Sheveloff Bids BU Farewell

From prelude to postlude, 45 years as dynamic music professor, provocateur

Here are a few of the things Joel Sheveloff hates: the U.S. Supreme Court, cell phones, the shrinking academic year, Googling as a substitute for book research, and wrong-way cyclists who play chicken with his car on Commonwealth Avenue. These are some things the blustery, Falstaffian, about-to-retire College of Fine Arts professor of music, musicology, and ethnomusicology loves: Bach (J. S., not his offspring), Scarlatti, Brahms, Finns, Greer Garson in Goodbye, Mr. Chips, Siena, Italy, and most of all, his students.

This past summer’s postlude to Sheveloff’s 45-year BU career ended on a poignant note—his very last lecture on the eternally misunderstood composer Johannes Brahms, whose work, jokes Sheveloff, it has been his “misfortune” to teach. Facing rows of empty desks on a nonteaching May afternoon in his second floor classroom in Mugar Memorial Library, he reflects on nearly half a century as not just a teacher, but a thorn in the side of the administration and a beloved but incorrigible nudge. With his gravelly, Mailer-esque voice and old-fashioned suspenders, Sheveloff has a way of wresting control of a room and holding forth on just about anything. He may grouse about everything from his department’s curriculum to the traffic on the BU Bridge, but if he criticizes his students at all, it is with affection—ate bemusement. He likes them.

They like him back: “Of course his knowledge is awesome,” writes a student on RateMyProfessors.com, “but what makes Dr. Shev one of the best is his insight. He understands the paradoxes of the human condition and how music expresses the full range of this experience.”

In 2004 Sheveloff earned the Metcalf Cup and Prize for Excellence in Teaching, the University’s highest teaching honor.

Like a flesh-and-blood incarnation of a Philip Roth character, he refers to himself only as “Sheveloff.” Although he speaks and lectures on an eclectic range of musical subjects, his scholarly focus has been the work of Domenico Scarlatti, Modest Mussorgsky, and Igor Stravinsky.

He’s devoted years of study to arcane fields of meter, analytical methodologies, and text setting as well as the confounding Musical Offering, a piece he refers to as “Bach’s DaVinci Code.” When it comes to J. S. Bach, Sheveloff serves up a feast of superlatives. Bach, he asserts, is “our Shakespeare, our Pushkin, the greatest mind ever to write music.”

Will he miss his students? “Oh, yes, terribly,” says Sheveloff. “I’m very proud. My students have spoiled me rotten.”

SUSAN SELIGSON

vise workout regimens for all 23 varsity teams, using the latest training techniques and equipment, as well as some decidedly old-school tools like medicine balls, weight vests, and barrels of rice (athletes plunge their hands in and squeeze the grains to improve wrist strength).

“You look around and you see new and shiny equipment, but the mentality is you need to do the hard work,” says Harris, who has beefed up everyone from professional soccer and lacrosse players to state troopers. “The successful people are the ones who are good at doing the hard work.”

Harris and his staff design each training session to improve an individual athlete’s movement, core stability, speed, strength, balance, and flexibility.

He points to Terrier hoops standout Rashad Bell (CGS’03, CAS’05), who now plays professional basketball in Asia, as one of his biggest success stories. “When I first met Rashad he was 6’8” and 172 pounds, and now he plays at 218 pounds,” Harris says. “It didn’t happen over the course of four months. It was a four-year process, and he arguably became one of the best players on our team. His mind, and his body, was a sponge.

“I’ve had athletes who have gone on to play professionally come back to me because they really enjoyed their time as a BU athlete and want to get into that training mode again.”

CALEB DANILOFF