

Why Not?

When I was seven I went to see *The Sting*.

We were living in Manhattan -- in Yorkville. The movie was playing at the UA East, the theatre on the ground floor of our apartment building. I went with my parents, and, in my memory, it was the first film I saw that was not made with children in mind. First there was *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, then *The Sound of Music*, now this.

I loved everything about it. I loved the costumes, I loved the setting (yes, I noticed these elements from a young age), I loved Robert Redford and Paul Newman (who wouldn't?) but, most of all I loved the music.

I had never heard Ragtime -- originally written for the piano, the syncopated rhythms and gorgeous melodies were completely new to me. I couldn't get enough of them. Ragtime transported me to another place, away from the four-lane highway that was First Avenue in the 1970s. Also, there was an uplifting spirit about Ragtime -- which came from the march and evolved into dance music -- that was transformative. If I was in a bad mood, listening to Ragtime immediately snapped me out of it.

Ragtime seemed to be the bridge between the classical music my parents always listened to on WQXR and WNCN and jazz, which I heard in old, black-and-white movies they watched. My parents were not professional musicians -- my father, 43, slender, with dark hair and glasses, was a piano graduate of Juilliard who had become a librarian and my mother, 45, plump and chestnut-haired, worked for the United Nations as a typist -- but in what spare time they had my father played the piano while my mother sang opera. Perhaps as a way of connecting with my newfound musical tastes my father bought me

the soundtrack to *The Sting* and the score and even learned to play *Solace*, one of the slower ballads, on the piano.

I was enamored. I especially loved *The Entertainer* and fantasized I could play it one day myself. I was a lazy piano student, however, and knew that this would probably never happen. In my opinion my father was the pianist in the family and I would never play like him. Knowing how much was entailed in becoming a musician, my father didn't push me to become one.

My mother, however, did have a kind of Rosalind Russell-in-Gypsy quality about her. In a word, she was "formidable" and certainly wanted me to follow in my fathers' footsteps. I can just see it now; she had probably envisioned herself as an operatic star. When that didn't work out she "managed" my fathers' piano career. Now that he had left that world, she could be in charge of mine. It should have been clear to her, even at my young age, that this was a wasted dream.

I was lazy because I really had no interest. I wanted to be a ballerina. I took weekly classes and put up with piano only because I had no choice. The lack of energy I put into the piano was directly related to the energy it took for my teachers and my mother to deal with me.

This is how it played out. My mother would find a teacher. For the first few weeks all would go according to plan. Then, after several months, the slide downward would begin. I wouldn't practice, the teacher wouldn't get anywhere with me, my mother would be called in. "Mrs. Gutoff," the teacher would proclaim, "I really can't do anything with this child. She refuses to practice, she doesn't seem interested, she can't WORK." My mother, loath to believe that there was anything wrong with her precious only child,

would turn around and blame the teacher: “Well, you’re obviously a bad teacher if you can’t engage her in music!” and off we’d go.

Down the street, to another teacher, where the whole scene would play out all over again. It was such a charade that I actually began to enjoy the drama of it, especially the fact that it had nothing to do with playing the piano. It was fun watching the teacher tell my mother what a terrible student I was; but the real pleasure was watching my mother tell the teacher it was *her* fault. How perfect for me. No work, no consequences. And free entertainment to boot.

There were three inherent problems with this scenario. First, I had a stage mother with grand dreams. Of course, those dreams had nothing to do with me. Second, I had no interest in playing the piano; it was my mother who, as a result of the first problem, wanted me to play. Third, BECAUSE I had no interest in playing the piano, I turned the whole thing into an entertainment for my own delight. It therefore became something completely different from what it set out to be.

Or did it?

There was the nagging issue of *The Entertainer*. I really did want to play it. If I was such a lazy student, how come I was so interested in it? Why didn’t I just move on to my ballet dreams and forget about it? The answer came, one day, when my father mentioned a cousin of his was teaching piano in the neighborhood. “Maybe she needs a different sort of teacher”, he said. He suggested my mother give her a call. Her name was Ada and she was a distant cousin of my father’s. Perhaps he was hoping that Ada would serve as an antidote to the ancient, grey-haired battleaxes that were calling themselves

piano teachers at the time. My father knew a lot about un-child friendly teachers and I'm sure he felt that if I had to study the piano the right teacher was surely the key.

