

Louder, Please

The small package came addressed to Daniel Eakins in his father's rapid printing, to which his own handwriting had become annoyingly similar. But the contents of the padded envelope, a letter wrapped around a little audio cassette, were from his mother. His mother's writing, frill-free and stylish when she was young, was starting to look like her own mother's. Just a bit of a tremor, and the letters were closer together, a sign that she was writing a little slower. "Bob made me do this," her note said. "He's a big fan. Enjoy." Daniel didn't know when his mother had started to say "Enjoy." It was one of those east coast language grafts she would have disapproved of when he was growing up.

The cassette was a custom job with a black and white picture, the near-glamour shot of his mother in her thirties, under the clear plastic. Daniel turned the case over and read "Now and then. Margaret Eakins Plays the Favorites," on the back. He turned the cassette over again to look at the picture. She really had been pretty, but the photographer, a family friend was one of very few to capture her looks, and he had

done it on a bet to show off his skills. The picture of Margaret had been shrunk to fit the dimensions of the cassette, losing most of the impact of the original.

Daniel's wife had finished sorting the rest of the mail, and she now sidled in close to see what Daniel had been sent. "It's Mother playing the piano." Daniel said. "Bob made it."

"Oh! What a wonderful thing to do!" She took it from his hand to admire. "Play it!"

Rebecca's enthusiasm was already a notch, maybe two notches ahead of Daniel's, and Daniel knew why. First, she was deeply fond of her mother-in-law. And then she knew that there was a good chance Daniel had already discounted the gift since it was from his not-quite-brother-in-law who was not-quite married to Daniel's only sister, and Daniel pretty much thought Bob was an idiot. Daniel was very likely to take against the gift just because of that.

"Play it," she said again, handing him the recording.

"I will," Daniel said, making no move toward the sound system. "Play it now," she said.

Daniel opened the cupboard that kept the black Japanese techno-boxes out of sight when they were not in use, which was most of the time. Daniel and Rebecca's tastes in music were not particularly out of sync, but Rebecca's small family had conducted their lives in considerably greater silence than Daniel's, and she had brought that assumption of silence with her to their marriage. And Daniel had, over the years, come to value quiet. The tape deck, bought mostly for their daughters who thought nothing of violating copyright laws, wantonly duplicating copies of copies of the group of the moment, always presented problems for Daniel. There were two gizmos side by side to

facilitate dubbing (manufacturers didn't seem to care any more about copyright than Daniel's daughters) and Daniel often stuck the cassette in the wrong one. He got it right this time, though, and, after a few seconds of hiss, the sound of his Mother playing "Night and Day" started up through the speakers, thin and clearly not from a sound studio, but unmistakably his mother.

The Eakinses stood there together for the length of the Porter piece, a song Margaret nearly always played when she sat down for a set. When it was over Daniel punched the stop button. "Oh, don't stop!" said Rebecca. "It's wonderful."

But it wasn't. Not as far as Daniel was concerned. Daniel wasn't even sure that it was wonderful for Rebecca. She had her own mother who had her own piano and her own repertoire. "Well, I think it's lovely," she said, warning Daniel that she didn't want to hear anything grumpy or ungracious.

"I'm not sure I'm ready for it," Daniel said.

"Well, I think it was really nice of Bob. I want to hear the whole thing when you are ready." She went back into the kitchen, leaving a whiff of disapproval in the air, solidifying the melancholy that had settled on her husband with the opening notes. And he was sorry.

But it wasn't wonderful. It wasn't even right. It was wrong. The sound was all wrong. He stood in the afternoon gloom of the dining room and tried to remember the right sound.

The right sound was big. Enormous. And no amount of electronic wizardry was going to make it right. It couldn't. For Daniel, you had to be right there at the keys. And young.

When Daniel was a boy, too young for school, but old enough to walk around and want things, what he wanted as often as anything was for his mother to play the piano. You didn't have to ask her twice. You didn't really have to ask her. Margaret was not only a pretty good pianist, but she loved to play. Not to perform, although she liked that well enough. But to play. Never a talented homemaker, Daniel's mother battled her way through the absolutely inescapable chores of the weekday until she had gotten lunch down whoever was there and then, possibly before Daniel's father had turned out of the driveway on his way back to work, she had her apron off and had hurried to the piano.

Daniel and his younger brother followed her, almost at a trot on their short legs, and took seats to either side of her, Daniel to the right, the better seat, Edwin to the left, his thumb in his mouth. And Margaret would play.

