

## If music...

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How do people come to love music? Is it a predisposition or formative experiences that set vibrating the sensitive chords that create music lovers?

In my life, music sacred and profane struck up early on, some of it forced on me, some discovered little by little.

We began each school day by singing a hymn, banged out on the school piano, our voices failing if the notes went too high or too low. Then there was church, with hymns and the grand swelling growl of the organ.

On the profane side were my grannies: Gaggie, alias Flora van Diepenheim, a gold-medal pianist, whose name was spoken in sorrow when I refused to practise; and Granny Beatrice, a frail force of nature who'd run away from home to be a singer in the music-hall. Granny was old and her audience reduced to one, but her smiling eyes and the gentle remnant of her voice, softly singing those old sentimental songs – *One True Friend*, *Keep Right On To The End Of The Road* – spun magic threads that bound me to music for ever.

Her daughter carried on the singing – at night, to send me to sleep. It didn't work. I listened wide-eared and the bedtime recitals got longer and longer. My mother learnt new songs until one day she just gave up and began reading me stories instead, prose-music.

At school, music was a part of life, beginning with singing and the theory that was to prepare us for learning an instrument. At my second primary school, Yvonne Adair, whose shock of white hair betrayed her as a composer (*Pussy Velvet* and other tuneful works for young people), taught us singing and percussion and we learned instruments ranging from the despised triangle to the much-favoured drums and cymbals and also performed scared solos on dulcimer, xylophone and celesta. Miss Adair once banged down the piano-lid and dismissed us all for „being silly“.

Piano lessons began. Mrs Carr had a white streak down her hair like a badger and led a double life as Zelda Bock, a concert pianist who gave recitals at the Wigmore Hall. We too had to perform, at the close of our annual Sports Day, before friends, teachers and parents, an event that darkened my life for weeks in advance.

The sempiternal singing continued at secondary school, with choir practice (those hymns!) and the school choir itself. We were once invited to perform Britten's *St. Nicholas* and got to know choral music from the inside. Piano



Heaven-storming Annie Fischer

lessons were now governed by Associated Board exams (butterflies, cold stiff shaky hands, full marks for learning by heart, nil marks for sight-reading). Musical Theory transmogrified first into Music (lives of composers – I cried hot tears for the solitary Beethoven – the orchestra, notation) and finally into O-Level Music, with analysis of works (*Dido and Aeneas* by Purcell, Beethoven's *String Quartet op.18, no.6*), composition and history.

We were also taken to Sadler's Wells several times a year, where we listened to greater and lesser operas with varying degrees of interest and seriousness. The nadir was *The Violins of St. Jacques* when we all got the giggles.

Meanwhile, in the outside world, all kinds of records had appeared: Bill Haley, who *Rocked around the Clock*, and Lonnie Donegan, who travelled the *Rock Island Line*; brittle black 78s in cardboard albums that shut with a button – *Carmen*, *Swan Lake* and *Famous Trios*; an LP with the Eiffel Tower and the high brave voice of Piaf; *High Society* and *South Pacific*, whose songs I learnt by heart, without understanding all the words; a record of American military marches, another of English country dances; children's music: Edward Lear's *Nonsense Poems*, sung to the tune of a small guitar, *Peter and the Wolf*, *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*; *The Planets* by Gustav Holst

and *Piano concerto* by Mozart played by Annie Fischer that was so beautiful it made me cry.

As did Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto*, but the Russian was a problem: once I was taken to a concert at the Albert Hall that ended with his *1812 Overture*. When the cannons started going off amid the pealing bells my insides crumpled up in a sickness and shame I couldn't explain.

On one record was an instrumental piece I played over and over again, whose unfamiliar sounds held me in thrall and which I later learned was *Never on Sunday*, by a Greek composer called Manos Hadzidakis... (Many years later I would have a similar revelation with *Canto General* by Mikis Theodorakis. Years later again, I found out the connection between the two...)

In the sixties, like my classmates, I loved the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and listened to the Hit Parade on Sunday night on Wonderful Radio Luxemburg, one ear alert for the approach of parents.

Then, alone, I discovered Bob Dylan; that cracked nasal voice; and the poetry: the prose-music, the rage and the beauty.

And there was music heard live: Proms at the Albert Hall, recitals, opera at the Coliseum; and each Palm Sunday, the Philharmonia's highly serious *St Matthew Passion*. We were asked not to applaud.

Over the years, some concerts stand out like monuments: Edinburgh, August 1968, Usher Hall: the dress rehearsal of Britten's *War Requiem*. The last notes had died away, Giulini stood head bowed and there was total silence; no one applauded, most of us were in tears...

Albert Hall, Proms 1978: Sibelius's *Fifth Symphony*. A revelation; stunned silence then outbursting applause for a young conductor named Simon Rattle. Theatre of Esch, September 1987, an intense evening with Sibelius's *Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Symphonies*...and Rattle and his musicians coming off-stage humming the *Wilhelmus* they'd just played for the Grand Duchess.

Esch, March 1987: Annie Fischer reducing me to tears yet again with her heaven-storming version of Brahms' *Third Sonata*.

And the Theodorakis concerts... and Tatiana Nicolayeva, and Perahia, Pires, Jochum, Buchbinder, Tortelier and the others: the glimpses of something transcendent continue and multiply...

How do people come to love music? I don't know. But if you do, it is for life.