

20 questions

Interview by Elisabeth Andrews Photography by Steve Raymer

An ever-animated Pressler holds forth from within his IU studio.



The Irrepressible Menahem Pressler

You would think that at 84 years old, even a piano virtuoso as gifted as Menahem Pressler would be showing signs of age. After more than 60 years of worldwide touring and recording—not to mention 53 spent teaching at IU—it would seem reasonable to expect a slowdown, a gradual octogenarian retreat from the stage.

And perhaps learning of this summer's farewell tour of the Beaux Arts Trio, the piano-violin-cello group Pressler founded in 1955 that *The Washington Post* describes as "the gold standard for trios throughout the world," you would imagine that he was finally succumbing to a well-earned weariness.

But you would be wrong. Although he decided to disband the Trio—having led it through five violinists, three cellists, more than 30 recordings, and some 100 concerts and master classes each year—Pressler has no plans to slow down. A recent *New York Times* review reported that his performance "was at its crystalline best," and Pressler agrees that he has never played, or felt, better. He's looking forward, he says, to a productive solo career.

While his skill and stamina have earned him his place among the greatest pianists the world has known, Pressler's personal journal is equally remarkable. Born to a Jewish family in Germany in 1923, he, his parents, and siblings narrowly escaped the Nazis in 1938. The rest of his family—grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins—all perished. Pressler's perseverance with his craft through this tragic uprooting is a classic tale of victory over seemingly impossible odds. Writer Elisabeth Andrews had the privilege of interviewing this exceptional Bloomington resident in his studio at the IU Jacobs School of Music.

BLOOM: During your early childhood in Germany in the 1920s and '30s, did you have a very musical household?

PRESSLER: Well, my family loved music. My father played badly the violin, but he sang with pleasure. My mother loved music, but I don't think there was anyone in the house who wanted it like I did. I started with the violin and my brother started with the piano, but each time the piano teacher came [my brother] was tired and I took his lesson. I loved the violin and to this very day I love the sound of the violin. But then after a while, it was decided you can't do both so I just did the piano.

BLOOM: Did you dream of becoming a professional musician?

PRESSLER: At that time, of course, that was not the idea. The idea was to satisfy something in myself which was a kind of a hunger for music, and I haven't lost that. Today I am 84 and I have the same hunger, and I feel that is something very fulfilling and strong.

Also, don't forget this was a time when Nazi Germany was in power. That was already making many more difficulties for me as a person, as a student in school, and even to take piano lessons. It was discouraged to have relationships between non-Jews and Jewish people at that time. The man who gave me my lessons was a church organist, a very nice human being, and even though it became very difficult, he would give me lessons.

BLOOM: Your family fled Germany in 1938, when you were 15. What do you remember from that journey?

PRESSLER: We went first to Italy, because we did not have a visa to go anywhere else, and luck would have it that we were able to cross the border into Italy. We stayed in Trieste waiting to get a certificate to go to Venice and then to Israel. The certificate arrived at the very last minute. It arrived just a week before Italy went into the war. The boat on which we went to Haifa never returned to Italy because it was confiscated once the war started.

So, somehow you get the feeling, when I talk about it now in hindsight, that we were blessed, we were spared. But it was only my



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An early, undated photo of the piano prodigy. Photo courtesy Indiana University

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immediate family—my father, mother, brother, and sister, and myself, who were spared. The rest—grandparents, cousins, uncles—were all killed and we don't even know where.

And then there came the chapter in Israel, and that was an exceptionally wonderful thing because we had very little, obviously, emigrating like that, but we were received with open arms.

BLOOM: How did you continue to study piano in Israel?

PRESSLER: The first teacher that I had was as kind and as understanding and as warm and as supportive as one can even think. He taught me for free. And, as you can imagine, it was hot in the summertime and I had a little upright [piano] and in that heat the ivories, they got loose, so I had to practice on the wood of the keys. So, of course, I always had splinters. It's nice to talk about it now, but it wasn't that pleasant.

But then I played in a competition of the Israel Philharmonic, which was a very famous orchestra. At that time I was 16 and I won a prize—to play with the orchestra.

And, of course, that was a big occasion in my life, but the bigger one happened, in hindsight, a few weeks later.

I was seated at home in my undershirt and pants, practicing in the heat of the day at my piano, when I heard guys from the outside calling. I go out and there were two boys and they said, "We play the violin and cello. We would like to play with you—a trio." So I said, "I don't know. What is the music?" So they said, "Let us play for you the records." And they played a record of a Schubert trio. And when I listened to that, it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard. It was glorious.

