because that which speaks to your soul is occupied. It's the beauty in which we don't live the daily life, because the daily life, there's many things around it which is not beautiful, and there's many things around it which we despise. There's many things around it that I can ... you can name it. But there is that one thing in which you in your dream, and in your listening and in your feelings, you don't have to bend to anyone. You have to reach out high and higher and higher.

**MP:** These people that record Beethoven and Schubert and Brahms and Debussy are in a way my gods. My temple is the hall in which those are being celebrated.

## Notes

[1] Pressler mentions the Hungarian composer György Kurtág, whom you can learn more about [here](#), or in this recent NYTimes article [here](#) (8:58)

## Recommended recordings

Overwhelmed by Pressler's discography and not sure which recording to start with? Try reverse chronological; and here are some newer releases that he recommended (at the time we spoke):

*Beethoven, Schubert & Chopin: Piano Works* – [MP3's](#) or [CD](#)

*Schubert, Mozart & Beethoven: Vienna Tales* – [MP3's](#) or [CD](#)

## Recommended reading

[Menahem Pressler: Artistry in Piano Teaching](#)

A compilation of Pressler's thoughts on teaching, technique, musical expression, and practicing – think of it as a more in-depth elaboration of everything he touches on in the interview. One of my favorite parts of the book is a play-by-play of his thoughts and notes on selected repertoire from a Beethoven concerto to a Chopin Sonata to the Ravel Piano Trio.

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