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ENGL-1010-03

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6 March 2015

Melodic Literature: The Art of Playing the Piano

As I played the last note on the ivory keys of the old upright piano, letting the sound ring through the room, I felt a surge of success. I stood up, turned around and bowed, reveling in the applause from the audience. I was 6 years old, and had just completed my first piano recital. People say that music is the universal language. I have always had a deep connection with it, and felt that it is a part of who I am. From a very young age, I had an intense love for piano music. My parents told me that I would pick out songs like “Twinkle Twinkle” or “Mary Had A Little Lamb” with one finger by the age of 4 years old. This inspired my mother to enroll me in piano lessons, which is where my love of music and understanding of piano literacy (my understanding of all things piano) began.

I was very excited and eager to learn it all, from the characteristics, such as the 88 keys or the sustain pedal, to the different dynamics used when playing a piece of music. I learned to play by ear and by reading notes, along with their variety of sharps, flats, and scales, the importance of fingering, and many more things along the way. I soon realized there are an innumerable amount of methods and aspects involved with understanding all there is to know about playing the piano. I am always trying to learn new things or ways to better my talent.

At first, my attention span left a lot to be desired, and I had to be bribed to practice by my mother. She would use either Skittles or M&Ms, and would create a pile on one side of the piano. For each time I played my piece, I would move one candy to the other side of the piano. When I had moved all of them, and only when I had moved all of them, would my mother allow me to eat them. It was a wonderful incentive, which worked remarkably well in getting me to practice. Eventually, I developed

a love for playing the piano. I am eternally grateful to my mother for pushing me to do it and for always being my biggest fan.

My first piano teacher, Ovella Dockstader, used the Suzuki method, which is a method that teaches students to play by ear, and later to play by reading notes. While I learned to play by ear, which is a great ability that I have and love, Ovella didn't stress the fact that I needed to be particular with some very important things, such as posture and fingering. I didn't learn these things in the beginning, which made it very difficult for me to retrain myself the right way, and is still a struggle for me every time I play.

When I was about ten years old, Ovella retired and my mother enrolled me in lessons with a new teacher, Norma Jeffs. I have a few memories from before this, but this is where the majority of my memories begin. I remember being terrified at first of the change and being intimidated by the elderly woman who was my new piano teacher. I vividly remember the musty smell of her classroom, and the mess of sheet-music that covered every available flat surface in the room. It was here that I learned more about timing and how to read notes. Unlike Ovella, Norma intentionally assigned me pieces that I had never heard, so as to force me to read the notes.

At first I hated it, and couldn't understand why I needed to be able to read notes. What was the purpose of all of this? Then one day, Norma gave me the assignment to learn a certain piece of music – one that I still consider one of the most beautiful pieces of music ever written, “Canon in D” by Johann Pachelbel. The fast scales and beautiful chord progressions in this piece inspired me from the age of ten, and continue to be a huge inspiration in the way I play piano. It helped me realize and understand the importance of being able to read notes. The key of D-Major is still my favorite and is my go-to key for just about any piece that I play by ear.

Norma also helped me a lot with my stage fright and performing skills. Once a month, all of her students and their families would meet for a group recital. We would stand up, state our name and what

pieces we planned on playing for the group – normally one solo, and either a duet or trio played with one or two of our peers. Once I overcame some of my stage fright, I grew to enjoy these recitals very much.

As I grew older and entered middle school, I started to be teased and ridiculed by many of the other kids. I was told that I was “a girl” or that I was “gay” because my talent was not common among other boys. My mother was a constant encouragement for me throughout these years, and if it would not have been for her, I probably would have given up. I remember that sometimes, when I was discouraged, playing the piano would help to brighten my mood. I felt as if playing my piano fixed everything and made my cares float away. A lot of what I would play was impromptu, and I was told by many people that they could tell my mood by the music I was playing. Playing impromptu was and still is very therapeutic.

Over the years, through lessons and countless hours of practice, I honed my talent. I performed for many community and religious gatherings, including the community's Harvest Festival, the Sunday Night Program, and I played accompaniment for my grandpa's Sunday-School. A few of the audiences I played for were numbered in the thousands. This helped me to overcome most of my stage fright, although I still do not enjoy being in front of a large crowd or being put on the spot.

Shortly after I was married, at the age of 18 years old, I was hired to play piano on the weekends for The Rex (a bar/restaurant) in Billings, MT. While I normally enjoyed this job, it could be very hard, because the majority of the requests I received from patrons were for songs I didn't know, because of the strict religious community I had been raised up in. I was told that I “sucked” on many occasions, which was very hard on my self-esteem. On the other hand, I was able to meet some people who genuinely appreciated my talent. I met Michael Mace, President of the Rocky Mountain College, which is located in Billings, on several occasions. He always tipped me very generously and was very kind and appreciative of my piano playing. Seeing him, and hearing him speak highly of my piano

playing, brightened my spirits and made me feel that at least there was someone who understood and appreciated my talent.

Throughout my life, I often dreamed of going to Hollywood or Nashville. However, after my experience at The Rex, I realized that I do not take criticism very well, and I wanted to play for people that I knew would appreciate my talent. My literacy of piano playing is very important to me as it has helped me through many hard times in my life. In many ways, it helps to define the man that I am today; Piano playing taught me discipline and determination through countless hours of practicing, and it also gave me an immense appreciation and love for music, which is something that I hope to pass on to my descendants. It has helped me to further develop my social skills and make many great friends. These are just a few of the many ways that it has helped me throughout my life. While I have decided to focus on a different career choice, I will always love piano playing, and I will continue to share my talent with anyone who cares to listen.