

Musical Mismatches

When I was in 3rd grade at the Kapowsin (WA) Grade School, there was a music program which equipped our entire class with “Flutophone” instruments. These were white plastic kinda-sorta- recorders. I’m pleased to find that they still exist.



I practiced at home enough to be able to play My Bonnie or some such tune, and we had class music lessons once or twice a week when the whole class played in unison. That is, we all played at the same *time*; there was very little unison of pitch or tempo, in fact we made an awful racket and I’m sure the teacher suffered agonies.

While I can still remember the plastic odor of the flutophone and the feel of the raised rings around its stops, its sound didn’t please me solo, never mind the twittering cacophony of the class ensemble.

A year or two later occurred a misunderstanding that may have changed my life. I don’t remember the circumstances exactly. It would have been my fifth or possibly sixth grade—at that time we didn’t have Junior High; we were in grade school through Seventh, then to a four year High—but the music program was branching out to real instruments.

I remember waiting in a long line as each student was asked which of the available instruments they wanted to play. What I wanted was the clarinet. Maybe I’d seen Benny Goodman on television? Problem was, I didn’t know its name, or couldn’t recall it at the moment. All I could come up with was “flute” so the person dealing out instruments held out this silver thing and mimicked playing, holding it sideways and blowing across the end in what seemed a futile and foolish posture. This complete mismatch from what I’d pictured, and my own frustration and tongue-tied inability to actually say what I wanted, ended up with my not being assigned anything. They had to move the line along.

Some time in those pre-pubescent years my mother tried to keep me to piano lessons. In hindsight, the mismatch here was a lack of models. The only music I heard regularly was church music, hymns sung to, as it happened, my mother’s workmanlike piano accompaniment. Yes, there was television, and I enjoyed Perry Como and Dean Martin and Rosemary Clooney, but the only pianist who appeared on our three channels of TV was the occasional guest spot by Liberace, and his

highly-ornamented classical bits didn't occur to me as something one could emulate.

Thus I didn't know what a piano could sound like, other than the pedestrian sounds of hymns, and thus I could not detect anything attractive within the pages of *John Thompson's First Grade Course for Piano* (a book I see is still in print), or anything that suggested vistas of better music to come. What's the point of knowing this stuff?

Just after high school I by chance heard someone playing boogie boogie and I was transfixed by it. Had there been a hint of that kind of piano in my childhood experience... Well. So it goes.

Late in the 1970s, maybe remembering the flutophone, I toyed with the recorder. I put quite a bit of time into self-guided practice and could play most melodies by ear. But again, I had no models, nothing to set goals. At one point I actually sought out and approached a real teacher of the recorder, and asked about lessons. I can still remember her crisp and decided tones as she told me, "Yes if you are serious, but I can't teach you if you just want to *tootle*." I couldn't then conceive of anything beyond more competent tootling, so I politely thanked her and went on my way.

Many decades later, while touring Bergen, Norway of all places, we attended a concert in an old stone church, presented by a master recordist. The bravura virtuosity of that chap playing from the classical repertoire was just jaw-dropping. Only then did I understand what that teacher lady meant as an alternative to mere tootling.

I shall spare you my decades-long, on-again off-again romance with the acoustic guitar. Suffice it that I have grown, and lost, fingertip calluses more times than most people.