

Other People's Music

by **Cynthia Aarons**

To the backdrop of Regan's echoing words *Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall*—I took piano lessons. When no one was looking, my favorite thing to play instead of practicing was Animal from *Sesame Street* (if he played piano) and Don Music, the frustrated composer. I dramatized Don Music's cries when he couldn't remember the next note and the screeches of elation when he played like a concert pianist. Or I played "Thunderstorm," every novice's best number. I started with a gentle rain tickling the upper register of the highest octaves, then as "Animal," cascading down into a violent, formidable nightmare of the booming keys, a roar that would be the perfect soundtrack to any mansion murder. It was in these moments that I was a messenger of a distant music that I alone was privileged to hear and transmit. Eighty-eight keys produce a million variations of seven notes. I could feel the power of the keys stretched out before me, realizing that any melody could be played by any ambidextrous child. The piano teaches children that anything in the world is possible.

Miss V was my piano teacher. She was also the vocal music director of three different grade schools and one junior high. Miss V had no eyebrows. She drew them on with an oily brown make-up pencil, the thick kind that leaves a permanent clown upside down smile over each eye. Her olive tanned forehead was always smeared in a glossy sheen. Her big glasses, the plastic kind the 80s were known for, a direct revolt against the librarian half-glasses of the 1950s and 60s, magnified her eyes and reflected her face in the Coke bottle corners. Miss V had a block tummy, like a book hidden under her shirt, that fell over the waistline with an even roll all the way around. It looked like the door to a dumbwaiter that if open would reveal afternoon treats: Battenberg cakes and cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off and a pot of steaming tea, the tall slender silver kind, spouting upward with the elegance of a

giraffe's head. It was not a good look. I noted her odd shape at seven am every other day of the week as I arrived for choir practice. I sat sleepily in the front row of the sopranos, my stomach full of scrambled eggs and toast, and I silently noted, without fully acknowledging the significance to myself, all the beauty atrocities I would never commit as an adult. I would never become her.

My piano lessons took place at Miss V's house, a 70s yellow brick ranch with a picture window looking out on a yard that didn't get enough sun. The too soft ground seemed always to be covered by wet leaves and hollowed out branches from the one tree in the center of her yard. It, along with the other trees in the neighborhood, created a tunnel over the shady one-lane street. Her tree had a tire swing tied to its sturdiest branch, something I never understood because she had no children. Every time I walked up the path to her front door I wondered about it—an unspoken question in the back of my mind—did the former owners put it there, or did she? And who was it for? Did Miss V look at it from her picture window and dream of children who might one day play on it? Did the neighbors' children use it? Nieces and nephews? Or did it twist in the gentle wind every summer, unoccupied by children or laughter, still full of autumn leaves and April rainwater?

In the summer, Miss V kept the front door open with the screen door closed to let in the cool breezes that the shady trees of her neighborhood created. In the Midwest, the humidity could be eighty percent or higher, which meant 85 felt like 105, and none of us had air conditioning. So the only things that made getting through the summer bearable were screen doors and screen windows at opposite ends of the house that created a cross breeze along with Oster fans—rotating models angled to blow on your face, and large square ones that sat inside windows to suck out the hot air. As I walked up Miss V's path, feeling sweat underneath my clothes and the oppressive heat on my neck, I encountered the most wonderful thing in the world: piano music coming through an open window. At first, I couldn't tell if it was Joe or Miss V. Joe was two years older (and my neighbor) and a lot better at the piano than I was (his Catholic parents made him practice). But soon I could tell the difference. Miss V was extraordinary—the technical precision was unparalleled. Her man-like, calloused fingers, one or more

usually wrapped in a Band-aid from playing so much, and her square powerful hands hit every note without a mistake, ever.

Over time, I heard something else during my weekly visits that I couldn't explain at first. By the next summer, I walked up to her screen door with a new sense of dread, a gnawing, tugging pain in my stomach, and each step closer to her was an involuntary act that I recognized as self-sabotage. Although Miss V's playing was technically accurate, including the crescendos and sudden shifts to *piano legato*—there was absolutely no feeling in her playing. I can't call it music now. Even at that age, my pre-pubescent, still innocent, naive wondering self knew that Miss V's playing was cold, devoid of emotion and color. I vowed never to let my music become like hers. I vowed I would never become like her.

As a family friend, Miss V shared personal information with my mother. I remember the day my mother got off the phone with someone talking about Miss V and "her condition." She hung up the receiver attached to the wall next to the kitchen door, its curly cord that could uncurl and stretch through the dining room to the entrance of the living room or all the way to the stove if necessary, recoiling against the wall as she returned the handset to its home. With a cluck in her throat—the one that meant, "Isn't it a shame?"—Mom said she hoped Miss V would recuperate soon, and she declared she would make a casserole for Miss V.

