

Recitals

If I correctly judge the attitude of children in general concerning piano recitals, I would say that they are universally dreaded and rejoiced over only when they are over. I can recall a few recitals, and I find it interesting that I remember the performances of others much more vividly than I do my own. Was I so traumatized by the fright of trying to make my unwilling fingers perform before an audience that I blocked all memories? Surely, I would recall more specific feelings of reluctance, even terror, if that were the case. I strongly suspect that my lack of memories is no more than a childish assessment of occasions that were really only so mediocre that they were only murkily memorable.

I can remember the seeming endlessness of the semi-annual piano recitals in Mrs. Howell's home. Either my father, who, according to family lore had a tin ear, never objected to attending the recitals or else, simply, I don't recall any pressure from Mother to get him there. Possibly his pride in his daughters necessitated his faithful appearances. At any rate, I can recall no time when he was conspicuous by his absence. Mother, of course, was so involved in pre-performance preparation that her appearance was a given. She may also have been involved in supplementing Mrs. Howell's plates of cookies for the after-recital celebration.

Mrs. Howell was a model of a successful neighborhood piano teacher, so of course all of her students appeared in a progression from the youngest or least talented to oldest or most accomplished pupils. In the early years, the recitals were held in her home, the living room cleared of its regular furniture to accommodate enough rows of folding chairs to seat the attending parents, fond relatives, and performing children, and the adjoining "studio" with its double glass doors opened wide. How long was the recital, beyond endless? I can't guess beyond assuming that given a one minute flowery introduction of each child by Mrs. Howell, the slow, dignified approach to the baby grand piano bearing music if the child had not memorized the pieces to be played, two or three minutes of actual playing the piano, an additional two or three minutes for the playing of the intermediate students in a duet with Mrs. Howell, and half a minute for the obligatory applause and stiff bow - all this by a minimum of ten performers - well, the evening must have lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, or seemingly forever. Then, there was the after-concert glow of receiving family kudos for superior performances while the guests munched cookies and drank colorful punch. (The punch was a prophetic forerunner of Kool Aid before that shortcut drink became a part of the American scene.)

I remember no specific recital in Mrs. Howell's home. They were uniformly overheated and noisy. I must have been about nine when her classes increased so much that a program in her home was impractical. We went first to a small auditorium on an upper floor at Titcher-Goettinger's Department Store, where the program was scheduled for early on Saturday afternoon since no store remained open past five o'clock in those days. There was a small elevated stage which made my family aware of the fact that now Martha's frequent skating accidents were much more obvious to the audience. Most of the time she managed to scrape the skin off most of her knuckles, but one time she had badly

abraded her knee the morning of the recital, necessitating a bandaged knee and a stiff-legged approach to the piano. She was such a winsome, graceful child that she was able to rise above such injuries. However, one year she wowed the audience not with injured hands and knees but with an eighteen-inch silk handkerchief tucked into a ring on the hand nearest the audience. The scarf was sheer and white with large red polka-dots; it made swooping circuits back and forth as she played Mendelssohn's "Spring Song" with its ripply broken chords up and down the treble clef. Nearly everyone feared that the handkerchief was going to get between her fingers and the keyboard and trip her up. The loud applause following her really creditable performance was as much relief from not laughing at the spectacle as acknowledgment of her musicianship.

The year Mrs. Howell secured the impressive Whittle's Music Store recital hall at their new Oak Lawn store is the only recital of which I have any specific memory of my own performance. I was eleven years old, her most senior student, and Mrs. Howell considered me ready for a really showy performance. I played one movement of a Mozart sonata, with Mrs. Howell accompanying me on a companion concert grand. I must have done all right, but I still recall the stiffening of my reluctant fingers when I first saw the awesome concert grand I was to use, reinforced and made more formidable by the presence of its twin for Mrs. Howell. I probably played at least one or two more recitals because I did not stop my piano lessons until I went on to high school.

Those dim memories were not really good preparation for my role as parent of a recital child. Did Mother and Daddy really suffer as much fright for their offspring as I did for George? He began piano lessons when he was six or seven, with his first recital in the home of his piano teacher. He had become a traditionally reluctant student, practicing under duress until he discovered that he could transpose his piece into a new key for each repetition during his practice. His teacher Elise Morton (not her name - I've forgotten it) had no inkling of George's bizarre practice habits because at his lessons he played each piece once and always had his music to refer to. Not so for the recital, when the piece had to be played from memory. Young George seated himself at the piano with considerable aplomb, placed his hands just above the keys in the approved curled position, paused, returned his hands to his lap, again approached the keyboard, and after three such false starts, snapped his fingers and began to play his piece. He felt that he had to use the composer's original key rather than one of his practice keys. It just took him a little while to remember the proper key. Meantime, his teacher, who had no idea what was happening, frantically retrieved his sheet music from the pile at hand and was starting toward him to give him his music when he remembered where to start and played the rest with no problem. He continued his piano lessons for two more years until practicing became such a burden that he and his mother were at sword's points all the time. He solved the stand-off in his own way by going to his lesson, seating himself at the piano, and refusing, politely, to put his hands on the keys and play a note. When his teacher finally reported his behavior, we all agreed that it was time for him to end his lessons. Soon he studied the clarinet and played in the school bands. Later he refused guitar lessons when he took up that instrument and became a fine guitarist. Was that his way of avoiding recitals?

In the meantime, Roland had begun to clamor for piano lessons, too. He was not quite five and Elise had never taught a pre-school youngster. Because Roland could read almost anything he really wanted to, she decided to risk teaching him. All went well, up to and really beyond the spring concert, where Roland strode confidently to the piano, plopped down on the piano bench, played his little piece, gave a curt bow, and walked rapidly from the stage. He had nothing to say about the evening, but when Elise requested that he go with her about town for her to demonstrate to some of her colleagues what could be done with a pre-school child, he rebelled. He had been enjoying the lessons and even practicing, but he hadn't enjoyed the recital and was quite sure that he would like even less the task of performing before other music teachers. He asked not to continue his piano lessons, and began to look forward to the time when he could begin band music as part of the public school program. He apparently did not consider the band concerts and marching appearances to be recitals, and he played his trumpet happily through his years in grade school and into junior high school.

Recitals continue in the lives of our grandchildren but their teachers seem to have devised less tedious ways of presenting the progress of the boys and girls. Somewhere there are still piano recitals, but for me they exist only in my memories.