BLOOM: Where did you play as a trio?

PRESSLER: On the communal settlements, the kibbutzim. I remember, still, the very first night, going to a kibbutz on a hill just outside Jerusalem, on quite a steep hill. Coming from Germany, I had something which was a kind of a psychological handicap. Every time it came to mealtime, I couldn't eat. I just couldn't eat. So obviously I was very, very frail.

On this hill, I said, "I can't make it." So the violinist, who was a big strapping boy, a wonderful boy, he took me on his shoulders and brought me up to the kibbutz.

Now the cellist in the group was the son of the woman who later became prime minister

of Israel, Golda Meir. The violinist was also the son of a labor leader, but more to the left than Golda, and he died at the age of 25 from cancer. He was a wonderful boy and played well and we had a marvelous time.

BLOOM: How did you decide to attend the Debussy competition in San Francisco in 1946?

PRESSLER: I saw an advertisement in the newspaper. My teacher at that time, he said, "Well, that's a good thing. The war is finished. We don't know, really, how good you are in relation to other people. Go."

Now, of course, I knew nothing. I knew one little piece of Debussy. When I think of it, accidental fortune played a big role in my life. At that time a French pianist came to Israel to give concerts. They sent me to him, to be the second piano. So I asked him about Debussy. And he spoke to me for a few hours in which he opened my eyes to something I had never seen.

Sara came to study with me and I told her she wasn't gifted enough. But she got even; she married me. We are still married to this very day.

BLOOM: You wound up winning the Debussy competition, which would launch you into worldwide fame. Do you remember that moment?

PRESSLER: At first I thought I dreamt the whole thing. The joy of going and sending a telegram home, I'll never forget.

With that I had an entrance to everything. And all that was just like a movie script because there was nothing at that point that was bad. As you know there isn't a life, no matter whose, that does not have disappointment, humiliations, losses. But at that time it seemed like I went from one triumph to the other.

BLOOM: How did you meet your wife, Sara?

PRESSLER: Sara came to study with me and I told her she wasn't gifted enough. But she got even; she married me. We are still married to this very day. It will be very soon sixty years that we're married.

BLOOM: Not long after that you started the Beaux Arts Trio. How did the Trio form?



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The Beaux Arts Trio in its final incarnation: Daniel Hope on violin, Pressler on piano, and Antonio Meneses on cello. Courtesy photo

PRESSLER: One day I said, "I would like to do some Mozart trios."

At the hotel apartment where we lived in New York, there was the first of the second violins of the NBC orchestra. He introduced me to [Daniel] Guilet, the violinist. And through him I also met [cellist Bernard] Greenhouse.

We thought we were doing seven concerts. But one of the concerts was at Tanglewood [Music Center in Massachusetts]. So we played that concert and Charles Munch, who was a famous conductor of the Boston Symphony, came and he said, "As long as I'm director, you play here every year." We immediately had seventy concerts and it never stopped.

BLOOM: Not until now, fifty-three years later. You've just completed your farewell tour. Why now?

PRESSLER: I'll tell you why now. My young violinist, Mr. [Daniel] Hope now has so many solo concerts he can't stay in the Trio. I didn't want to bring up another violinist.

Right now, if I show you the press on this [farewell] trip, it is incredible, it is just incredible. People were crying and we played at our best. To say goodbye as a champion, that is beautiful.

BLOOM: The same year that you started the Trio, 1955, was also the year you came to teach at Indiana University. What was that transition like?

PRESSLER: Well, first of all I was overwhelmed. I thought the university was beautiful. But I had a lot of students, terrible students, dreadful students, some of them couldn't even read music.

Soon enough though, Sidney Foster, this wonderful pianist, had a heart attack, and in order for him to have his salary, two of us, [William]

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Masselos and myself, had to teach his students. Then all of a sudden, I had good students, excellent students. And from that year on I always had excellent students.

BLOOM: How have you seen Indiana University's School of Music evolve in the fifty-three years you have been here?

PRESSLER: The music school has grown; it has many more famous people on the faculty. It is, of course, easier now to join because at the time when I joined nobody knew where Bloomington was and they really did not realize what Indiana could be. Today Indiana has students from thirty-two different countries.

BLOOM: Where do you think Bloomington fits into the classical musical world today?

