

Playing to the tune of her senses

RONÉE BOYCE 1998

Profile by Julia Stanley Weaver

Ronée Boyce has a flourishing career as a concert pianist, chamber musician and pedagogue. She has performed across Canada, the U.S., France, Eurasia and the Caribbean. As a piano soloist, she is the recipient of many local and national prizes, and won the New York International Piano Competition in 2006. In addition to her busy performance career, Ronée is artistic director of The Neapolitan Connection concert series in Toronto.

Ronée's love of music began at the age of three after she became inspired by a pianist performing at a shopping mall. She recalls being drawn in on many sensory levels – by the sound of the music, the beauty of the piano itself, the bright lights, even the hum and scent of the crowd. She began pestering her parents for a piano of her own, and was soon taking music lessons. She has never looked back. While at Havergal from Grades 7 to 13, she played violin in the strings program along with her piano studies, studied the harpsichord and frequently performed for the school in the Assembly Hall.

Ronée maintains her ties with Havergal and recently brought cello prodigy Sujari Britt to the Upper School to perform with her. To Ronée's surprise, her former school teachers were special guests at the performance, including former Head of Music Elisabeth Muir.

For Ronée, music has always been far more than an



auditory experience. She possesses the extraordinary sensory condition synesthesia, a rare neurological phenomenon described as a fusion of the senses. Synesthesia takes several forms; some synesthetes can hear, smell, taste or feel pain in colour. Others perceive letters, numbers and words in colour. Scientific studies have confirmed that the phenomenon is biological, automatic and unlearned. More common in women and left-handed people, the condition runs in families. Scientists can only speculate

as to its causes, but modern behavioural sciences, brain imaging and molecular genetic tools may eventually solve this mystery.

Ronée possesses the most common form of synesthesia called chromesthesia, or coloured hearing. Famous music composers such as Franz Liszt, Alexander Scriabin and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart shared this form of synesthesia. In her “mind’s eye,” Ronée sees colour when she hears music, and associates specific colours with specific keys. For example, when she hears music in the key of A major, Ronée’s mind’s eye sees pink. The key of D major is visualized as light green. Flat keys are experienced as darker-coloured tones, so A flat major becomes magenta-coloured and D flat major is Havergal green. For this remarkable musician, every day presents a splendid new fusion of music and colour; a literal fantasia.

Ronée sees colour when she hears music.