

Music in Our Family

My parents never seemed to have much interest in music. True, my mother had a fairly sizable collection of 78s and 45s that she stored in a wooden record rack that my father had made for her ("EdDot" was carved into each side wall of the rack). When we lived in Germantown she would play music occasionally when it was Cleaning Day (Saturday), but I don't recall hearing her play any records after Bob and I knocked her record player off its stand, breaking it and several of her favorite records. She shrieked when she heard the crash and screamed when she saw the wreckage, but after a grieving period of several minutes she never mentioned it again. She ever bought another record player after that, and I don't believe that my father ever gave her a record for a Christmas, birthday, or anniversary present. The next time I recall ever seeing a record player in the house was around 1966, when my parents bought me my first record player, along with two albums: Lawrence Welk's Winchester Cathedral and an anthology of the best tunes of 1966. Aside from that, they never listened to music on the radio, preferring to fill their house, store, and car with the dulcet tones of talking heads on KYW news radio.

To remedy this situation I decided in the mid 1990s to encourage them to relive their good old days by listening to their favorite music. Over a period of two months I would quiz them about the music they liked to listen to as they were growing up, and the music they would dance to while dating. I compile a list of twenty or so songs that they both identified and bought them a CD player as well as six CDs that help the original, remastered cuts of their favorite music. They were very appreciative when they opened these gifts for Christmas. Unfortunately, when I came back for a visit a couple of years later, I discovered to my astonishment that the shrink-wrap on the CDs had never been cut open, and the CD player was still in its box, apparently never opened. However, I could hear the KYW news radio jingle playing on the kitchen radio.

In all fairness, my father always wanted to play music. For years he longed for an accordion; my mother would just laugh at his choice of instrument and scolded him for wanting to take up a hobby for which he would never have any time. "Money down the drain!" she would exclaim. Yet, to everyone's astonishment, she rescued an accordion from a neighbor's yard sale somewhere around 1969 or 1970 and gave it to him as a birthday present. He was speechless, almost tearful, when he opened the box. He fooled with the instrument for several months, but soon realized he had neither the talent nor the time to play. It became a large collector of dust for decades; since it was no longer in their bedroom closet in September 2007, I assume that it had been sold or given away to some music lover outside the family.

In the late 60s my father bought a Wurlitzer organ that was housed in our basement for well over a decade. I played music on that instrument daily, trying to improvise on tunes outlined in a thick fake book. Neil also developed some skill at playing the organ. Later, after I got married, it could be found in the living room next to the main entry to the

house, where it stayed until we sold the house in 2016. Dad bought numerous books on how to play the piano and organ from scratch, and even enrolled in a fairly rigorous correspondence course. I berated him often for cheating on his tests: he claimed he just wanted to get some recognition for having made some progress in the program. The piano didn't win over his heart. He felt called to play the organ, and play he did, with great enthusiasm and little sense of rhythm or dynamics. His pedal work always seemed to be off by a sixteenth beat, no matter what speed he played at, and he took great delight in maneuvering the volume pedal in regular, but musically inappropriate intervals. For reasons I do not entirely understand he gave up playing the organ once he got into his 60s and all the kids moved out of his house. Now that he finally had sufficient time and money to pursue this great avocation of his, he devoted virtually all of his leisure to model railroading, philately and numismatics. The organ became a furniture showpiece that need to be dusted regularly.

The piano was a fixture in my grandmother's house on McMahon Avenue. Located along a broad wall in their dining room, it arrested attention when one walked from the living room to the kitchen, even when the room was darkened. I know that I tinkered on it from time to time. I vividly remember Nan playing songs from the 20s and 30s with great verve. Her favorite tune was the "[Darktown Strutter's Ball](#)" (the original sheet music she bought I still have in my possession) and "Please Release Me"—songs that she would play from memory well into her 80s. I also recall hearing Aunt Helene practicing her own lessons on occasion. Helene, who must have been in her very late teens at the time, was particularly fond of making up goofy words to the songs she played. I remember her teaching me lyrics to a song from Carmen: "Toreador-uh, don't spit on the floor-uh." Later, if I just played the first few notes of that piece, my mother or grandmother would come into the room and order me to stop singing the lyrics immediately.

Sometime in 1962 my father decided, or my parents decided, or my grandmother decided that it was high time to fill a corner of our small dining room on Price Street with a piano. My father found an inexpensive Spinet piano at Wanamaker's and put down the \$20 necessary to purchase it outright. It fit perfectly well into the space available, and since we now had a piano, it as high time for me to start piano lessons.

A word about the Spinet: It still fills a similar space in our living room on Glenwood Drive. It hasn't been played in years well over three decades because it has virtually no action and because the strings are warped to such a degree that no amount of tuning is able to get them in decent shape. I'm not quite sure how I played this piano when I was little: it's certainly hard for me to play now, and even our kids found it difficult to practice play. But at the time I didn't know better, and perhaps it served a good purpose in strengthening my finger muscles.

