



BENZIE SANGMA

Intelligencer

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DEVRIES, Cara (Butler)

At age four, she began to take piano lessons. Her brother, who was one year younger, followed suit. In less than a decade later, the extraordinary talents of these two child prodigies became the talk of the town in the 1950s — first locally and shortly after, in other communities including Cobourg, Kingston and Toronto.

The siblings were Belleville resident Cara (Butler) Devries and her brother Greg Butler, who currently lives in Windsor. Following their local debut in 1954, the reputation of the two siblings, the children of a former Belleville lawyer, Ormonde Butler and his wife Cara, continued to attract attention in the area. In the years that followed, the Butlers played to packed audiences wherever they went.

All that started under the watchful eyes and skillful guidance of a locally well-known musical personality.

"We started taking lessons with Leona Riggs. She was the best teacher that Belleville had at the time. She was an accomplished singer as well as a pianist. We studied under her for seven years," recalled Devries of the earlier days when she first ventured into the musical world. The two continued to study under another teacher, William Conner, for one year.

A nerve-racking audition in front of a well-known Canadian pianist, Mona Bates, in Toronto successfully secured them an opportunity to study under this gifted pianist who was said to have given her first own public perfor-

mance at the age of seven. "Bates was the best in Canada. People needed to do an audition before being accepted as her students. Prior to meeting with her, I didn't know much about her. It was our music teacher, Leona Riggs, who made the initial contact with Bates and told her about us," said Devries. Her memory of their first meeting with Bates remained vivid in her mind.

"She was very impressive," she said. "The studio at her home was absolutely amazing with two huge grand pianos. My brother and I did a lot of two-piano work. I was 12 at the time. We went to Toronto every two weeks for our lessons with her." But travelling back and forth hardly bothered the Butlers. They were simply happy to be accepted to study piano with Bates.

"Just to be taken in as her students, there was this presumption that you had to be good. She just did not accept just anybody."

The siblings studied music with Bates for six years. Devries was 18 when she and her brother stopped their lessons with Bates. They found themselves at a certain crossroad in their lives that would take each of them down their own individual paths. Devries became engaged and married soon after while her brother ventured on to establish himself in the world of music.

"The Community Concert Association from New York was going to have Greg and I audition for a concert tour and I was engaged at the time. So, there was really no point in furthering that," said Devries.

As she told her tale, she, without a moment's hesitation, admitted:

"Those years playing piano with my brother were the best years of my life. Those were wonderful years. I simply cannot forget them," said Devries. "The two-piano work that we did was just wonderful. We had a grand piano and an upright piano at home. They were in two different rooms and Greg and I would close the door between the two rooms so we could practise on our solos and when we did our two-piano work, we'd open up the door and the whole house would fill with music."

Those golden years were anything but leisurely for the young Butlers. Long hours of

practice while trying to meet a tight schedule of attending school, practising for recitals which took place once almost every two weeks and teaching piano became part of her daily lifestyle, she said. At age 13, while some of her peers were just starting to explore their interest in music, Devries was already earning herself spending money giving piano lessons. Top that with making time for their friends, who, she said, were many throughout the years she attended St. Michael's school and later, the Belleville Collegiate.

"Both Greg and I had wonderful friends at school. I think they respected what we did. It really wasn't part of our daily conversation. We were pretty normal. We didn't go around wearing our talent, if you will," she continued reflectively.

As high school students, she and Greg ran a weekly radio program on CJBQ.

"My brother and I did that together at first and then later on I carried on by myself. It was on every Saturday for an hour. It was a program on school bands and music. There was some talking and some music in that program. Either Greg or I would play each week."

Their radio program ran for four years, she added.

Reflecting on some of the most memorable moments of their early years in the public eye, Devries laughingly recalled an incident, which happened while the two were performing for a packed audience at BCI one night.

"I can remember the concert that we played when we were 15 and 16 or maybe we were 14 and 15 at the time. The power went out while we were in the middle of our performance. This was at BCI and the whole school was in darkness. Greg and I played right through it and we got a standing ovation when the lights came back on four or five minutes later."

When she chose to bow out of the public eye many years ago, Devries did not entirely abandon her love of music. She said she continued to give piano lessons periodically over the years. Today, she has three students under her wings.

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