

WAN, TEW, THREE, FAW

OUR FAMILY WAS not musical. Ours is not the type of family with an auntie who can vamp out 'Bye Bye Blackbird' and sing along in a high, trembling voice full of swoops and scoops. Our house never echoed with the squawks of amateur violins, or the running up and down of piano scales. One of my grandmothers did have a small grand piano but I never heard her play it. There was no musical instrument in our house until after I'd left home.

A musical family was one in which each child played a different instrument. The Brockmans down in Villa-Manta Street were such a family. Their father played the organ in a church. They all looked intense and tousled, with burning eyes. Our family was plain, fair and muscly. Our parents played golf.

All this silence got too much for me in 1977. I bought a second-hand piano for my eight-year-old daughter. A rock-and-roll bass player who lived in the house taught her a few riffs and she romped away. I was scared of the instrument and never touched it.

By 1980 I had got up the nerve to find a piano teacher for myself. His name was Greg. He was half my age and looked like Dr Dolittle.

He was crazy about Bartok and started me off on 'Mikrokosmos'. I liked this very much but longed to play Bach.

I had been wanting to play Bach ever since I saw Manning Clark take up the piano at fifty and sit stubbornly at the instrument with *The Children's Bach* open in front of him, picking away at it, his ankles crossed under the bench. I bought *The Children's Bach* and read E. Harold Davies' pompous little introduction. 'Bach is never simple,' he wrote, 'but that is one of the best reasons why we should try hard to master him. It is only in overcoming difficulties that any of us can rise to greatness, and that, surely, is what we all want to do.'

Greg began to teach me 'A Song of Contentment', but then we moved house and I had to find another teacher. An old lady called Mrs Beryl T. Arroll took over. Above her piano she had two portraits, one of Schubert, the other of Liszt. She pulled a face when I mentioned 'Mikrokosmos'. John Thompson's method for beginners was more her speed. I limped through pieces with names like 'Runaway River', 'The Scissors Grinder', 'The Mouse's Party', 'The Wigwam'.

My daughter, meanwhile, had begun to learn the cello. Her pieces had dignified titles like 'Sonata in C'. Once again she galloped past me and I ate her dust.

The family Christmas dinner at my sister Marie's place was her idea, but the concert was mine. My motives were not pure. I was afraid of boredom on Christmas Day. I calculated the number of hours to be filled with social obligations: greetings and drinks, forty-five minutes: present-opening and exclamations, twenty minutes: dinner, ninety minutes: digestion and general conversation, several hours, and so on. Even if no clashes occurred between me and my father, the strain of this would be immense.

I said to Marie, 'We should have a concert.' She made no response, being preoccupied with a maintenance problem of the swimming pool. This was October. I let it pass.

Halfway through November Marie rang up. 'What are you and Alice playing at the concert?'

'What concert?'

'It was your idea. The Christmas concert.'

'It was only a joke!'

'You can't say that now. It's all organised. I'm making a list. Owen's sister is a terrific pianist, and her kids play too. They're doing something by Haydn, I think she said. What'll I put down for you?'

'I can hardly play at all. I only learn bubsy stuff.'

'That doesn't matter. What'll you play? It'll be gorgeous.'

'Everyone will laugh at me. I'm hopeless.'

'Of course they won't. Just tell me a title.'

'It's all right for you. You aren't playing anything.'

'No, but I'm organising. I want it all arranged in advance, so the kids' music teachers can help them prepare their pieces. Does Alice want to play in a trio?'

You don't argue with Marie. I may be the eldest, but Marie is the real thing, long-legged and elegant, wears real jewellery, married a doctor, has lived in America, keeps her recipes on an Apple.

I blackmailed Alice into accompanying me on 'Runaway River'. 'Just play the bottom line,' I commanded.

She rolled her eyes but obeyed. We would set ourselves up in the kitchen every evening while dinner was being cooked, and thump and saw away. Alice had to put a rolled-up towel under the cello spike to stop it from slipping on the lino. The weather got hotter and the piano went out of tune and started to jangle and buzz. I timed the piece: approximately twenty seconds.

Meanwhile the other members of the trio were preparing, with their teachers, for the big day. I took Alice out there for a practice. The cousins' music teacher, who called weekly at the house, put the cello part in front of Alice and away she went, bluffing like a trouser, her skinny legs clamped round the half-size Japanese cello, her face set in the fierce concentration of the sight-reader: eyes staring, teeth bared.

Back in our kitchen I plodded on. The daughter of a friend happened to pass through the room one day. She came and stood beside me, watched my struggles, then leaned over and whispered in my ear, 'My mum can play better than you.'