Im March 1964 my parents decided to select an Italian immigrant by the name of Sinjani as my first teacher. Perhaps Ms Gallo, my grandmother's neighbor, played some role it

finding work for her countryman, perhaps it was the recommendation of a Price Street neighbor. At any rate, every week for the remainder of the year I would either walk or bicycle the two miles to Sinjani's Music School at 1259 East Chelton Avenue for my lesson.

The school was a single room that was cluttered with all manner of musical busts, instruments, and books. It was probably the front room of a residence, because I could always smell tomato sauce and several different spices whenever I sat down at the piano to play. There was never a single speck of food or a soiled plate, fork, or spoon anywhere to be seen, so I guess he must have just eaten lunch in the back before my appointment.

Ms Sinjani was a small, but imposing man who spoke broken English. He is perhaps best described as "old school," demanding complete respect, complete dedication, complete observance of whatever decorum he set up in his crowded studio. It was not beyond him to crack the rhythm of the piece on the piano stool on which I was sitting, using either his foot or a stick that resembled the rulers I was occasionally beaten with by the nuns at Immaculate Conception. I had the audacity once—only once—to begin the lesson while chewing some Juicy Fruit gum. He cracked his stick on the piano, held out his hand sternly, demanded that I place the gum in his hand for the duration of the lesson, and then demanded that I stick that hard, shriveled piece of gum back in my mouth once the lesson was over.

Sinjani did not believe in using the books I had been accustomed to seeing at my grandmother's house, such as John Thompson readers and popular sheet music. He started me off with stock of the classic European "repertoire": Czerny etudes, Kohler fingering exercises, Clementi sonatinas. I couldn't relate to the music well, but played along as well as I could for fear of being yelled at or beaten with the stick. I'm not sure what my parents thought about the lessons: this was certainly not the music they were expecting me to learn. Ten years later, when I discovered the beauties of Clementi and learned four of the sonatinas by heart, they could not relate to the music even then and wondered aloud why I would play such "weird," "highbrow" music, especially before dinner.

To this day I can see and hear the lessons during which he tried vainly to have me play "In the Garden" in Kohler's Practical Method for the Pianoforte. The pleasant tune is permanently stored in my hippocampus; I feel his exasperation whenever I failed to play the rhythm that he pounded out with his stick; I hear the melody that he hummed aloud with his gravelly, quivering voice; I smell the dense perspiration emanating from his wrinkled shirt and the pungent aromas emanating from some hidden room in the back.

I took lessons from Sinjani for nine months before a new teacher came into my life. I have no idea what her name was or where she lived. It took a fairly long car ride to get to her house that was in a nice-looking neighborhood in north Philadelphia, we had to

walk up a fairly long set of stairs, past a colossal evergreen, to reach her house, which always assaulted me with sweet and pungent aromas that I could never identify. She was a matronly woman, widowed, of a much nicer disposition than Sinjani—even though she was equally earnest and serious about music instruction. She discarded Kohler as useless, and replaced Czerny and Clementi with John Thompson, Victor Herbert, Franz Lehar, Johann Strauss, in short, with music that my parents actually liked and could enjoy, even when it was played in a barely recognizable manner by this poor piano student.

I am not quite sure what happened, but the lessons were terminated abruptly after several months. Was it a dispute about money? Did she say or insinuate something that angered my parents or grandmother? Did some hideous secret about her past come to light? All I remember is that Bob and I—he had begun taking lessons from the same woman—were in her piano room, finishing our lessons, when my mother announced that we would not be coming back for any further lessons. The news did not seem to take the woman by surprise, but perhaps she was just being gracious. I recall vividly that Bob and I both broke out in tears and wailed all the way to the car, unable to fathom why this person we liked so much would suddenly be out of our lives. I wish I had asked my mother about this episode before she fell victim to Alzheimer's, for there is no way that I will ever know the reason for this precipitous break in my musical career. Perhaps we were preparing to move to Jersey, and this was the last time the woman could work us into her summer schedule?

I don't recall many details of that traumatic move, but sometime in the first year in New Jersey the Spinet disappeared and the piano that had been located in my grandmother's house was now situated prominently in our new living room. And sometime in the next year we were signed up to take lessons at the Kingston Music Studio. Why? My parents had decided that we would all learn the piano, and this studio was run by musicians who worked at the now-defunct Hawaiian Cottage—an upscale restaurant and lounge at which my parents celebrated anniversaries and birthdays. The old guy I took lessons from for four years may have been a fine musician, but he couldn't teach at all. He kept the Lehar, Strauss, and Herbert, but added all kinds of popular music from anthologies—music that was melodic, but that made absolutely no demands on the player, at least not on a player who knew nothing about improvisation and who did not know enough to ask about this skill. It was all “popular” music, but I had never heard of most of the stuff, since no one at home played music on the radio. Not, at least, until I discovered the FM dial on my father's old shortwave radio and began getting into the Association, Booker T and the MGs, the Fifth Dimension, Tijuana Brass and other “wild” groups of the mid 60s. None of these groups appeared in any of the anthologies I was required to buy, and most of the groups in those anthologies I had never heard of. Besides that, the sheet music was minimalist and simplistic.