The casserole: an invention that probably originated in the 1930s but really gained traction in the 1980s: egg noodles from a plastic bag, a glob of Cream of Chicken soup, a glob of Cream of Celery soup, a quarter of a bell pepper, a small onion, and bam you have a meal that can feed 500 people.

Etiquette in small Midwestern towns was rigidly and happily adhered to. Death? A casserole. Bridal shower? A casserole. Baby shower? Potluck? Any party, including major holidays? Casserole! You switched it up with a different canned meat or something festive on top like dried onion rings. You just had to label your pan with a piece of masking tape and a permanent marker. Except for Vera K's casseroles and my mom's, which actually tasted good, the rule for the casserole beneficiary was to store

the casseroles in a deep freeze, the one in the cellar shaped like a coffin, packed with ice cream, deer meat, and twenty-five cent plastic Corelle containers of frozen corn waiting for a tornado to take off the roof. After a polite month, the beneficiary was allowed to thaw a casserole, feed it to the dog (or put it on the burn pile for the neighborhood strays), and give back the pan. If you gave back the pan too soon, everyone would know what you did. If you waited longer than six months, it meant you stole their pan. Either way, you would no longer receive casseroles, which you might appreciate but only at the cost of not being liked, which in a small town could be unrecoverable. These and other rules I learned as a child without anyone explaining them to me. I learned that the gift of a casserole accompanied the most serious events of life, especially those we did not talk about in detail in the Midwest, if at all.

Mom seemed particularly troubled as she stood next to the phone. Because Miss V was my piano teacher, I pressed my mother that day, but she wouldn't tell me, a child, what was wrong. I worried Miss V had cancer. I worried someone I knew would die. My mother assured me she wouldn't die, but it was clear the condition was as big as death, perhaps bigger, and I was not allowed to go to the hospital. Days later, I pressed my mother again. In a moment of weakness my mother revealed that Miss V had a "female condition." Amazingly, the tone of voice let me know she was referring to the part of the body that we truly never, ever talked about, something not even vaguely alluded to on TV except in tampon commercials. Many years later, I brought it up again. Mom shared that Miss V had had a hysterectomy, and visiting her at the hospital on the day of the "casserole phone call" was an ex-boyfriend, a well-respected music director from the next town who had jilted Miss V at the altar years before!

This was high drama indeed. And it was death. A death to possibilities, to something I could not put into words until now because it was so horrible and frightening to say out loud. Some people didn't get to have children. Or partners. Or happiness. My mother let me know without saying anything that this was one of the worst things that could happen to a woman. And I took Miss V's hysterectomy to be a stain connected to her singleness, to her not being chosen. It seemed to explain her music, too, the dead, rigid, robotic approach to the keys. Again, I decided I would never become like her.

During piano lessons and choir practice, even though I didn't know exactly what was wrong, I looked for signs of Miss V's "change." But I couldn't see anything wrong with her. She was always upbeat and projected her voice as though performing a solo in Carnegie Hall. Her energy frightened me. She seemed to lunge into life a bit too enthusiastically, a bit too hyper. I took piano lessons from her for three years. But when I was eleven, she told me I had to trim my fingernails. I wanted to have sexy fingernails, as sexy as an eleven-year-old can have. I knew feminine nails were long and had learned from a teen magazine how to push back the cuticles with a stick and apply a base coat, two color coats, and the final clear coat without getting polish outside the nail. But Miss V said my nails were too long and were "impairing" my ability to play properly. She and I fought over how I held my hands over the keys, and she wanted me to study the 3 B's (Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms). At a younger age I loved the Classics, but in my pre-teen years, I wanted to play Billy Joel. I wanted to jump on the keyboard and then onto the couch singing, *This is My Life! (Go ahead with your own life—leave me alone!)*

Miss V had dreams of making me her protégé. She wanted to "expand my repertoire" and increase "my range." When I learned of her plan to live vicariously through my life as a professional pianist, or at least as a fourth place winner at State recitals, I panicked. And for one of the few times in my life, I stood up for myself. I told my mother I was quitting piano. I stopped pretending to practice and really started to sound horrible. Miss V and I both knew it was a sham. My mother told me, *You will regret this for the rest of your life.* She urged me to think it over for a couple of months. But after a while she let me quit. I quit the choir also to avoid eye contact, to avoid the fact that Miss V embarrassed me and frightened me, and to avoid admitting to myself that I missed the piano.

