

The Music Man

I remember her name as Sister Rita. She was the music teacher at the convent school in Colusa. It was she who gave me weekly piano lessons during the middle grades of my elementary school education. She was, as I remember, a short woman, dressed in black robes cinched at the waist by jangling rosary beads, which somehow were connected to a heart-shaped religious symbol attached to her chest. Her hair was covered with starched white linen, and sitting atop her head was a semicircular fluted linen headpiece that stretched from ear to ear around the circumference of her face. A black veil hung from the fluted linen piece and flowed down her back, ending well below the waistline. Sister Rita rarely spoke and gave her lesson with an air of impatience and austerity that made me even more nervous than I usually was in the presence of religious authority.

It must have been my mother's idea for me to take piano lessons, although I never knew anyone on her side of the family who was remotely interested in music. I had heard some vague references to musical ability on my father's side of the family, but I never met them, and as far as I could tell, my father seemed to have no identifiable musical talent. Perhaps these Holy Cross nuns talked up the value of music lessons as a way of securing additional income, and this was my devout mother's way of helping them out. Neither do I know whether the piano we had at home was the reason I was taking lessons or whether it was the lessons themselves which prompted my mother to purchase a piano. Aside from the practice time at the piano, I never witnessed any other person using it.

I took the lessons for a few years and I sometimes practiced every day at home, but I did not show much natural aptitude. I learned to read notes, and I played a few pieces at the annual recital by dint of memorizing them. I never seemed to progress to the point where I could sight-read and play the piano with ease. I had to play each line over and over again until I had it memorized. Toward the end of my elementary school career, the lessons and practice periods fell by the wayside. I have no recollection whether the cessation of my musical endeavor upset my parents. Perhaps they were relieved because they no longer had to pay for the lessons. I was certainly relieved to be free of my stressful sessions with Sister Rita.

Music reasserted itself during my senior year of high school. I was in monastic training, and a specified number of weekend recreation hours were allotted to students for art appreciation, such as reading (approved) novels or listening to classical music. I developed an interest in music appreciation, and Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Offenbach became my favorites. I was especially enamored of *Swan Lake*, which I listened to over and over again. There was one other classmate who shared my interest in listening to this music. He was one class younger than I, a large boy without any athletic ability, a little offbeat in his personal mannerisms, and a little effeminate. Classical music became the basis for our friendship.

I burst onto the music scene again at St. Mary's College, toward the end of my sophomore year. I got it into my mind that I wanted to take organ lessons. I have no recollection about what prompted this desire or why I came to feel so strongly about it. I certainly had shown no special musical aptitude at the piano or in our weekly choir practice, but I fixated on my desire to play the organ, the king of musical instruments. And because of my favored relationship with the college president, I was soon enrolled as a student of Richard Purvis, the organ master of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

Talent or not, I plunged myself into the mysteries of learning to play this magnificent instrument. At every opportunity, night or day, I would bound up the stairs to the choir loft at St. Mary's College chapel and practice until my eyes could no longer focus on the page of music. I did make some progress, but once again my lack of natural aptitude hampered my development. I learned to play the selection by painfully memorizing the notes and the proper fingering. Sight-reading seemed to elude me, and I began to realize that unless I could break this barrier, I would never become an organist. Every new selection was a challenge, and I felt as if I was always starting over again. I stuck with it, hoping that enough practice time would enable me to read the music with enough ease that I could play naturally and use my practice time to perfect technique and interpretation. But it was not to be.

I graduated from college after three years of study, not the usual four, and was assigned to teach high school in Bakersfield. Of necessity, I was separated from my organ and my teacher, and I had also lost the will to continue the drudgery of practice in hopes that someday I would achieve the breakthrough I needed. When I relocated to Bakersfield, I gave it up entirely. I accepted my

decision with such finality that no one could possibly know that at one time I had had a burning desire to master the organ. I chalked this experience up as yet another in my growing list of life's "incompletes."

I did not lose my love for fine music. After one year in Bakersfield, I was assigned to teach in San Francisco and soon had free access to box seats for the San Francisco Symphony. During the next five symphony seasons, I had the privilege of listening to the world's greatest music performed by artists of great renown.

In 1965, the changes in my life – leaving religious life, joining the farmworker movement, marrying Bonnie, and moving to Delano – served to relegate my love of music to the inactive file. Indulging one's interest in fine music requires time, money, and access. We could fill none of these requirements.

When we took our leave of the farmworker movement and relocated ourselves to Sacramento in 1973, we rediscovered music and we were determined to expose our daughters (now four, soon to be five) to this world. I remember one occasion when all six of us sat in the very first row of the Opera House in San Francisco to hear Alicia de Larrocha perform one of Mozart's piano concertos. She was magnificent; we were spellbound and fully expected that our four daughters, ranging in age from nine to four years, would carry this music with them for the rest of their lives.

Thirty years earlier, my parents set the music man in motion, and now it was my turn.