IN TRIBUTE TO DR. BOB BENNETT
Spoken at the Bob Bennett Memorial Program of December 27, 2012

I studied with Dr. Bob Bennett through my undergrad and graduate years, earning both a BA and MA degree in piano performance under his instruction. After graduation and through the many years of MTAC membership, our relationship changed and grew. I became a teacher myself, and he -- my mentor and trusted friend.

About a year or so ago, Bob, always being the very well-prepared professional he was, asked me if I might speak to you today. The topic was to be his musical career. His instruction to me was to do this in 5 minutes! Feeling extraordinarily honored by his request, I replied to him in my “brave” voice: “Yes, of course. I can do that.”

As I began to focus in on the aspects of Bob’s career deserving attention, it became evident that there was much too much to put into words, and that I would not be able to say enough; and surely it could not be attempted in five minutes! Much of what I will share with you today is based upon an interview with Bob conducted in the Fall of 2005.

In his own words, “music was always a passion” for him, “whether it was performing, conducting, composing, arranging, teaching or listening.” Dr. Bob, as he is affectionately known by many of us, began his early love of music through his study on no less than 6 different instruments: piano, organ, violin, cello, flute and piccolo. During his years at Selma High, he had it narrowed down to 3, and so he practiced faithfully each day 2 hours on piano, 1 hour on flute, and 1 hour on violin. He joined his school orchestra and band, played competitive tennis and directed a church choir for which he arranged and composed music, writing out all parts by hand. Bob presented his first solo piano recital in 1943 in Selma, California. And this was just the start of things.

A musical career as profound as Bob’s can only be built by a unique individual with very special attributes. Besides the requisite musical abilities, there are great personal qualities that Bob brought to his music, as educator, performer and leader. So many, in fact, that I must resort to my “Short List”:

Bob was a man of vision and integrity. He always practiced generosity and kindness to others. He approached everyone and everything with a sense of
understanding. In response to others, he demonstrated a deep intelligence as well as a quick humor. His actions were filled with thoughtfulness, graciousness, compassion and encouragement. And last, but not least, Bob loved to tell a good story!

Bob’s life is indeed a wonderful story to tell – filled with chapters of music, of friendship, or travel adventures, of family life, of educational pursuit and of teaching and musical performance.

It was good fortune for anyone to have attended one of Bob’s live performances – a source of excellence, insight and inspiration. For many of us here today, it was our personal great fortune to have been among his piano students at Fresno State, where he served as head of the piano department. As instructor, he was always well-prepared. His words were always kind, helpful and on target. He taught music as a tool of communication and infused his approach with all the important historical and musical information that his students needed in order to fully understand the literature they were immersed in. I love the story shared by piano teacher and former Fresno MTAC President, Linda Erlenheim, in which Dr. Bob remarked at her lesson: “OK, you have given me all the things that are on the page. Now give me what is not on the page.” He encouraged his students to play beyond the page and to send the intrinsic musical message into the air.

Bob began his own college years at Fresno State as a student of Miriam Fox Withrow. After graduation, he began working for his Masters’ Degree at Juilliard in New York City, where he studied with Carl Friedberg, one of the greatest proponents of the Schumann/Brahms tradition. The strength of Friedberg’s musical lineage is built on the foundation of his own personal studies with both Johannes Brahms and Clara Schumann.

Juilliard was an eye-opening period for Bob, which he expressed in these words: “Although Friedberg’s office was not very large at all, the world seemed to grow bigger at each lesson.” One day, while in a lesson with Friedberg, Bob mentioned that he was working on the same Bach piece as another of Friedberg’s students. Bob pointed out: “His Bach piece is the same as mine, Mr. Friedberg, but they do not sound the same.” Friedberg quickly replied: “Yes … isn’t it wonderful!” At yet another unforgettable lesson, and with a recital looming around the corner, Friedberg piled on the
suggestions and musical criticisms. Bob responded: “Mr. Friedberg, I don’t think I can do all of this in 3 weeks,” to which Friedberg replied: “Ah, but there is always after the recital!”

Dr. Bob adopted many important philosophies from his Juilliard years, bringing them directly to his own students:

1. First, the musical traditions of Brahms and Schumann – priceless by any measure.
2. The ability to see who you are; very handy as you work with students of various potentials.
3. The consideration that musical progress is by far the most important factor in the training of each student.