I could not take piano lessons from a different teacher because in a small town Miss V would find out. It would be an insult I would never commit. So I practiced on my own and even improved quite a lot in the next years, but without technical guidance, I peaked early and stayed there. I secretly longed for music. I would play Eric Satie and Debussy with passion, as long as no one else was in the house. I could be the faint heart of someone who had loved and lost or the fiery self-made woman who led a

Bohemian life that caused men to fall at her feet. I mourned over Apartheid, humanitarian crises in Somalia, and homelessness. I played with a deep conviction that I could be anything, do anything, and that I could save the world.

Now I have lived in San Francisco for more than ten years. Passionate types are a dime a dozen here, and some actually save the world. I never went to South Africa to end Apartheid, didn't stick with the homeless ministry I joined when I first moved, and now work two jobs, nearly to my own death, and I am, just like Miss V, single and childless. I am probably five years older than Miss V was when she had her hysterectomy, but unlike Miss V, I never had a man value me enough—if even in a moment of reckless abandon—to offer to meet me at the altar. I've contemplated adopting through Foster Care and becoming a single parent, but I have come to accept that at least for now I cannot do it alone, not financially, not logistically, not emotionally.

The world I inherited from Women's Liberation (though I am thankful for it overall) and Steve Jobs is one in which I have more education than my parents and older siblings, with fewer job opportunities—yet, I'm supposed to be successful in a profession and have kids (through IVF) and postpone marriage indefinitely if not forever because if necessary I can do it alone. We're supposed to work all the time wherever we are with all our documents in a cloud, readable on a tablet as thin as a fifty-cent piece ... on a date, in transit, even at the top of small mountains looking out at the vast world below ... the Me Generation turned iPhone turned *a thousand points of light* all converging in my kitchen from all my devices, the lines between work and the personal erased as quickly as a Venmo Smartphone kiss.

When I go home, an empty hallway table greets me where plants once sat until they wilted in shadows, leaving a blank gray wall. I binge watch Netflix and eat slices of cheese pizza for dinner. Is there someone out there with the same ache I have watching the entire oeuvre of *Friends*? Are there others reaching out to the rest of our X generation/Ancient-Millennials, especially those still single, unwilling to use online dating because it's too much like ordering toilet paper on Amazon? Perhaps Netflix will connect us, given that it knows more about our daily lives than eharmony ever could—

the unvarnished, raw pain of loneliness recorded on our Watch List cue, the muted shades of TV light dancing on our faces as it changes from scene to scene to blackout.

And what about the dream of saving the world? As a community college instructor, I honestly don't think anything could shock me—I've taught a Lost Boy who witnessed his father being macheted while his village burned down, a twenty-year old mother I took to a women's shelter, a boy whose stomach was eviscerated by an IED in Iraq, a woman who witnessed her uncle executed in the street during the Cultural Revolution, a woman who escaped her violent husband by jumping off the ledge of a building, and countless students with precarious financial and immigration statuses.

I taught all of them how to use a comma, and I tried to give them hope. But I have not corrected the wrongs done to them and cannot undo the trajectory of trauma and misfortune. In the endless cycle of trying to make enough money to pay the always increasing rent in San Francisco, meet the needs of overcrowded classrooms, and complete ridiculous amounts of committee work, I can't fit saving the world into my Google calendar.

Is there a man out there who is tired of this treadmill, too, whose B12 shots are no longer working?—*Stop the Madness!* Is he unavailable because he is living in a biodome saving icebergs in Antarctica or trekking solo on foot in Nepal, knowing that I am so special he will have to look in the most remote place on earth? Or is all the evidence pointing to the end of a fantasy that kept me alive through the darkest times? Or perhaps the darkest times are yet to come. What is the next delusional hope to pull me through?

In reality, I never could have been a concert pianist. My hands are too small. I can barely reach an octave, and so a lot of the more complex works are just physically too hard. And frankly, I never wanted to be the kind of person who plays other people's music. But my mother's voice is right there, *You will regret this for the rest of your life*. She was right. My heart cries out every day for music. For the past two years, I haven't been able to listen to music of any kind because the melodies make my cold life seem so pathetic in comparison. Today I can listen to the radio occasionally, but I find myself listening to the news and traffic reports more and more often.

Now I see Miss V's empty swing. I can see her at the window, and I feel sure a woman who devoted her life to bringing music to children probably wanted some of her own. Yes, I'm certain she imagined her own children playing on the swing and a husband to watch through the window with her. I'm sure she felt trapped in our little community—where would she have possibly met eligible men there at her age? (I can't even find one suitable man in this great world-famous city of romance!)

I see myself walking up the path, the inevitable steps to my own tragedy, as she played inside her front living room, pounding the notes, getting them right, doing them justice, that cold, lifeless shell. And now, I finally understand her.

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