

Piano Lessons

I'm not sure exactly when my informal association with the piano began. I can't remember a time when we didn't have a piano, and I was no different from other children in loving to peck away at the black and white keys to enjoy the sounds my fingers and fists could make. I especially remember the mystery of the three pedals on our upright piano; I discovered that I could make a louder noise by holding down the pedal on the right, but I was not satisfied with any explanation I heard about the function of the other two pedals. I reasoned that if the right pedal could make sound louder, the left pedal should make sound softer, but my experiments didn't really bear out that hypothesis.

My formal piano training began when I was seven and Mother found a piano teacher within walking distance of our home. Inez Baker Howell lived on Mercedes Street (pronounced "MUR-ce-des"), the next street over from our home on Morningside. I could walk the half block from our house to Matilda Street, turn right, walk to Mercedes, turn left, and walk to the end of the 5800 block, where Mrs. Howell lived. I was very excited.

My first real "piece" involved using both hands, one finger at a time, as I played the notes of the middle C scale octave. I can still feel the position of my curved fingers placed above the keyboard as I prepared to press the proper key with the proper finger as I chanted the words,

Tugging up the hillside,
Bundled warm as toast.
If you pull the sled up,
I will let you coast.

I was fascinated with the cover of the sheet music which had a drawing of two well-coated and hooded children pulling a sled up a snow-covered hill, an exotic experience I could only imagine, since I lived in flat, largely snow-less Texas. The music I produced became more interesting as I progressed to pieces complicated enough to require both hands and more than one finger at a time. By the time of my first recital the next spring, I had successfully progressed to chords, making me feel very grown up! The recital was held in Mrs. Howell's home where I felt no stage fright and didn't really think I'd done anything to deserve the applause. I was not happy about having to return to the piano to take a stiff, rehearsed bow. After all, the set-up was almost the same as a regular lesson day except that the living room contained chairs full of parents and I was wearing my "recital" dress.

My sister Martha began piano lessons a couple of years later, at about the time I graduated from one private lesson a week to an added class lesson on Saturday morning when Mrs. Howell taught music theory, not something I ever looked forward to. Now, I am sorry that I paid so little attention to those Saturday lessons, for I'd like to know more about the composition of the music I so love today. I enjoyed the private lessons, and even the practice; however, I do remember kicking pebbles along the sidewalk as I

walked to my lesson and thinking that, if Bach had known how much trouble one of his etudes was causing me, he would never have written it.

Early on, Mrs. Howell typecast Martha and me. Martha was always assigned ripply pieces, with lacy scales going up and down the keyboard. Mrs. Howell declared that I was the "muscular impulse" type and always gave me pieces with chords as big as my hands could play. She supervised my stretching exercises to help my fourth and fifth fingers become independent of each other and to enable my stubby fingers to reach as far as possible. I achieved octaves but had great difficulty playing a chord involving fingers in between two octave notes. I wasn't really eager to develop too much "muscular impulse" capability after observing Mrs. Howell's powerful hands which had well-developed muscles across the tops.

Every spring as we prepared for the recital, memorizing our pieces, Mother tried to keep Martha and me from arriving at the performance with our hands and knees skinned from skating accidents. One year Martha felt herself falling and quickly decided to protect her palms from sidewalk abrasions, only to take the skin off all the knuckles on both hands, this on the morning of the evening recital. Her mercurochrome-painted knuckles were the most evident part of her appearance when she sat down at the piano that evening, far eclipsing my mercurochromed knees, since I had tumbled soon after she had. We were not allowed to skate for a week before the recitals after that.

The stereotyping of our musical skills made for an interesting recital the year Martha was about nine. I played a grand-sounding, thunderous piece, Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King," while Martha produced the tinkly sounds of fairy-like dances. I thought her music was much more beautiful than mine. That spring the recital was held not in Mrs. Howell's home but in a small hall with a real stage. Martha was the hit of the evening for the bored parents who usually were interested only in the performances of their own offspring. She had been given a decorative chiffon handkerchief for her birthday, a white square about eighteen inches wide with large red dots printed on it. Martha had an artist's eye for harmony, and the handkerchief went well with her white recital frock. Without consulting anyone, she tucked one corner of the handkerchief under a ring on her right hand, proceeded to the piano and began to play her recital piece. While Mrs. Howell anguished backstage, wondering whether to rescue her from becoming entangled in her handkerchief, Martha trailed the light handkerchief gracefully up and down the length of the treble clef of the piano, back and forth, back and forth, completely mesmerizing the audience. When she ended the piece without a bobble, the entertained and delighted audience gave her a rousing hand. She didn't see any reason for the excitement.

I don't know when Martha gave up piano lessons, but I called a halt when I started to high school. Both of our sons studied piano for a time. George stopped in favor of other instruments. Roland successfully campaigned for and began lessons before he started to school, despite the teacher's doubt about the ability of a pre-reader to learn music. He made good progress, but he was very shy and balked when his teacher, proud of his accomplishment at such an early age, wanted to parade him about the city before other

teachers. He later studied trumpet, an instrument he could play in the middle of a band rather than solo.

I value the piano lessons so long ago, because of the solid introduction they gave me to music in general. I enjoyed playing for my own pleasure and still do occasionally although it's not something I feel secure enough about to do outside of the family because I never did learn what to do with the other two pedals on the piano.