PRESSLER: I think it's right there on top. I mean obviously to be in New York has enor-

I had a lot of students, terrible students, dreadful students, some of them couldn't even read music.

mous advantages. You have all the big things in New York—the opera, the orchestras. But we have something else that they don't have. We have here a place where a student can devote himself to himself, continuously.

BLOOM: Over the years you have probably had the chance to meet most of the biggest names in classical music. Are there any encounters that were particularly thrilling or memorable for you?

PRESSLER: There are many memorable things. Playing with [violinist Kurt] Mazur is very memorable. He is a phenomenal musician and he has become my friend. I have met many, many great musicians, cellists [Mstislav] Rostropovich and [Gregor] Piatigorsky, and pianists [Arthur] Rubinstein, [Vladimir] Horowitz, [Robert] Casadesus, and many, many more. And I've loved it, and I've loved their music, and I've loved being a part of that group that makes the music.

There are millions of incidents and accidents that happen during your lifetime, as you can imagine. So there are stories that are page-turners. Some of them are hair-raising, some of them are funny, and in the end one of the great things in my life, without a doubt, is Indiana University and my teaching.



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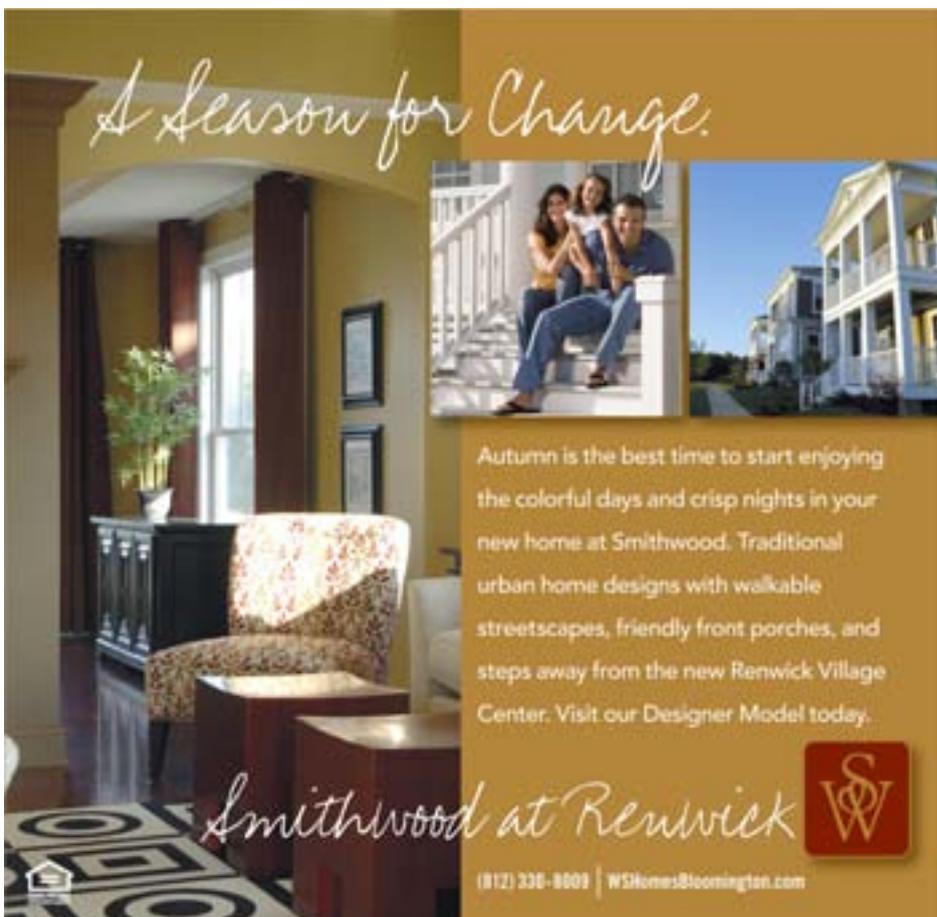
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Pressler, seen here with one of his students, considers teaching to be the most rewarding experience of his life.

While the concerts give you the ability to show all you have, the ability to have people share that which you find beautiful, that which you find life-giving—because I feel that my reason to be alive is to teach and to play—I am more grateful for the teaching. Because when you play a concert you have the applause, which is wonderful. You are paid immediately, which is marvelous. But when you teach, you plant a seed in the heart and mind of a young person. In a way, they become your children.