Ada lived in a walk-up on Third Avenue in the '90s and I remember her apartment was filled with light. Ada was young, unlike the teachers I was used to, and she had a gentle voice. Shockingly, Ada talked about the keyboard being made of clay and that I should imagine myself "molding the keys." I had no idea what she was talking about. No one had ever spoken about the piano as something I could "imagine" or be playful with. What was I to make of this woman? I liked her.

I don't remember how long I studied with Ada; she may have moved away at some point. Somewhere in this period were teachers at my school, Rudolf Steiner. I remember participating enough in the practice regime to give regular recitals in elementary school. The next person in the cast was a lovely man named David. David was the husband of my mother's vocal teacher and both of them were from the South — Georgia, I believe. David spoke with a gorgeous accent; growing up in New York, I had never heard someone speak like that. Listening to David was like that dream state you go into right before you fall asleep. By now, I was in high school and working on pieces by Bach and Mozart; I still have the scores with David's handwriting on them.

What Ada and David did was change my outlook. Before them, lessons were something to be endured, like eating spinach. They were unpleasant and administered by teachers who were not interested in teaching. Ada and David altered the way in which I viewed studying piano. For the first time, I was working with teachers who seemed to enjoy teaching and were engaging at the same time. They also seemed to be interested in

who I was and what I had to offer the piano. I was not simply another small child to be told what to do.

Unfortunately, David was replaced by theatre. I had discovered the bug at my high school, Walden, and it completely took over. I was taking summer classes at HB Studio in the Village and doing shows at school. All my friends were in the productions. Something had to go. Sadly, it was the piano. “You’ll regret this,” my mother warned me.

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When my children were small, they both took lessons. Unlike myself, my older daughter displayed an aptitude from a young age. I called a teacher to ask him about lessons; he told me to wait until the end of first grade. That’s when children have experience with homework and can read, he said. In this case she was already reading and doing homework. I asked him if he would take her on.

Several years went by and she moved on to another teacher. This was at the stage where she was more interested in playing songs of her own choosing than those in the *Alfred Basic Piano Course* for children. The new teacher came to the house and suddenly the theme from *Star Wars* was a new assignment.

One day, she asked my daughter if she wanted to play Scott Joplin and handed her some sheet music. “You want me to play the *Maple Leaf Rag*?!” My daughter asked. “Sure, why not?” the teacher responded. My daughter wasn’t interested in playing rags.

But I was. So much time had gone by; and yet...there was still a fantasy...

At this point, I was 37. My mother had just passed away. I was mourning by feeling guilty; couldn’t I have tried a little harder at the piano? Maybe I could start over. Maybe I could learn to play basic piano. Maybe I could just enjoy it. What did I have to

lose? I took the *Maple Leaf Rag* and sat down. I managed to learn the first note of the chord in the melody, then the second. Then, I added the second chord in the same way. And so it went until I got to the end of the first measure. Then I went back to the start and learned the first note of the first chord in the left hand; then the second. Eventually, I learned the first measure with both hands.

God, it was slow going. If it was painful for me, it was more so for my family. Is there anything worse than listening to someone learn a piece on an instrument for the first time? I know that children think it is much more horrible when their parents learn an instrument than the other way around. Suddenly, I felt like such a jerk for all the horrible thoughts I had about my mother when I was little and I would listen to her sing or try to learn a piano piece.

I felt almost paralyzed I sounded so awful. It was like that nightmare scenario where you can't get to where you're going because your legs are made of mush. But still—there's that hope that you will get there...

The right teacher certainly helps. I found one, with the help of a good friend. I knew that if I was going to study piano as an adult I was not wasting any time with the wrong teacher. I met with her and she asked me what I wanted to play.

“Ragtime,” I answered.

“That's great”, she said.

“There's only one problem”, I responded.

“What's that?”

“I can't.” I said.

“Why not?” she asked.

Eventually, I learned the *Maple Leaf Rag*. It took about a year from first note to complete fluency. Later on I played it from memory at a performance practice with a group of other adult students.

