



## Poor, but Rich!

Speaking last week of the days when I was a flute student set me off remembering some of the episodes from that time of my life, and one in particular came to mind ... the day I got my 'own' first flute.

I had taken up playing flute quite by accident. Our family had moved to a new city part way through the school year, and as the courses available in the new school didn't match what I had been taking in the old location, I ended up with an open 'slot' in the schedule. When the counsellor who was helping me with integration into the new school heard that my father was a professional musician, he suggested I join the school's band program; I don't remember having any particular strong feelings about this, and basically let myself be pushed into it. Somehow - I no longer remember who made the decision - I ended up being assigned to play the flute, and for the next decade or so, that instrument was to be the main focus of my life.

Now the school band was in the practice of supplying the larger instruments - things such as tubas, bass drums, and the like - but students playing more 'normal' instruments were expected to supply their own. My parents at this time though, were not what one would call particularly 'flush' with money. Because my father had made the leap to a new city, he of course didn't get much work right away; it took some time for him to become known and to get established. So the idea that I could have a new flute for the band classes was completely off the table. There was a flute in the house. My father was what was known as a 'reed player' - playing the saxophone as his main instrument, and 'doubling' on such things as flute, clarinet, and oboe. This was common practice in the dance/jazz/studio session field, and it imposed quite a burden on woodwind players, who sometimes quite envied their trumpet-playing fellow musicians, who showed up for work with a single (and light!) instrument case.

So for my first sessions at school I used my father's instrument, but this was of course not sustainable, because he himself frequently needed to use it. The band teacher soon 'came to the rescue'. I was turning out to be quite a good student, so to help things along the way, he used some of the band funds to order a flute that I could use. This was one of those things that 'seemed like a good idea at the time', but it was a complete bust. He bought a very cheap instrument indeed - this was the early days of products coming from China - and it was a complete nightmare both to play and maintain. Even though I was extremely careful, it spent most of the time in the repair shop, and I was constantly badgering my father to use his.

A possible solution presented itself one day in the form of a small ad in the paper, offering a flute for sale for \$120. I no longer remember whether I had the courage to approach my parents about it, or if they saw it without my intervention, but one day later that week, there we were in the living room of the seller, inspecting it. It turned out that he was one of the members of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, selling an instrument he no longer needed. This gave it quite a cachet in my eyes - a professional instrument! - and after my father gave the OK, we paid the money and brought it home.

That flute turned out to be the only one that I would ever own. It saw me through my entire flute 'career', through the years of study, hundreds upon hundreds of concerts, and into my attempts to enter the world of a professional orchestra musician. I never did attain that goal, and to tell the truth, I am not really suited to such a position by nature, but it was the journey that was important.

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But ... there is a twist. A few years later, I found myself back in that same living room once again. Upon entering the music program at university, I had been put on that man's roster of flute students, and I showed up one day that September for my first lesson. He didn't remember me at first, but when I opened my case and brought out the instrument, *this* he remembered. And just perhaps, he wasn't quite so comfortable to see it come back into his life.

He himself never told me the story, but I heard it later from one of the other flutists in the orchestra. His position in the orchestra was 3rd flute and piccolo, and one of the most famous pieces in the orchestral repertoire - the Tchaikovsky Nutcracker Suite - includes a dance segment that features three flutes playing together. It seems that during rehearsals, the conductor had been frustrated by an imbalance in the flute section - the 3rd flute was consistently too strong, no matter how carefully this man had tried to 'keep it down'. So he hit upon a good solution; go to a music store and purchase a flute with poor tone quality, to use for just this single piece of music. It worked. The 3rd flute part no longer stood out, the conductor was happy, and after the concert series was over, the flutist sold the no-longer-needed 'poor' flute.

To me.

The flute now rests in its case in storage upstairs, and although I will never again put it to my lips, I would never consider selling it. Poor it may be, it holds just too many memories.

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