



Editorial

Music Lessons

By Benjamin Bolden

Stuart McLean has made his career as an author and CBC broadcaster by offering up quintessential Canadiana. His humorous and often poignant stories have, for some years, engaged audiences from coast to coast to coast.

In their work, artists are purported to reflect society. With this in mind, I was particularly intrigued to recently tune in to McLean reading the story, "Music Lessons" on his popular CBC radio show, *The Vinyl Café*. I wondered: What do Canadians (from the perspective of this particular bard, in any case) have to say about music education?

The narrative follows Morley as she negotiates how best to initiate her son, Sam, into the world of piano lessons. She has two options as far as teachers are concerned. Brian Merriman will only take Sam on as a student if he attends music camp to get his Grade One piano first. The other teacher, Ray Spinella, will take him as he is.

Morley turns to her sister-in-law for advice. Annie is a professional violinist, and has been through the music lesson ringer.

Growing up in Nova Scotia, Annie had a father who loved music with a passion. Despite having "no sense of rhythm and a very unusual sense of pitch" (p. 73), Charlie would host musical get-togethers for anyone who could play something. They had a wonderful time.

Annie showed musical promise from a young age. She began with piano and

continued on with violin right through a performance degree at McGill University. When she graduated, she got a job playing with a prestigious string quartet. But "...she felt incomplete. She wasn't having fun. Everyone was so intense. And earnest. Annie had thought that when she got out of school playing music would be fun again" (p. 77).

Annie, with considerable trepidation, decided to go further. After a gruelling and stressful audition process, she was taken on as the protégé of the famous (fictional) New York concert violinist Avi Stovman:

Once, while she was warming up, Annie played a reel, and Stovman screamed at her. Don't play like that in here, he said. The accompanist told Annie Stovman was harder on her than any of his other pupils. That made her happy. She stayed two years. (p. 81)

Annie's work with Stovman paid off; she was hired by the Boston Symphony. "But life with the orchestra didn't seem to suit Annie" (p. 81). The repertoire was repetitive and uninteresting. Salaries were low and opportunities were few. Discontent amongst the orchestra players was rife, bubbling over into petty infighting. Annie's stand partner "had actually complained to the conductor that she was tired of carrying Annie, that Annie always played off tempo" (p. 82).

When Annie quit, and moved back to Nova Scotia, "Stovman was furious. He wrote her a blistering three-page letter. 'What are you trying to do to me?' he

wrote (p. 82). Annie signed on with Symphony Nova Scotia and joined a Celtic group. "Suddenly music was fun again" (p. 82).

Once Annie has shared all this, Morley explains her dilemma: her uncertainty about having Sam learn piano with the laid-back Spinella versus the demanding Merriman. Annie responds directly: "Brian Merriman is a prissy snob" (p. 82).

So Morley sends her son Sam for lessons with Ray Spinella. One lesson, she asks if she can stay and watch.

Ray and Sam were soon utterly absorbed by the music. Morley noticed that Ray obviously wasn't following a method. And he wasn't teaching the Grade One syllabus. At the end of the lesson Ray had Sam make up a tune, then he took a trumpet off the top of the piano, stood beside her son and began to play along. Sam smiled at his teacher. Ray nodded and they both kept going. (p. 83)

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As I listened to this story on my car radio, I recognized many familiar themes— aspects and archetypes of music making and learning that seem to pervade the anecdotes, literature, and experiences that I have heard, read, and lived. Stuart McLean duly offers up the well-meaning but uncertain parent, convinced of the value of a music education, but aware and concerned about avoiding the pitfalls and providing the 'right' kinds of experiences. There is the disconcerting notion of music learning as a vehicle to fulfil some-

the prelude

editorial

one else's dreams. McLean identifies the apprentice who tolerates—perhaps even craves, and revels in—music abuse. There is the tyrannical teacher who sees pupils as potential musical offspring—to be sent forth as well-trained and disciplined reflections and representations of himself, and as the embodiment of his own vision of what music is and should be. In contrast, the teacher who eschews the confines of traditional methods, makes space for creativity, and supports personal expression. The story strongly suggests that 'working' at music takes the fun out of it, illustrated by the representation of professional classical music as a world full of stress, fraught relationships, and discontent. Community music—or kitchen music—on the other hand, may not be as refined, but tends to be a lot more enjoyable.

This is the legacy that we music educators have inherited. This is our world—or, to be more precise, one author's perception of it. As I reflect on the tale I find much that echoes my own experiences, and so rings true. However, I also find much that is frustratingly oversimplified, complexities ironed smooth for the sake of an easily digestible yarn. But I am always keen to hear what people have to say about music education (and in my experience there are precious few who don't have something to say) because hearing diverse views inevitably both supports and challenges

my own, and thereby helps to keep my thinking fresh. It seems there is always something valuable to be taken from a new perspective, and what I take from McLean's commentary are the perceived dichotomies. That music education is either this or that—creative or constrained, fun or work, classical or kitchen. I believe, in fact, that such stark polarity very rarely exists. But I also think I understand why the perception is there. And I welcome the opportunity to build understanding amongst those I learn with that music education does not have to be positioned at either one end of any given spectrum or the other—that music teaching and learning can and should be ever so much richer than a world of either/or.

I also find myself wondering what you, my colleagues, might see or hear in this story. I wonder what you might take away, or add. Does this story resonate with you? Do you see yourself, or your students, or teachers, or parents, or children? CME

Please respond through the ether to: bbolden@uvic.ca

Reference

McLean, S. (1998). *Home from the Vinyl Café*. Toronto: Viking.

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