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The Music Makers

I don't remember picking up a violin for the first time. I do remember, though, the last time I held one: and how odd it felt. It seemed almost dangerous to hold: as if it were somehow both fragile and explosive at once.

Perhaps it didn't help that it was a fine eighteenth century Italian instrument, slim and almost reedily slight under the fingers as such violins are. Its back and ribs showed the characteristic tabby-cat markings of maple wood. Its belly, made of grainy spruce, was a light tan. Its scroll was no longer crisply carved, but smoothed by the passage of two and a half centuries. It smelt soberly of linseed; and sweetly of resin. On the chinrest and the fingerboard, it also smelt faintly of someone skin.

It was someone else's smell, and someone else's fiddle. But its owner had offered to let me play it. And, if this had been a dream, I would have done. After all, it wasn't the rarest fiddle I've ever held, and I certainly wasn't in awe of it. On the contrary: it provoked me. In just the way that good cooking smells get you ready to eat, holding it automatically made my body ready itself to play. I'm not sure I was actually salivating, but I might as well have been. Just picking the violin made a playing-shaped space in my arms. I could feel that old parallelogram forming itself: left arm – "let your arm hang from the wrist" – torso, bowing forearm – and the bow, which the violin's owner was holding out to me.

My body remembers that configuration so well. But also so badly. I can return to playing the violin in dreams, and I still often do. Yet my *waking* body can't any longer do what it remembers. I'm not living with some horrible condition, or in the aftermath of a dreadful accident. It's simply that I'm now a writer, and you can't do *both* with single-minded commitment. "Every choice is a renunciation," as the old Italian proverb has it. Violin-playing's a motor skill that requires a high degree of precision just to make a sound that isn't positively repulsive – never mind pleasurable. And it's a skill that has to be kept up. The cliché is that we can all remember how to ride a bicycle, once we've learnt. But playing the violin is different. Pushing your feet up and down on some pedals while remembering not to tip over just is altogether broad-brush compared to the intricate fingering of, say, a passage by Sibelius.

I'm also talking, here, as the daughter of a violin teacher. For years, our weekday evenings were accompanied by a rota of learner violinists. Not all of them made sounds you'd want to eat your tea to. Every half hour it was the same: scales, arpeggios, then the pieces. Aural tests in exam season. Sometimes some Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music sight-reading. These were specially tuneless little pieces, presumably designed to be counter-intuitive so as not to give the more

musical child any advantage. How well we knew the set pieces for each Grade, by the time of the syllabus's periodic changeover. And how easy it was to know who was going to pass, who get a Merit and who a Distinction, when exam day came at the local music centre.

For instrumental practice is a curiously public, even a confessional, affair. Everybody and his dog know how you're getting on. (His dog may well be singing along.) Tyro poets can choose to keep their work secret until they're confident enough to share it with an admiring friend or sympathetic lover, or in a creative writing workshop. When I teach such workshops I tend to feel sympathy for the participants who are, after all, undertaking a writing exercise that's probably unfamiliar, in a room full of relative strangers. But then I remember my own musical training, and how relentlessly public it was: and I have less sympathy.

You see, I remember how levelling the public nature of playing is, and what a sense of freedom that produces. You simply are as good as you are (and no better). Everybody knows it: because everybody can hear it. The result's a kind of straightforwardness that lets the best art through, and that I still find myself campaigning for, when I review, or edit. Of course, we suffered competitive pangs. There were arguments over interpretations. We inherited different schools of violin playing, part of the glorious arcana of the field. (Did you descend from the Belgian Eugene Ysäye by way of Fred Grinke, or from Leopold Auer and the Russian School?) But about who was really good there was, basically, consensus. They put bow to string and, roughly speaking, there it was. [This was as true of primary school kids battling with first position as it was of performers on the international circuit.]

All of which sounds wonderful in principle. But what about in practice? I can only say what I remember. And much of that is lit by a gorgeous, summery light. For summer was when music courses and summer schools, the whole bursaried world of being a young musician *among* other young musicians, suddenly opened up, after the year spent working the double shift of school and daily instrumental practice.

For example, I remember hearing Eugene Ysäye's dazzling Third Sonata for Unaccompanied Violin for the first time. I was sixteen. I'd travelled alone across Europe to spend the summer studying in Salzburg with a Czech violin professor at the Mozarteum. He taught in a mixture of Russian and German, neither of which I had. So I also found myself auditing the parallel course, led by Jean Fournier of the Paris Conservatoire. *Travaillez bien*: I could understand that all right.

Fournier had brought his star pupil with him. He was a young man who looked as tall and out at the elbow as Paganini himself, and whose Ysäye wasn't just flawless but wildly charismatic too. The one-movement 'Ballade' is a wrenching, dramatic piece. It's difficult (but also, to be honest, rather enjoyable) to play: chiefly because of the way Ysäye designs the double-stopping – when you play more than one note at once – to *draw* resonance from the fiddle. We all sat and listened, and the long eighteenth century windows were wide open to the horse chestnut trees in the Mirabelle Palace Gardens behind us, and there was simply nothing to say. He was the Real Thing. (Later, he would buy me a strudel in a pastry shop and I would discover *he* had absolutely nothing to say, either, once he put the violin down. But that's another story.)

