

ROSALIE LEVENTRITT

For Young Musicians

By FERN MARJA ECKMAN

IN THE RED ROOM of her Park Avenue apartment, Rosalie Joseph Leventritt, eldest of four generations of Rosalies, seated herself at the window, where the light streaming in underlined the campaign marks etched on her delicate features by the passage of time. Mrs. Leventritt neither ignores nor denies her age; she flaunts it.

She was pouring tea—Georgian silver service, Spode china—and saying in her customary staccato tempo: "Don't think I'm deprived because I'm not having any. I hate tea. I have to be very sick to drink it."

Her slight figure, attired in a purple sweater and gray, pleated skirt, her pumps so narrow and unworn they quite falsely suggested she never walks but is somehow wafted about on a cloud, looked lost in the depths of the armchair. The reporter, beguiled by Mrs. Leventritt's fragile elegance, said impulsively, "Are you comfortable in that chair?"

"I have been for 60 years," retorted Mrs. Leventritt, who was submitting to her first interview with obvious misgivings.

At 84 ("not 83, please—84"), she is a wisp of a woman, white-haired, blue-eyed, with a magnolia-sweet Alabama drawl, a tart manner she can wield like a scythe and an overwhelming commitment to the Leventritt International Competition, America's leading contest for pianists and violinists, which she founded in memory of her husband 36 years ago. It is now ranked by many with Moscow's Tchaikovsky and Belgium's Queen Elizabeth competitions.

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Mrs. Leventritt makes no claims to musical aptitudes. Indeed she mocks them with a flow of self-deprecatory remarks, delivered with the deceptive guilelessness of a comedian's straight man. But the knowledge she has acquired is impressive, and she is apt to have little patience with those who know less.

"I had a guest here once who didn't know a viola is a fifth of an octave lower than a violin," she noted, adding acidly, "I think she later went on the board of the Philharmonic."

The Leventritt music room, which must measure 40 by 25, frequently serves as a rehearsal hall for her circle of friends, many of them world-famous instrumentalists. "This is a kind of practice center," she said.

"We had 25 years of chamber music classes given right here. They started because Isaac Stern wanted to learn chamber music. He was a little boy, chubby and lovable. And, being Isaac, he learned it very quick."

Rosalie Leventritt is the grande dame of music patron. She was—and is—so ultimately involved with the Marlboro Music School and the Casals Festival that she could be described as their midwife.

She is the woman behind not only the Leventritt Foundation but also Young Audiences, which is currently celebrating its 25th anniversary and last year brought music—"good music"—into 4500 schools in 34 states, operating through 38 chapters and reaching 3 million children.

It can all be traced back, however, to Edgar M. Leventritt, lawyer and musician, who died in 1939. "He was," said his widow, "a very fine amateur pianist. Probably the best in the city."

Her daughter, the second Rosalie, Mrs. T. Roland Berner, wife of the chairman and president of the Curtiss-Wright Corp., herself a pianist and a grandmother, was listening in. "The lawyers used to call him the best pianist," she said, laughing, "and the pianists used to call him the best lawyer."

"I used to dread when the Philadelphia Orchestra came to town," Mrs. Leventritt said, "because he'd go out in the internis-

sion and gather up musicians and then I'd have to feed 'em."

Metaphorically speaking, that is. Reared in Birmingham, only child of a merchant who owned a couple of department stores and had financial interests in a chain of others, Rosalie Leventritt never worked at developing culinary skills. "Well, I can cook a bit," she said.

"Little, fancy trimmings," Mrs. Berner scoffed. "But something like a leg of lamb, no."

"Hollandaise," her mother reminded. "Wonderful hollandaise," Mrs. Berner agreed.

"Salad dressing." "Delicious sauces and salad dressing. But nothing that fills your stomach."

Mrs. Leventritt staged a strategic retreat by glancing out the window. "Beautiful overhead but terrible underfoot," she said. "It's very good to grow old. You don't have to go anywhere unless you want to."

She recited a lightly ironic litany on an octogenarian's advantages. "People say, 'It's snowing—she's too old to go out.' Or: 'She's too tired.' Old ladies," reported Mrs. Leventritt, who is up and dressed at 7:15 every morning, breakfasting on a tray at 7:45, on the telephone with a coterie of early-birds by 8, "are all supposed to be tired."

"And I don't have to go to bad concerts any more. You can choose your concerts. And all the premieres I attended." A grimace. "I don't have to do that any more."

What does she do? "I get up and make the bed," she said solemnly. "I dust the furniture . . ."

"She does not," said Mrs. Berner. "What she does is meet fascinating people. Leo Steinberg—the art historian—dined with her recently and said, 'How many creative people come to see you!'"

"He brought me a copy of his new book on the last paintings of Michelangelo," Mrs. Leventritt said. "I showed him a book on Troy by Hugo Buchthal, who's married to Rudolf Serkin's sister. And Mr. Steinberg said, 'How do you get to know all these creative people?'"

"I don't know myself," I told him. "That's puzzled me too." "It's because you don't know how to do anything," he said, "so no one has to compete with you."

"Oh, mother, He didn't say that. He said you're not competitive."

The first Rosalie spared the second Rosalie an ool, blue stare. "He said, 'It's because you don't know how to do anything,'" she reiterated.

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"Tell about the two pianos, mother." Smiling, Mrs. Leventritt complied. "My husband and my daughter would play a lot of four-hand piano and I thought it would be nice if they had another Steinway. But I was terrified because my husband hated to get presents. He came in—and he didn't even notice the new piano. I had to call it to his attention."