Christmas Day that year dawned a scorcher. Alice felt ill but we set out anyway; my husband with a guitar and an iron determination not

to play it; two of my sisters, one with a saxophone; Alice with her cello and a plastic sick-bowl; and me with John Thompson and a thundering heart.

'La famille Rikiki va au concert,' remarked my husband in his native tongue.

As we drove along Johnston Street, Alice vomited into the bowl. My sisters cried out in disgust and rolled the windows down. My husband pulled in to a closed service station and I got out and emptied the bowl down a gully-trap.

At Marie's there were dozens of relatives, by blood and marriage, running about screaming. Screwed-up paper and ribbons were strewn everywhere. I marvelled once again at the miracle of family resemblance. My family has Cossack legs and yellowish skin; Marie's husband's family a nutcracker jaw and piercing blue eyes.

Marie's children had made splendiferous programs for the concert. The first item was "Runaway River" by Helen and Alice.

Alice was getting a lot of mileage out of the spewing story, but seemed to be in top form. Children in sopping bathers, skin scorched and hair dripping down their backs, tuned up their instruments. Someone was setting up a tape recorder.

'Keep that flaming door shut, you kids,' roared my father, who was born in the Mallee.

When the moment could be delayed no longer, I sat at the piano and Alice set up her cello. I was unnerved by having my back to the audience. I was dripping with sweat. My fingers stuck together and would not move independently; my hands were like two lumps of wood. I stared at the music and saw only black shapes dancing on a grid of lines, meaning nothing. It was the worst moment of my life, worse than a French oral exam. I thought I was going to die of fear.

'And now,' cried Marie from behind me in a cracked, excited voice. 'Helen and Alice will play—"Runaway River"!'.

I sat block-like in the hush of attention.

'Come on,' hissed Alice at my side. 'Count us in.'

Fifth finger left hand, third finger right hand. I found them and put them on the notes. 'One, two, three,' I whispered. It was the softest

piano I had ever heard. It was like playing a piano made of sponge. But some mechanism between brain and fingers was still working all by itself. The cello sang along. I could see my daughter's brow, her sinewy bowing arm, and nothing was going wrong.

By the twelfth bar I was enjoying myself. By the fourteenth I was Glenn Gould, by the sixteenth I was Bach himself. I struck the last note in pride and regret.

There was a silence, then a roar of applause. I stood up and turned to bow, and saw a room full of clapping hands and smiling faces. Marie was standing against the wall wiping her eyes with a huge red serviette; her mascara had run right down her cheeks.

Grown-ups played with children, child with child; piano duets, piano and recorder, violin and flute, the famous trio. In secret lounge rooms, in the kitchens and garages of rock-and-roll houses, in school music lessons, these ten years, an ordinary unmusical family had been doggedly transforming itself into something else.

My husband played the guitar after all and sang one of those melancholy, melodic French songs in three-four time, by Georges Brassens, that can break a heart. My father said it was marvellous and offered to become his manager.

Then Steve sat at the piano, my sister got out her saxophone, and up stood the little ratbag, Adam, Marie's son. His huge teeth were chipped. His hair, matted and greenish with chlorine, shone like flax. He was holding a trumpet.

'Gawd spare me days,' said our father out of the corner of his mouth.

'Ssshhh, Bruce,' whispered our mother.

Marie, her eyes bunged up with crying, rose to make the announcement. 'Steve, Sally and Adam will now present—"Tamouree".'

'Wan, tew, three, faw,' said Steve. The blond boy and his blonde auntie poured forth a flood of brass. Their cheeks were fat with air, their eyes downcast. They leaned back to give the sound room. Their feet beat the rhythm, the boy's bare, the woman's in elegant open-toed shoes. The welkin rang. 'Tamouree' brought the house down.

'Ho, ho, ho!' roared our father.

In the pandemonium, the young trumpeter stood on his head on a cushion with his legs up the wall and played 'Mary Had a Little Lamb'.

Steve and my husband withdrew to a doorway. 'This affair is a bit ridiculous,' said my husband. Steve nodded and smiled and kept his eyes on the ground and his arms folded.

'Dinner is served,' shouted Marie.

'Still on the dole, are you?' said our father to my sister in the stampede to the table. She stopped and turned red.

'I get paid for playing, dad,' she replied.

Our mother said, 'Cut it out, you two,' and put herself between them.

'Oh no,' shouted Marie's husband. 'The tape recorder wasn't working.'

'Just as well,' said our father. 'Once is enough, don't you reckon?' He put on a paper crown, adjusted his glasses, and applied his thumbs to a champagne cork.



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