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Looking back, I think my childhood was a bit like the dress-up corner at school: “Now I’m going to be a princess, later I’ll be a firefighter...”

In my case, I wanted to be Ginger Rodgers. Only I suffered from what I call Fred Astaire Syndrome – a condition wherein you, a small child, tap dance in front of your TV and say “I can do that!” In order to really tap, though, you have to put in the hours, days, weeks and years. In other words it’s work and not pretend. My need to play Ragtime was based on a whim, a childhood fantasy made up in the dress-up corner. It wasn’t until I found a great teacher and started to work -- putting those notes together -- that the fantasy slowly evolved into a reality.

I give my mother credit for indulging my other whims (including flute lessons and drama classes in high school) even after I disappointed her at the piano. Eventually I went back to ballet class and spent enough time there to graduate to toe shoes. However, when the girls in class were planning their auditions for the School of American Ballet, I ducked out. The writing was on the wall: I didn’t have the chops to survive an SAB audition. What I did have was the ability to make a colossal fool out of myself.

Part of growing up is recognizing when dress up is over and it’s time to clean up. Perhaps, “assess” is a better way of putting it. I had to assess where I was in my life and what I could reasonably accomplish. Although I now realize I could have kept up the piano and participated in theatre, I did not have the maturity to do so at the time. My all-

or-nothing attitude and my ability to become completely overwhelmed by responsibility was very much in keeping with being a teenager. Now I see I could have simply organized my time a little better.

The thing about Ragtime is that I had it all wrong. I didn't have a music problem. Sure I was a lazy student and I didn't have a clue about theory (I still don't). Needless to say, I avoided it. When I set my mind to it, however, I was perfectly capable of learning a piece within my ability. And by the time I was in high school, I had caught up to the point that I could play a waltz by Chopin or a piano concerto by Mozart. On some levels, learning the notes was actually easy.

Certainly, there were many obstacles along the way. The first was when I dropped off my younger daughter at her lesson one day and a middle school student ahead of her was playing the *Maple Leaf Rag*. There is nothing more ego stripping than a 12-year-old showing up an adult. The solution? Walk out the door, go home and practice even harder. What choice do you have? (other than going home, getting in bed, and pulling the covers over your head?)

Time, of course, was a major issue. My teacher once commented, "I only wish you had more time to practice." Ragtime requires a lot. But I also discovered that ten good minutes a day was worth more than it sounded and the pain of picking up after days gone by without practicing was simply not worth it.

Upkeep turned out to be the ultimate challenge. It's so easy to toss a piece aside after you've learned it. If you're not going to play it again in public, the motivation is not the same. Trying to play it through at least once a week became the new motivation.

So, the key was daily practice and upkeep of learned pieces. Ten minutes a day, maybe twenty. On weekends, a half-hour is a dream. Certainly, I will never be a professional. The “10,000 hours” I should have had by age eighteen were spent doing other things. It helps to have a dad who, at the age of 86, just played a program of Mozart, Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky and Beethoven from memory. His practice? He gets up and is at the piano every morning for one hour.

What I learned from my dad is that being passionate about art and participating in it is much more important than being a professional artist. He gave up his career after making his debut at Carnegie Recital Hall in 1961. He simply decided that concertizing wasn't for him. But he continued to practice and play community recitals. He never lost his work ethic, sense of self-discipline and professionalism. His attitude was that no matter where you're playing you show up and you're prepared. If you aren't prepared, you have no business showing up.

And what did I get from my mom? Guilt. There really is nothing like the feeling that you have disappointed your mother. And yet, in the end, guilt seemed to serve as the perfect motivator for moving me forward. If it wasn't for guilt, I wouldn't have looked for a piano teacher. If it wasn't for guilt, I wouldn't have started practicing. And if it wasn't for guilt, I would not continue to play on an almost-daily basis. I would love to tell my mom how much I *love* playing the piano now.

And what ever happened to classical? Since I began studying again I've worked on pieces by Bach and Mozart, as well. I would love to play Debussy. My dad just asked me if I would learn the Beethoven Piano Concerto in G Minor. He told me he even had

the score and would be happy to give it to me. It's beautiful, battered and a faded shade of blue. It has all his notations in it. Hmm...why not?