And so in my next memory, from a couple of years later, I'm studying with Fournier in Paris. The nuns of the Convent which welcomed stays by girls from more Catholic families had outsourced me to a little pension in the 16th. I don't know whether they realised it was a house of no great repute. I remember working on the Brahms Violin Concerto, my practice mute conscientiously if rather futilely clamped to the bridge of the violin, in the little third-floor front, with its view down the sunny dog-leg street. I remember the characteristically Parisian, skinny wrought-iron of the balcony where I dried my socks. I remember balancing the music above the washbasin in the corner of the room: [there was one of those shelves in front of the mirror with a miniature balustrade, like a terrace for toothbrushes to take the air]. Above all, I remember how everything felt possible.

In a third memory I'm practising the Ysäye itself. By now I was in my first year at the Royal Academy of Music. In those days the college lacked rehearsal rooms: a real problem when students lived scattered wide distances across the city, and needed to make sure they got their "five a day", their hours of daily practice. But unused teaching rooms could be booked by students. The best were high above the Euston Road, up under the roof on the fourth and fifth floors. They had gabled portholes, circular windows set high enough to give you a view of scudding London skies. Those cavernous rooms, off equally cavernous corridors hung with darkening honours boards, were gloriously resonant. And their old-fashioned double doors of wood and glass were not remotely soundproof. Everyone knew exactly how good everyone else was.

You have to push off from the side to play the Ysäye properly, after its slow introduction. Now I know the piece borrows this structure, which is still used by Roma violinists all over Central and South-East Europe. In the years since, I've pushed notes under the fingerboard of the fiddler at a Slovenia party, heard kids busk in Romania, and danced the kolo at a stranger's wedding in Novi Sad. I can recognise the Roma-fiddle feel, of a relaxed and virtuoso plenty, in Ysäye's characteristically dramatic "arguing" chords, once they arrive. But when I was eighteen all I knew was that it's a piece that warms to its task; that you have to spread the chords, not hack them, taking the time they take. In short, I was making a lot of noise, and so it was that the kingmaker among the professors passed by, stopped, peered through the glass, then just as you'd hope let himself in, beaming with approbation...

Nobody admits that music is such an extravert art. There's a lot of educational talk about its being "a good way of joining in". Teachers stress the pleasures of youth orchestra and school wind band, with amateur music-making to look forward to in adult life. And they're right, of course. Making music with other people – in choirs, orchestras or chamber music – is great fun.

But let's not ignore its indefatigable out-loud-ness. And let's not ignore the way that music teaches you how you simply have to face the world *because the world can see you anyway*. Some kids who like performing enjoy showing off. But performing also suits the kind of child I was, someone who's too shy to speak up, but has the music do it for her. When the whole of life is performance anxiety – a continual worry about doing it right – the narrow criteria of musical success come as a relief. Music, which

is as impersonal as T.S. Eliot said poetry was, and in the same glorious way, let me take my place, too, in the world around me.

It also let me know that the Real Thing was out there somewhere, waiting to be discovered. School and neighbourhood repeat to many young people how “people like us” can never hope to participate in the wide world. And so music’s message that somewhere there *are* platforms and green rooms, Bach and Stravinsky, art and life, can be enormously important, life-defining and even lifesaving. Which is why the violin I was holding [at the start of this essay] felt so explosive.

So how did I come to hold it? Oddly, I was leading workshops for the National Youth Orchestra. Needless to say, they were in poetry not music. The NYO I remember took a robustly sink-or-swim attitude to both instrumental excellence and the developing teenage self. We members – holding our breath each year that we’d be readmitted by its Musical Director, the terrifying and cape-clad Ivey Dickson – adored it none the less for that. Today’s orchestra is altogether more concerned with whole person education. Its members receive carefully rounded musical training, and also have access to other activities: such as writing poetry.

Today’s NYO also does outreach work: because music lessons have become such a middle-class preserve. It wasn’t always thus. Nearly all the students I was with at the Academy came, like me, from state schools. Most, like me, had had much of their musical education paid for, one way or another, by their Local Education Authority. It was the heyday of arts education, and of public arts access. Arts policy was being made with the next generation of makers in mind, and it was understood that talent cuts across social background.

How lucky we were. And those of us who *were* so lucky can’t forget the opportunities we were given: the chances to realise that we, too, could be “the music makers and dreamers of dreams”. I first came across those words from Arthur O’Shaughnessy’s ‘Ode’ in their setting by Edward Elgar. The music, then as now, led me to the poetry. I handed the violin back to its rightful owner, the strings coach of the National Youth Orchestra. But I take that parallelogram – violin arm, torso, right forearm and the absent bow – with me wherever I go.