While living and studying in New York, Bob toured as a soloist and accompanist for Columbia Concerts Management, performing in Carnegie Hall, Town Hall, Times Hall, Cooper Union, and the Museum of the City of New York. After he completed his Masters Degree at Juilliard, he was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship for study at the Paris Conservatory, where he worked with Lazare Levy. So in 1950, Bob set sail for Paris. Bob recalls Levy as a teacher with a very strict regard for fingering and pedal clarity. It was in Paris in May, 1951 when Bob presented a solo concert at the American Embassy Theatre.

Other outstanding teachers influencing Bob’s musical growth and educational philosophy included Bach studies with Rosalyn Tureck, studies with Muriel Kerr at USC, and Soulima Stravinsky at Stanford University, where he took his Doctorate. Now we are beginning to understand how very lucky Dr. Bob’s students really were!

Let’s not forget, however, that Bob had quite a bit of luck himself, because during his Juilliard years he met an attractive students, Susan Nye, who was tackling her Masters’ Degree in social work at Columbia University. Bob and Sue were married in Sue’s homeland of Hawaii in 1952, and settled down in San Francisco where Bob was accompanist for the San Francisco Opera Association, and where their son, Brian, was born.

Soon after, Dr. Bob accepted an invitation to teach at Fresno State College where he stayed on for what he termed “a wonderful 33 years.” His piano department years were jam-packed with solo and chamber music
performances. His solo performances clearly reflected his personal interest in contemporary music. His repertoire included the West Coast premiere of the Charles Ives Sonata, the solo version of Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue, the Prokofiev Piano Sonatas, the John Cage Sonatas and the Interludes for prepared piano, the Bartok Third Piano Concerto, and pieces by George Crumb and Corigliano. Bob soloed twice with the Fresno Philharmonic, twice with the Tulare Symphony and often with the CSUF Symphony Orchestra. He toured the Central Valley in collaboration with Fresno Phil Concertmaster, Verner Lywen, performing the complete cycle of Beethoven Sonatas for Violin and Piano, and again with a chamber group known as the Bennett Consort which he organized and rehearsed. Choral music played a large role in Bob’s musical activities as well. His 2 choral ensembles at Fresno State had a reputation for excellence in tonal quality and exploration of interesting literature. Bob also conducted the Fresno Buddhist Betsuin Choir which toured Japan with remarkable success in 1963.

As piano department head, and realizing how many of his students became teachers, Bob organized and established the pedagogy major. His teachings have influenced the growth and development of fine piano teachers throughout the Central Valley and way beyond, touching the lives of several generations of music makers. Two former students of Dr. Bob became piano department heads: Former MTAC Young Artist Guild member, Ross Smith, now at Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana, and Terri Manno, department head at Moorehead University in Minnesota.

Dr. Bob’s piano students felt his positive influence in everything. Once, during a lesson with Bob he remarked to me that I had taken some liberty and added a personal spin to a particular passage. “I'm inclined to let you do it your way,” he remarked, and then added: “But -- Convince me!” His words, of course, were only wonderful encouragement to work even harder. At every stage of progress, Bob was masterful at motivating his students to return to the bench and to keep working.

Fresno’s own organist, harpsichordist, pianist and music educator, Laurell Huber, recalls many valuable opportunities she received from Dr. Bob, in addition to her lessons. In her words: “He not only let me learn pieces on the brand new 1966 Neupert harpsichord, but also enabled a fascinating lesson with Stanford harpsichordist, Margaret Fabrizio. The frosting on the cake was his encouragement that one of my graduate recitals comprise only
Bach literature and be all on harpsichord. This was, if I boned up on Baroque era ornamentation! He introduced me to the music of Buxtehude, whose music I had never heard before and now cannot live without! A whole new musical chapter opened for me which still continues, thanks to Dr. Bob.”

Double-tracking in time now, I must return briefly to 1977, when an important lady, Clarice Lincoln, invited Bob to be part of the Music Teachers’ Association of California State Board of Directors. Within this venue, Bob expanded his opportunities to further influence music education throughout the state of California. In 1982, Bob was installed as the MTAC State President. Through his visionary leadership, enormous accomplishments were made:

1. The creation of the Certificate of Merit Council to help clarify policy and to professionalize the written exam and the testing procedures for our students. Today there are over 33,000 students throughout the state who participate annually in the MTAC Certificate of Merit exams and who have benefited by these important changes.

