

ARTS

Ruiz shares talents with UNCA community

By Chris Streppa and Sylvia Hawkins

Dr. Michael Ruiz hunches his shoulders and presses into the piano. His expression is one of intense concentration, almost pain. His fingers trace melodies he has played many times before.

The music rolls through the empty auditorium; the light trills of a Bach sonata becoming the passion of a Chopin etude before turning into a piece Ruiz himself composed.

Even in practice, his playing reflects his mastery of what 20th century pianist Jorge Bolet called

the "perfectionist's profession."

"I've always been surprised at how much you can get out of yourself," says the chairman of the physics department. "And the further you go it seems the more talent you have."

Ruiz' talents encompass two exacting fields, piano and physics. His interest in both began when he was in grade school.

He asked his parents for a piano when he was 12. "Every time I heard a piano as a kid, I had an attraction to it I couldn't explain," he says. "I always had a de-

sire to play the instrument."

The next eight years were a combination of private lessons and self instruction. Ruiz doesn't remember more than a day going by when he didn't play piano back then, but he considers his early education spotty. "I felt inferior because all these girls could play Beethoven sonatas and I couldn't," he admits.

But at the University of Maryland, Ruiz discovered that "even though I couldn't play the Beethoven sonatas, I had

some unique playing style."

He felt "extremely privileged" when Dr. Stewart Gordon (then head of the piano division, and now chairman of the University's music department) invited Ruiz to join his group of music students.

The practices were "nerveracking." They meant playing for a group of gifted students who knew by heart the piece Ruiz was playing and could detect each and every flaw. "I was surprised that they were impressed by me," he says.

Ruiz also perfected his jazz and improvisational techniques. "It's easy to learn if you are classically trained with a bent to fooling around," he says.

But Ruiz didn't consider pursuing a career as a concert pianist. For one thing, he says, "being in such a big place, being around people who have been playing since age three or four, you never could get a big head." For another, he "only had a few more years to go" to get his doctorate in physics.

Ruiz accepted a teaching position at UNCA in 1978. Two years later, at the age of 30, he became chairman of the Physics Department. He soon found himself "overwhelmed by administrative responsibilities" as well as the demands of teaching.

Piano faded into the background for four years.

"I forgot the music," says Ruiz. "I just let it go."

Now, thanks to his Elderhostel summer class (a series of lecture/recitals for senior citizens) and the third Humanities course ("The Modern World"), Ruiz is rediscovering the "happy medium."

"He's one of the closest things we've got to a Renaissance man on this campus," says Dr. Peg Downes, chairman of the Humanities Department. "He's an expert and well-respected scientist" as well as a gifted musician.

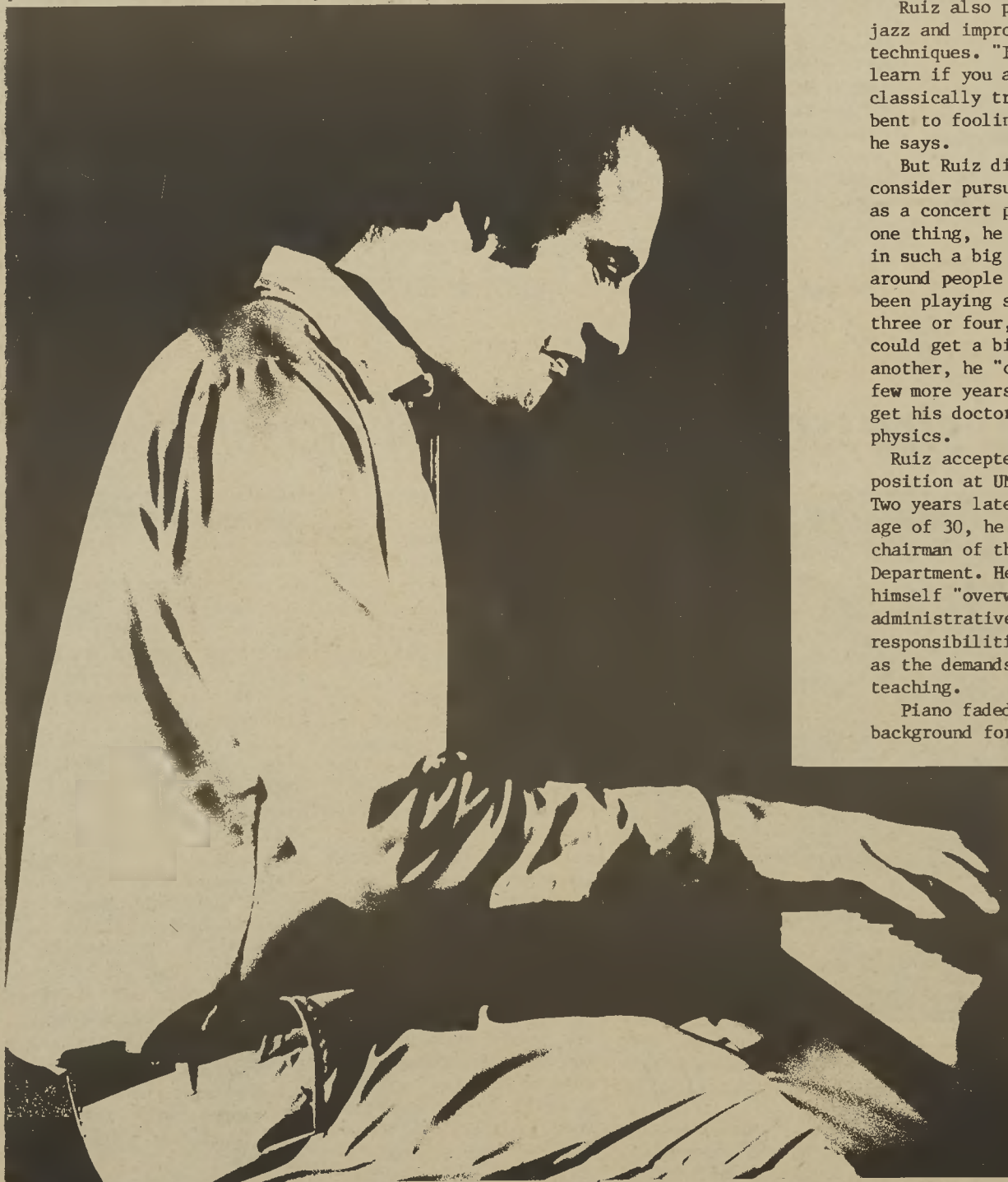
Downes says Ruiz combines his talent with his understanding of music's historical context in a lecture/concert that makes the music of the 18th and 19th century come alive for humanities students.

Sophomore David Reynolds enjoyed Ruiz' February concert. "The purpose of humanities is to give students an understanding and an appreciation of how civilizations developed," he says. "Hearing how music has changed goes right along with that."

Ruiz is also sharing the joys of music with his own children. He often sits one-and-one-half-year-old daughter Frances beside him on the piano bench. While he plays complex chords with his right hand, Frances bangs out the occasional accent chord with her tiny left.

With the combined duties of parenting and teaching, Ruiz says he doesn't find much time to practice. But when he does, he works hard. Practice means dissecting the music into its right and left hand components, endlessly repeating difficult passages, listening to every note with a critical ear.

"I would like to play a lot better," says Ruiz, "to improve the level of technique I have now." He views "absolute perfection" as the combination of technical accuracy and emotional abandon. "And that," he says, "takes a lifetime."



DR. MICHAEL RUIZ: "Enjoyment for me is playing a Chopin etude perfectly."

Staff photo by Sylvia Hawkins