In no particular order - or some order that made sense to her that day - she would reel off a widely, weirdly varied string of pieces. Jerome Kern, Bach, Cole Porter, Chopin, Richard Rogers, Grieg, Irving Berlin, Liszt, John Jacob Niles, Arthur Sullivan, Stephen Foster. At their age, the playlist presented no problem to the boys. She would sing along with the show tunes in a competent but untrained alto, the words meaningless to Daniel who would grow to detest most lyrics as an adult. But most of the time she concentrated on the keyboard. And if she would stop, Daniel, glued to her side like a housecat, would tell her to play more. Edwin, half-crazed with sleep, drool leaking around the thumb, would look up in agreement, and she would start back in.

She wasn't just good, she was strong. In later years Daniel and Rebecca would agree that Daniel's mother was maddeningly slow around the kitchen. Every egg cracked looked like the first time, every dust cloth suffered for want of an operator's manual. But

the piano was a different story. At the piano she was as strong and as sure of herself as a big league shortstop. And loud.

Christ, it was lovely. Margaret was a small woman, but those slim wrists and little square hands got a sound out of the five foot grand that penetrated the bones in Daniel's body and rattled the chipped Limoges pieces in the corner cupboard, creating in the boy a permanent need to be not just around music but inside it, where noise was powerful and where the big chords blanked out every other sensation. Those early afternoons doomed him to disappointment in later life when there was no way to replicate the sensation. Which was to say, almost forever. Only the sound of a large and practiced congregation singing bellicose and eventually banned protestant anthems or opera from the overpriced seats ever came close to the power of piano strings at a range of twenty-four inches.

Daniel looked at the play list Bob had tucked in. He must have had Daniel's sister to do the typing and the spelling. And the Chopin Polonaise was there. For a moment Daniel was tempted to fast forward and play it. But he didn't. He could remember it better than Bob could capture it on tape. A crazy blitz of big, big sound, requiring a lot of leaning in and manhandling the full keyboard, and played from memory. Margaret could lean back and look around for Cole Porter, but she needed to watch the keys like crazy for Chopin. The boys had to look out for their safety, bobbing and weaving under her elbows. It was more than exhilarating, it was overpowering.

Every now and then Daniel would try to talk her into playing the Polonaise a second time, but she never did. Maybe she was whipped by the physical requirement, but more likely she had moved on in her head. She would start into something else and, since there was nothing she played that was disagreeable or unwanted, Daniel accepted the decision. Still, he

would have been perfectly happy to have that piece three or four times.

The private concerts usually ended with Edwin, down by the bass notes, slumping into Margaret's lap or slipping off the end of the bench to try to sleep on the floor, and Margaret would have to pick him up and carry him off to put him down for a nap. Daniel would stay on his end of the bench on the chance that Margaret would resume the music, but she never did. Edwin, who burned himself out every two or three hours with intense physical activity and the private war with the world he would carry into adulthood, needed his sleep, and Margaret needed the rest from his demands even more than she needed the music. It pissed Daniel off, but there was nothing to be done other than to torture Edwin when he was awake.

As often as not, Margaret would put herself down for a rest, with orders to Daniel to lie down. But Daniel wasn't a napper. Within minutes he would be over the bedrail and out of the bedroom to fool around in the quiet of the afternoon. As often as not he would get to the piano bench and lift the lid to look at the sheet music and think about it, sifting through the pop songs, staring at the odd portraits of singers and composers, stopping invariably at the Chopin book to wonder what was the connection between Chopin's tailcoat and the music inside the book. He would open the pages for a clue, but there were no pictures, just millions and millions of black notes.

Daniel found the button that sprung the cassette from its cradle in the deck, pulled out the tape, and, after a couple of false starts, tucked the tape back in its box and shut the lid. The portrait of his mother was an enigmatic and unhelpful as the picture of Chopin. She still played the piano for herself. It was rare for him to go home and not hear her. But it was different. There was no room for him on the bench, and the grand had been replaced years ago by an upright that freed up badly needed space but sounded, to

Daniel's ears, anemic. Unfamiliar pieces had worked their way into the repertoire in the decades of his absent adulthood, pieces he didn't really want to hear. And in her eighties she no longer had the strength to hammer the big numbers. Once in a while she would repeat a song she had played moments before.

Daniel put the cassette away, well back in the black hole behind the amplifier, closed the cupboard doors, and went to the phone to call home and tell his Mother how much he had enjoyed it.

Albert Pyle