If nothing else, from this music teacher I learned how to pick out scales and chords on the piano. He didn't actually teach me these; the designations appeared on the sheet music, and I was simply curious to learn what they signified and how they could be used to create music. At this time I found the organ a much more rewarding instrument than the piano, because I could figure out my own stylings by manipulating the chordal progressions in fake books and experimenting with the bass offered by the pedals. Booker T might have also played an important role in this preference (I wished we had Hammond organ), but I was playing all kinds of music from various periods in the twentieth century (except for the decadent 50s). I developed a special affinity for music of the thirties and forties, particularly Cole Porter, George Gerschwin, Johnny Mercer, Hoagy Carmichael. But these were guilty pleasures: no one in school would ever learn that I was so enamored of "ancient" music and less drawn to the trivial excesses of contemporary pop.

Somewhere around 1969 I became fascinated by poetry and Classical music. The former passion emerged from earlier readings of Wordsworth, Longfellow, Sandberg, and Frost, and from some truly wonderful lyrics I would find and memorize in the fake books. I began writing poetry of my own, modeling my efforts on poems by these masters.

I can nail down the moment when my passion for Classical music was aroused. At this time I knew I was growing to be a different person than my parents expected me to become. One sign of this deviance was my need to watch cultural specials that were only aired on the new Public Broadcasting System, which I viewed in splendid solitude in my bedroom. I recall one particular show in which a highly-educated interviewer was speaking with Philippe Entremont, who played two Chopin waltzes to illustrate some aspect of music they were discussing. I was captivated and knew immediately that I had to learn how to play music that was so intricate, so engaging, so profound. Shortly thereafter, I discovered WFLN on the FM dial, where I heard Vivaldi's Four Seasons. Once again, I was transfixed by this music and resolved to explore classical music. I signed up for a course in Music Appreciation at LaSalle, where I learned more about this history of music and its contributions to the trajectory of Western civilization. I also used the piano in the music building to practice my newly-found love away from home. Over time, I became fairly close friends with two violinists who used my very meager talents to help them practice their own pieces.

I spent two years playing Schubert sonatinas and Telemann sonatas with Pete Homel. We played the notes religiously and with great conviction, although I doubt we ever created any music. When I met Berta I unceremoniously let Pete out of my life, having found someone who knew more about music than even Pete did and who, by good fortune, happened to be of the female persuasion and hence much more deserving of my dotting attention. Besides, by that time Pete had decided to abandon the study of German literature and switch to empirical psychology, so I felt I had little more to say to

the guy. I was an ass, but I was in love, and I had no room for anyone else in my life—especially someone who might offer worthy competition for Berta’s affections.

During my college years I immersed myself in Classical music. Wanamaker’s had a superior music store at that time, and I would spend an hour there every week just perusing the books and scores on their shelves. I also bought all of Beethoven’s sonatas, all Chopin’s waltzes and polonaises, three volumes of Schumann’s collected works, a selection of DeBussy’s major works, Joplin’s complete works (before he had been rediscovered as a composer!). I drove my parents crazy for years, especially when I struggled playing Beethoven sonatas. My mother complained loudly that I played before dinner, after dinner, before bedtime: I made it impossible for her to think. “How can you stand playing that high-brow music?” My father tolerated it, wished longingly for some Strauss or Lehar, but he was most appreciative that I could (finally) do something with my fingers that he could not do. He tried to encourage me to become a professional musician but did not understand that my skills were woefully inadequate to ensure even the modest of successes. Sure, the passion and the interest were there, and I could play a lot of notes in a wide variety of styles, but my ability to create music from those notes was at best marginal.

The true gift of music was given to Bob, who in his early teens had abandoned the piano and taken up the guitar. In high school we started hanging around with a bunch of guys who were forming a band, and Bob’s skills on the instrument just blossomed. I don’t recall him practicing much at home, probably because he spent so much time with his band. His passion for the guitar has led him to become a highly respected guitarist in South Jersey, and he taught his youngest son Sparky to master the instrument. Sparky actually earned a degree in music in college and has worked as an adjunct instructor at a university in Virginia.

All of our kids—Ted, Megan, and Ben—were required to take piano lessons until they graduated from high school. I’m proud that each of them still has some degree of competence on the instrument. Megan continues to expand her repertoire on a Yamaha keyboard; Ben has adopted the guitar as his favorite instrument; Ted has experimented with the accordion and bass guitar; and, aside from playing the piano several times a week, I have begun taking lessons on the blues harmonica. All three of our grandchildren have access to a keyboard, so I hope they will find enjoyment in tickling the ivories sometime in the near future.