2. The establishment of the MTAC commissioned composers project, named as The Friends of Today’s Music, which continues to thrive today, some 30 years later, both as an important source of contemporary repertoire for our own music students from major living composers, as well as a guiding light for other national projects of this kind.

3. Also important, was the founding of The Contemporary Music Seminar program, which allows students and teachers to explore the newest possible literature and present it in recital format at State Convention.

While Bob was serving on the MTAC State Board, a young new teacher from Santa Clarita Branch attended convention. This is her story: “Bob was my first contact with anyone from the State Board. As I attended my first State Convention, I was so nervous beside all of the other more experienced teachers. Bob made me feel welcome and that I, too, was important. I have never forgotten that. He was truly a very special person.” These are the words of Madeline Miller, our current MTAC State President.

Bob was deservedly honored at the 2005 MTAC State Convention in Sacramento, as the founder of the Friends of Today’s Music, at the occasion
of the 20th anniversary of this program. Ditto for even more honors to Bob at the 25th anniversary, celebrated in 2010. In 2006, at the opening night banquet of the MTAC State Convention in Los Angeles, Bob became the 10th recipient of the MTAC Lifetime Achievement Award, for his invaluable contributions to MTAC throughout the years. Bob delivered his acceptance speech with grace, gratitude and humor, ending with the words: “My cup runneth over.” Well …. to know Bob, in all these many roles and titles, is to realize that, on many occasions, even our own cups are overflowing!

In 1987 Dr. Bob retired from CSUF in a concert farewell with duo piano partner, Terri Manno. His retirement certainly did not lessen his influence, nor his pace, as he became mentor and master-teacher to many local piano teachers and students of all ages. Until just 14 months ago, Bob served as an officer of the Fresno Branch Board.

The years following CSUF were full and rich: he joined Fresno Musical Club, and together he and Sue traveled to 31 countries on 7 continents. They enjoyed photography and playing bridge, and continued to host MTAC workshops and Branch Board installation dinners, Fresno Musical Club meetings and dinner parties for friends. They often served as dual chefs in their newly renovated kitchen. During these years, Bob also master-minded the Fresno Branch MTAC project known as the Community Outreach Concerts. All of these concerts, from 1999 through 2009, were held at CSUF and open to the community free of charge. These were definitely a hands-on project for Bob, and he rolled up his shirt sleeves with gusto!

Bob provided his home team, the Fresno musical community, with 60 years of service, inspiration and challenge – with pushes and pats and words of wisdom. He always cared, and he always encouraged. Bob’s contributions resulted in wonderful musical growth for all who had privilege to work with him. And yet, the growth was often so much more than only musical. In the words of Peabody student, Michael Delfin, who was lucky to have enjoyed four lessons with Bob: “I’ll always remember Dr. Bob’s unceasing encouragement and support. He cared not only about the student’s finished products, but about the student’s well-being as musicians and individuals.”

In 2007 Bob was presented with a Horizon Award from the Fresno Arts Council; the Ella Odorfer Educators’ Award. The presenter was life-long friend, Dorothy Renzi.
Bob brought to us so many gifts! He gave them freely, and they are ours for keeps! The words of Former President of the Fresno Branch of MTAC, Tina Carter, express it so well for all of us: “He was always thinking and pondering ways to contribute to those around him – in big and in small ways, on an individual basis, as well as on a grand-scale. There are so many instances of Dr. Bob’s generosity and goodness to me on a personal level as well as the student-teacher relationship that have inspired and urged me on to be my best.”

Dr. Bob was an incredible music educator. More than that, he was an ambassador of music and of music education. He promoted the joy and the spirit of music. Best of all, Dr. Bob promoted the student within you, no matter your age! But still more than that, he was teacher for life and about life. He taught us to believe in ourselves and to work hard to make the most of what we have been given. And on top of that, he was an exemplary human being, showing us unfailingly with every step, how to live a beautiful, dedicated, and happy life.

Today, as in the past, and as in the many days to come, we celebrate and we honor Dr. Bob Bennett, with sincere gratitude for his wonderful life of accomplishment and of service to others.

Written by Carol Oaks
Delivered at the Bob Bennett Memorial Service, December 27, 2012, Campus Bible Church in Fresno, California