OVER the years Western Pennsylvania has been home to many fine musicians. Although most professional musicians have been men, Gloria Siegle Spiegler — whose professional music career began in the forties — exemplifies the contribution of women to professional music. She continues to make her mark on Pittsburgh’s music through her teaching and playing. At this time in her life, Gloria says she feels the best about what she does.

Recently, while she was playing piano for a noisy football crowd at the William Penn’s Sunday brunch and feeling ignored, she noticed a casually dressed man pour himself a glass of orange juice and sit down at a large table near the piano. A waiter quickly ushered the man into La Plume Restaurant where there were smaller tables. Later, as the man was leaving, he approached the piano and said with just a trace of an accent, “You play beautifully.” Gloria, pleased that someone was listening, was thrilled when the man introduced himself as Alexis Weissenberg. Mr. Weissenberg, the world-famous concert pianist, had been performing with the Pittsburgh Symphony.

“We shook hands very gently,” said Gloria. “Someone said to me later that the incident must have made my day. It made more than my day; it made my life. If I had known such a wonderful musician was there, I would have been nervous. But I played and really just did my job, and apparently he liked it. It was the greatest thing that ever happened to me.”

Doing her job hardly seems an appropriate way of describing this woman and her music. Three keyboards dominate the living room of her Squirrel Hill home. A Knabe piano used for teaching sits in a corner, while preeminence is given a Steinway from Steinway Hall in New York. An electronic keyboard is a recent addition that Gloria purchased as an incentive for her young students.

Oils of brilliantly-colored flowers painted by Gloria’s mother,

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Notes and Documents

Taube Siegle, hang on the white living room walls. "My mother was a Baltimore girl — a very artistic lady. She had many offers for her paintings. And she also played the piano beautifully," said Gloria.

As a young child growing up in Monongahela, Gloria played the family's upright piano, and composed music as well. If she was feeling sad, she would go to the piano and play some melancholy piece. "One day an amazing thing happened," Gloria recalled. "I went to the piano and started to improvise. My first song was 'Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life.' I hadn't seen the music, but I began to play it and made it quite elaborate. And everyone thought little Gloria was just wonderful. It wasn't that it was so wonderful; it just came naturally."

Her first lessons came from a young woman who lived nearby and attended Carnegie-Mellon University (at that time known as Carnegie Tech). The woman came to Gloria's home for seventy-five cents a lesson. When it was time for college, Gloria auditioned for C-MU and won a scholarship.

Gloria started her private teaching career in college. She began with three students who were serious about music, but majoring in other fields. She has taught students as young as four and as old as seventy. She teaches six days a week, often scheduling lessons in the morning before her job at the William Penn, then in the afternoon and a few evenings.

Gloria claims it is only within the past several years that she has felt adequate as a teacher. She has no faith in the Suzuki method and prefers a teaching style based on the techniques of the man she calls her inspiration — Max Adkins. Mr. Adkins was her private orchestra-tion instructor. Gloria's pupils, however, have admired her techniques. Some have continued to keep in touch with her; one former student now living in Boston continues to write Gloria for advice on buying music.

Gloria's teaching method features the "Party Program," the old recital with a new twist. She invites her young pupils to a private party in her home, complete with cookies and punch. Their admission ticket is to play a selection on the Steinway. "I told them there would be no parents at this party. It will be just for us," explained Gloria. "This gives me a chance to get closer to the children and have some fun with them. The children are planning to dress in party clothes, and I've told them we will observe party etiquette. That is, we will applaud a performance, and the applause will be acknowledged by a curtsy or a bow." On the occasions when she has had adult students willing to perform she holds a Sunday Party Program with wine and fruitcake.
Gloria’s personal performances have run the gamut of socialite teas in Sewickley drawing rooms, to writing popular songs and show music for the Pittsburgh Playhouse, to playing in some of Pittsburgh’s former hot night spots. She played in the Hollywood Show Bar on Sixth Avenue, then at the Red Door on Delray Street near Market Square.

During a performance at the Red Door, Gloria came close to walking out on a job. Gloria’s mother, who was proud of her daughter’s ability, would occasionally go to hear her play. “My mother was a very petite and proper lady,” said Gloria. “This one evening she had come to the Red Door for dinner and to hear me play. Well, the manager walked in inebriated and proceeded to put my mother on his lap. She couldn’t get off, and she was mortified. I thought well that’s enough of this. But later he apologized, and I kept the job.”

A more decorous setting was the Monte Carlo near Horne’s department store. The Monte Carlo, owned by Allen Clarke of the D. L. Clark candy company, was a supper club complete with a long bar, banquettes, and a small stage. “The Monte Carlo had an exclusive air about it. It wasn’t a hang-out,” recalled Gloria. She alternated with Bobby Cardillo and shared billing with performers who went on to national fame. Imogene Coca appeared at the Monte Carlo before “The Show of Shows.” One of Andy Williams’ early solo appearances was at the Monte Carlo after he left his brothers and Kay Thompson. A radio quiz show whose theme song was “Sophisticated Lady” aired from the Monte Carlo at noon. Gloria would play a song and the luncheon audience had to identify it.

In 1955, Fred Burleigh, the director of the Playhouse, wanted Gloria to be the musical director of the spring show. Gloria had written the music for a review Burleigh wanted to put on, but she was getting married that year and had to decline the position.

She had one son, Oren, and was divorced when Oren was three. Since Gloria’s mother babysat while Gloria worked, Oren would sometimes accompany his grandmother to hear Gloria play. “I remember playing in Stouffer’s Gaslight Room in Oakland. I looked out and saw this child of mine pick up a whole potato and stuff it in his mouth. I was powerless to do anything about it, and he knew it,” said Gloria. “I think he sometimes resented his mother not being home, but now he tells me he’s proud of me.”

Because she once played the Riverboat Room for about four years, Gloria’s job at the William Penn is like coming home again. One particularly pleasant aspect of her William Penn position is the piano she
uses. "The William Penn purchased André Previn’s nine-foot grand piano," Gloria explained. "The delivery men wore tuxedos — as it should be — and Vic Cianca directed traffic. That piano is so cooperative. Sometimes right after it’s tuned I feel I should pay them for allowing me to play," Gloria laughed.

Recently a college friend heard Gloria play at the William Penn and remarked that Gloria had always been able to make a living at music. Many musicians find themselves working part-time at other occupations to make ends meet. Gloria considers herself fortunate. "If I regret anything," she said, "it’s that I didn’t promote my songs more. But I have learned that as difficult as composing is, promoting is harder."

In fact, her audience should have the regrets. They are missing the opportunity to hear Gloria’s musical satires, arrangements of classics in pop style. For instance, she has done a Chopin polonaise in boogie. But, of course, musical satires require practice and an appreciative audience.

An audience that listens is important because Gloria speaks through her music. "If anyone troubles to listen, they’ll know exactly what I’m all about. It’s all there."