

The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

THE EVOLUTION OF MUSICAL LIVES

Here is a musical fable in two parts for your consideration: The first represents the philosophy of the time-honored past; the second offers a vastly different modern odyssey. The two divergent musical realities co-exist in today's world, and at the end, converge.

You're the proud parent of a child who expresses an interest in learning to play an instrument. Little Suzie has friends who play in the school orchestra, and she wants to spend more time with them, fit in, and have fun, too. So, in discussions with the music teacher at the school, you decide to enroll her in the program and rent a school violin. About a year later, Suzie's interest hasn't flagged and you go the extra mile and buy her a better instrument than the one the school owns. In discussions with the teacher, you determine that Suzie would really benefit from private weekly lessons from a good music teacher outside of school. The violinist-teacher is a professional musician in the local symphony and also teaches at the neighborhood music school. Suzie, it's evident, loves music.

(This is the timeless rite of passage of classical musical training: the archetype of how music education has nurtured adept students for generations. For traditionally minded kids and school music programs, as in the rural environs of the Berkshire hill towns and southern Vermont, this is the path that parents and students still pursue today.)

Back to Suzie, and fast-forward several years. She's reached an intermediate level of performance, and is playing first violin in the high school orchestra. She continues to keep up with those private lessons and increases her daily practice time (which started at 30 minutes; now it's two hours,) augments her involvement with music by going to symphony and chamber music concerts, reads about her favorite musical masterpieces and performers, including the top violinists.

With lots of hard work, Suzie auditions for, and is accepted by Juilliard. Her career path is ordained: she's to become a professional musician herself,

teaching others to perform and love it as she does, and after obtaining her Master of Music degree, has landed a position in the second violin section of a “B” orchestra in the mid-West. She’s happy to perform the standard classical repertory – masterworks of the 18th and 19th centuries, which is the bread and butter repertoire of orchestras.

It’s 25 years later. Still in the same orchestra, she feels trapped. After what seems like an endless succession of performances of works by the “masters,” and sick of a series of conductor despots dictating what to play and how to play it, Suzie wonders, “Is that all there is?”

Consider an alternative path: Justin started on his musical journey when, as a pre-teen, his parents bought him a guitar at the local music store. He soon wanted to form a rock band so he could play with his friends – neighborhood kids he’d met at middle school. He soon gave up the guitar when he heard the spacey sounds a synthesizer could make. He never liked taking regular music lessons with a teacher anyway; couldn’t stick with it. He’d watch a lot of the new bands on MTV and was really impressed with heavy metal, which had exactly the rebellious sound he was looking for. Not long after, he discovered the top ‘90s grunge band – Nirvana, fronted by songwriter-guitarist Kurt Cobain, the glam Gen X arena-rock star. Justin, it’s evident, loves music.

Over the next 15 years, Justin’s morphed from being a singer-songwriter in his own locally known band to focus on his love of music technology and quitting performing altogether. Recording, synthesizer programming and sound design have really captivated him; tech is where he lives. Now in LA, he’s recently done several TV soundtracks and sound design for “The Wire,” “Lost,” and “House,” and is also an artist representative for Yamaha Corporation, programming their high-end synthesizers and music workstations.

Suzie’s right-brain, intuitive skills came in handy when, at Juilliard, Dorothy DeLay coached her. “Now, I want you to play this passage with a more detached spiccato, moving the bow arm barely. And when you approach the next legato passage, I want more of a wider vibrato, until you get to the appoggiaturas, where the portamenti should be emphasized with a continuous slur on the upbow phrase. Remember dear, it’s not about you; be faithful to the composer and play only what’s on the page.”

In his sales pitch last month to the music merchandisers at the semi-annual national convention in Anaheim, Justin, wearing his lapel mic and sporting some serious bling, tapped into his familiar left-brain, analytical tech talk: “This Fuzzbuster patch’s got a tight set of envelope generators, each with 72 breakpoints. The four LFOs can synch to tempo or to ADAT wordclock. The S/PIDF outputs can be routed to 16 channel strips on your virtual mixer, and you can process realtime modulation inputs to create complex nonlinear response curves.”

By now Justin’s seen just about every hardware and software upgrade that manufacturers can stuff into their computer-based instruments. He doesn’t like to admit it, but he’s become jaded by all the innovation, which is starting to ring hollow. He knows there’s more in these boxes than a person – even a techie - can ever hope to learn, much less master.

After hours, in the bar in his hotel adjoining the convention center, he tries to tune out the din of the meandering multitudes, trying to escape to a quiet space for a while, until his pitch early tomorrow. He wonders: “Where did all the music go? Is that all there is?”

Moral: To sustain ardor, one must be in love not only with the thing itself, but also with the idea of the thing itself.

With apologies to Peggy Lee – S.D.

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