

The Piano Lessons

Cecilia Manguerra Brainard

Imagine my parents sitting on the porch swing, catching the late afternoon breeze while the gardener swept the lawn. My sister and I played on the teeter totter, tipping back and forth, bickering and giggling, still in our blue and white school uniforms. I was six; she was ten. Our two older siblings are not in this picture; they were off with their friends or in their rooms. My father's mind was probably on the construction of our house that he was completing. My mother could have been thinking of the new piano situated in the room at the foot of the stairs, adjacent to the living room. Mama had been a music major at the University of the Philippines where she met my father, an engineering professor who played the violin.

"I think Nene and Baby should take piano lessons," Mama said.

My father, startled from his thoughts of cement and gravel, railings and posts, glanced at us and remembered when he and his older brother were younger than us and already studying the violin. "Where can they take lessons?" he asked.

Mama, who had already considered the matter before this conversation, said, "Bokoy will be good to start with."

"Why not enroll them with Pilar at Battig?"

"Pilar's expensive. The children need the basics. I could teach them myself but I'm too busy. Besides, it's difficult to teach your own children."

And with that, the decision was made that my sister (Nene) and I

would study piano with a man named Bokoy. I no longer remember with clarity those piano days. Perhaps we went three times a week, after school and on Saturdays. Perhaps I studied for a year or two. This period of my life – three years before my father died – was chaotic, and in my mind events blur or run together. Emotionally however, I feel the demarcation between the periods of Before-my-father-died and After-my-father-died. Before-my-father-died was a happy, fanciful time of my life. After-my-father-died was a dark and grim period. It took some time before I got over the sad stage and learned to be happy and productive.

Before-my-father-died, Papa drove us downtown for our piano lessons. He owned a red jeep and a Buick, and even though we had a driver, my father enjoyed driving us to and from school and other places. He favored the red jeep and so I imagine my sister and I sitting in the back of it, as my father pulled away from our Spanish-style house, away from the foothills, toward the sea where the downtown area was. It was the early 1950s. At the age of six I looked at the houses in ruin, at the rubble, at the pockmarked roads, without really understanding that Cebu was still rebuilding, still recovering from the Second World War that had sent my parents and my older siblings to the hinterlands of Mindanao where my father had joined the guerrilla movement. Downtown Cebu in particular had been bombed during Liberation when the Americans took back Cebu from the Japanese. Historic houses and buildings were destroyed, turning the area into a blight. But these images of destruction were part of my geography, which I accepted as normal.

After leaving the Capitol area, driving down Jones Avenue and through narrow winding streets, my father brought us to the house of our teacher, a slender gangly man, in his late twenties or early thirties. We had lessons on an upright piano in the living room of his family home. I have no recollection if our piano teacher was strict or kind. What I recall vividly was walking into his living room one day and finding him reclining on the sofa with his feet over the piano, and his toes ran over the keys, playing music. I had a difficult time training my fingers to stretch and strike the keys in the right way, and here was a man who could use his toes to play the piano – it was quite a memorable sight.

Bokoy taught us how to read notes and how to play simple tunes. Since I was a fairly diligent student, I am sure I practiced on our upright.

On this same piano, my mother used to play classical music with such vigor as to shake the overhead chandelier so the crystal prisms quivered and sparkled.

Some evenings my parents played together: she on the piano, he on the violin. We four children sat in the living room to watch and listen. My father would tune his violin and warm up. He would make the violin skip in a happy bouncy way; sometimes he would make it sound mournful. My mother needed little warming up. She was like that in real life; my mother rarely hesitated, she was always ready to go. My mother's music was much louder, much more energetic, sometimes drowning out my father's sweeter and calmer sounds. Those were wonderful times, those home concerts – nights full of magic, brimming with sweet family ties.

Bokoy organized a piano recital for his students. He rented an auditorium that was filled with proud parents and relatives. I wore a blue dress with puffed sleeves and smocking on the bodice. There were around a dozen students, and I waited my turn in the back stage. When my name was called I walked out and scrambled up on the piano stool, my feet dangling and not touching the floor. I don't recall any mishap as I played "Skating on the Lake" and "Volga Boat Song." When I finished, I hopped off the stool, faced the audience and curtsied. They clapped and I walked off stage to give way to another student. The recital was altogether uneventful.

There was only one piano recital. I suspect my sister and I became lazy about going to piano practices. "The girls are not that interested in piano," my mother may have confessed to my father. "It's getting harder to get them to go to Bokoy."

Remembering the uninspired music we did on the piano, my father may have said, "They're busy with homework. The Belgian nuns are strict."

And my mother, realizing the hard work involved to get anywhere with music – work she had done, and look where she found herself in – a housewife with four children, dabbling with a buy-and-sell business, said, "All right then." And they let the matter go.

In fact, my sister and I were not completely devoid of any musical gifts. Not too long after the piano lessons, my older sister took singing, which didn't last either. In high school and college, I played the guitar, not magnificently, but I could strum a few folksongs. My sister took classical

guitar when she was in Spain and she taught me a few pieces. But the piano was thrust aside. In fact our piano became silent after my father died. It turned into a piece of furniture displaying on its top a couple of framed sepia-colored photos of my mother and father.

A few years before my mother died – and this was decades after the piano lessons – the same piano we had downstairs was moved to her room upstairs. By this time, Mama’s hands had become stiff. Once during a terrible typhoon, she had tried to close a window and the wind had slammed it shut over her hand, leaving two of her fingers with a permanent kink, a deformation that made playing the piano difficult. But in her old age, Mama could still play a few pieces, and she loved to talk of her past. She started studying the piano at the age of three, she said, missing precious playtime or the luxury of sleeping in because of piano practices and lessons. This was at St. Catherine’s in Carcar, Cebu. “I was just a little girl,” she said, with a coy expression; and if she were sitting on her bed, she would kick her feet back and forth, like a child.

When she later attended St. Scholastica’s College in Manila because of its famed music program, it was the same thing – practice, practice, and practice. My mother added that the German nuns there were very strict; for instance, they insisted she eat all the (dreaded) potatoes from her plate. Not a scrap of food could be left. She was not fond of their meals and looked forward to her father’s visit. “He would bring Jacob’s crackers and English candies,” she said, her eyes lighting up from the memory.

From St. Scholastica’s, Mama went on to the University of the Philippines to major in Music. There she met my father, a professor in Engineering, a widower thirteen years her senior. My mother used to play basketball at the university, and the story goes that one day she fell and my father helped her. I imagine her in baggy bloomers sprawled on the gym floor, her companions in a dither, and the engineering professor walking over and taking charge. That was the beginning of their love story, one that included a dramatic elopement on an airplane because my grandfather disapproved of my father. The fact was that my grandfather turned away all his daughters’ suitors, so much so that my oldest aunt had to finally put her foot down and marry off her younger sisters against the wishes of their father. In my mother’s case, my father picked her up

in Cebu and brought her by plane to another island where the wedding party was waiting.

Referring to her early morning piano practices, Mama in her old age reminisced: “For the first time I could sleep in when I was married.” She added, with a giggle, “I was really lazy.”

My parents settled in Manila where my father taught. Their two children were born before World War II broke out in 1941 and they had to flee Manila for guerrilla life in Mindanao. Between 1941 until the end of the war in 1945, they did not play the piano nor violin. For several years after the war, there was no time for music either. The afternoon they sat out on the patio swing and discussed piano lessons may have signaled the time to put the War behind. It was time to fill their lives with music again.