



Music, Maestro ... Please!

Are there among the A Story A Week readers any good piano players? Such readers may get a particular smile from this week's episode. Either that, or tears ...

I myself don't play piano at all. There is a keyboard/synthesizer in storage upstairs, which I used some time back - together with a computer - for experimenting with a bit of music composition, but I haven't touched it for years. I did take a year of 'piano lessons' during my first (and only) year at university, but I attended the session with the teacher each time in body only; I had no interest at all, I didn't do the exercises she posed, and both of us were simply going through the motions.

Some time after I left school though, I met a young man who had a rather unique approach to learning how to play piano. His name was Gordon, and his main musical instrument was the clarinet. (I'll avoid using his full name here, in case he might be embarrassed by the story I am about to tell.)

He, just like most beginners, had no interest at all in such things as scales, exercises, and the other things that most piano students accept as a normal part of the learning procedure. He wanted to *play* the piano.

So he did. He set himself the goal of playing one of the most famous Beethoven piano sonatas (I don't remember which one), and he set about the task in a most interesting way. On his first day, he put the music score on his piano, and hunted for the keys that matched the opening chord. Putting his fingers in place, he played it.

He then repeated over and over again the process of sitting down, putting his hands in place, and striking that first chord, working until he could do it smoothly - without hunting around - and with a reasonable tone. That first day, he went no further than the opening chord.

For his next practice session, he looked at the music for the next chord, worked out what notes needed to be played, put his fingers into position, and played, practicing it repeatedly. He then of course combined the two steps - he could now sit down at the piano, and confidently play the first two chords of the first bar of the sonata.

You can see where we are going with this. He kept up the same process for many months. At the time I met him and heard him play, he had worked through about the first two pages of the sonata, never moving forward until he could play up to that point with absolute confidence. I suppose a professional pianist could hear defects in his 'performance', but to other music students such as myself, he sounded magnificent!

I am unable to let you know whether or not he was ever able to perform the entire sonata, because I moved away from Vancouver, and have had no contact with him since those days. But he was a pretty stubborn and determined guy, so I would not be surprised at all to hear that he took the experiment all the way to its conclusion, with a performance of the entire piece.

Even since then, trying this same experiment has always been on my list of things to do one day, although I think that rather than Beethoven, I will perhaps choose some Debussy Preludes.

And look at that, I said 'will' rather than 'would'. I guess I'm still maintaining the fantasy that this will actually happen!

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