BLOOM: This may be an odd question, but I understand you share a birthday—December 16—with Beethoven, and I'd like to know if you feel any special connection with him.

PRESSLER: I do, I do. As a matter of fact, the very first concert of the [Beaux Arts] Trio in Tanglewood was devoted to Beethoven. Of course I love Schubert and I love Flaubert, and I love the contemporary composer [Gyor-

My most important advice is to love the music, because if you honestly do love the music, you are rewarded to begin with, immediately.

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gy] Kurtag who wrote pieces for my Trio. But there is a special love and respect and gratitude that there is the music of Beethoven, and that there was a Beethoven, because he has taken me to such heights in feelings—with no drugs, no drinks, just that music, those little black dots on paper that he transmitted nearly two hundred years ago.

BLOOM: You've had great professional success, but although the Beaux Arts Trio was twice nominated for the Grammy, you never won. Does that surprise you?

PRESSLER: It's a business and has its own justification. We never got the Grammy but we got all the other prizes. We were the first to get the very, very big prize in London, which is the prize of the Gramophone. It selects the best in each rubric—best piano, best orchestra, best opera, best singer, best choral—and then of the best, the best was the Beaux Arts Trio. We got the Grand Prix du Disque in France, which is the big prize. We got it in Holland, we got it in Belgium, and we got it in Germany.

But I will say, this very last time with the Grammy [in 2006], we were nominated and it was won by a group called the Emerson Quartet. They were my students. They studied all of their works with me. So, is there justice? You prefer bananas, I prefer oranges. But both are good fruits to eat. I have loved working with these boys like I have loved working with many groups and many young artists who are now standing on their own two feet.

BLOOM: The Beaux Arts Trio has had its final concert, but I understand you will still be touring on your own. Do you have any intention of slowing down in the near future?

PRESSLER: I really don't, but I know that I have to listen to upstairs when He tells me it is time. I don't feel it now—as a matter of fact it seems easier now, right now. I don't understand it myself.

BLOOM: Are you able to rest and recuperate? Or do you find the music replenishing in itself?

PRESSLER: I think it does replenish you. And also the differences of activity—playing is a different activity, and teaching is different. And sometimes I go to a master class, and I'm in Vermont or Hamburg or in the mountains. It's beautiful, I teach for three hours, and the rest of the day is mine, I'm on vacation.

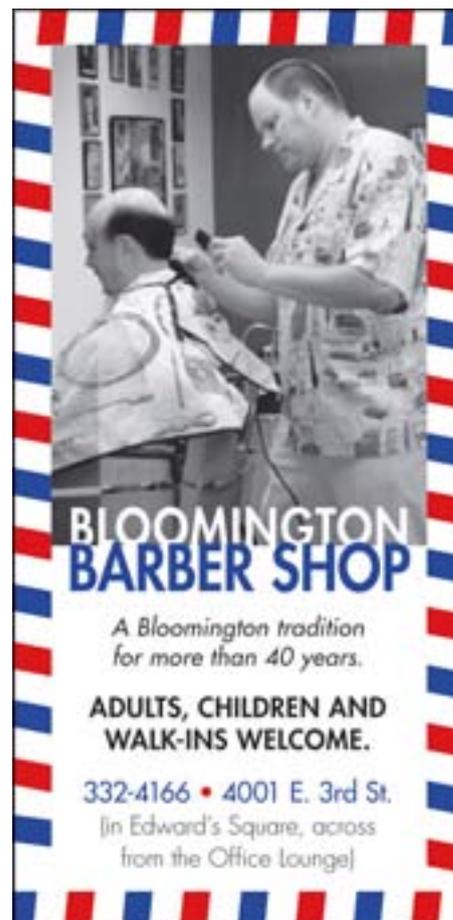
BLOOM: Is there particular advice you always share with your students, that you like to communicate to young musicians?

PRESSLER: My most important advice is to love the music, because if you honestly do love the music, you are rewarded to begin with, immediately. If you can share that love, you will reward others and you are rewarded. But if you feel that music should do something for you, then you're defeated before you begin.

BLOOM: If and when you ever do retire, do you plan to stay in Bloomington or go elsewhere?

PRESSLER: I'm going to stay here. I cannot see myself having lived life in a place and then going to Florida to try to get a little ball into a little hole.

I was asked by a friend, he said, "Mena-hem, when are you going to retire to enjoy your life?" I answered, "I don't have to retire to enjoy my life. I've enjoyed it and I am still enjoying it." ✨



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