That's not as far-fetched as it seems. In the baronial proportions of the Music Room, where her birthday is celebrated with a surprise concert every year, the two parlor grandes fit together, curve against curve, in concert fashion. It's really not hard to overlook one of them.

Over the fireplace is a painting of a young and lovely Rosalie Leventritt in a blue tea gown. "Done by Blaas in Venice," Mrs. Leventritt said. "I wanted to bring something home for the children."

The way Rosalie Joseph Leventritt tells it, growing up in Alabama was a happy experience. "I was born in Birmingham on Nov. 18, 1891. So I shouldn't go back too far in talking about myself because I haven't that much memory." She waited just long enough to see if we believed her: We didn't.

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Post

THE WEEK IN
Entertainment

Post Photo by Frank Leonardo

Age has its compensations.

She was, she said, the offspring of Moses Victor Joseph and the former Jennie Marx, lived in "just a very nice bourgeois house" on a hill, went to public schools and took piano lessons.

At 17, she entered Smith College in Massachusetts, quit after three years. "I didn't like being with so many girls," she said, amused. "And it was very cold."

Her romance with Edgar Leventritt, a Californian of French-Jewish descent, 15 years her senior, is a nice example of life imitating Edith Wharton. "It's too long a story," she said at first. Coaxed, she yielded herself up to the pleasures of nostalgia.

Irene Guggenheim—the Guggenheim Museum Guggenheims—gave a party for me and her brother Clarence, whom I had met on a trip to Europe. You know where F. A. O. Schwarz is now? The Guggenheims had a big house there."

"It was a bitter cold night. I was—what? Twenty. I was introduced to a young gentleman whose name I didn't hear. I had on a red velvet gown that swished as I walked. It made electric sparks. He said, 'My goodness, some sparking!'"

"We were going to the theater. Irene mixed up the tickets." Instead of giving them to Clarence, she gave them to Edgar. We had both seen the play in London so we did a lot of talking and then went back to the Guggenheims for dinner and dancing. "Edgar had dark eyes and fair skin. Tall—5-11. Very handsome. I didn't dance with anyone else. I forgot Clarence had brought me to the party. Edgar brought me home, across the street to the Sherry-Netherland."

"The next morning, my mother woke me up and said a young gentleman she didn't

know was on the phone. He said to me, 'I must see you. Have lunch with me.' I said, 'I mightn't recognize you.' My mother didn't want me to go but I slipped out and met him at the Belmont Hotel."

He escorted her upstairs, where his mother was waiting. Without introducing Miss Joseph, he sat down and played for her. Then he whisked her off to his office in the Trinity Building.

"We had lunch at the Lawyers Club and he asked me to marry him. I said, 'All right, I'll go home and tell my mother.' He said, 'Don't do that—she'll think you're crazy.' And I said, 'Well, do you want to marry me or not?'"

"Edgar won my mother over. But my father said I didn't know Edgar and he didn't know Edgar. Which was true. So we compromised. My father said if Edgar came and stayed with us down South, he'd see. So Edgar gave up his practice for a month and came and stayed with us. And we got married when the month was up, on April 3, 1913."

A year to the day later, Victor, the Leventritts' only son, was born. A lawyer with three adopted children, he died in 1968.

"I'm very proud," Mrs. Leventritt said. "I have"—turning to her daughter—"how many grandchildren?"

"Eight grandchildren and six great grandchildren," said Mrs. Berner, who was born in the Red Room, which currently has celadon green walls.

"After my husband passed away," said Mrs. Leventritt, "I thought about what I could do in his memory. Not a marble statue. Rudy Serkin, a good friend of ours, said young musicians, if they were good enough, could always get a teacher to teach them for nothing. But where did they go from there? So we set up the Leventritt Competition."

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The 29th Leventritt, the first to be held since 1973, open this year to pianists—of professional caliber, aged 17 to 23—is now under way. Applications, available through the Leventritt Foundation, 1 Passaic St., Wood-Ridge, N. J. 07075, must be returned there by March 30. The major award consists of \$10,000, engagements with leading orchestras and an RCA recording contract.

"We don't give the Leventritt prize every year because winning it could crucify a young artist if you gave him the prize too early," said Mrs. Leventritt. "It is not a prize for a student. It's a prize for a young artist."

Among the young artists of the past have been pianists Gary Graffman, Van Cliburn, Eugene Istomin; violinists Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zuckerman, Arnold Steinhardt, Kyung Wha Chung, Joseph Kalichstein.

"The greatest thing the Leventritt has is its board of judges," Mrs. Leventritt said. Over the years they have included Toscanini, Leonard Bernstein, Nathan Milstein, Serkin, Isaac Stern and Juilliard's distinguished piano teacher, Nadia Reisenberg. "I have no vote," said Mrs. Leventritt.

The Leventritt Foundation and Competition, family enterprises, absorb only a fraction of Mrs. Leventritt's energy. She weekends with the Berners in Cold Spring, N. Y. "We have a large, rambling house where all the generations convene," said Mrs. Berner.

"Mother never gardens but she makes fabulous flower arrangements. Look at this petit point she made. It's a work of art. Everyone in trouble calls her. She's maternal to the world. And if she misses the newspaper one day, she's upset."

Asked whether she reads the music reviews first, Rosalie Leventritt gave a little grin. "The obituaries first," she said. "I want to see which of my friends has died. Then the music section."