

# Music Lessons

By Callie Dean

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“Why don’t you start with the Sibelius?”

Earlier that day I performed the Sibelius violin concerto for my college audition, and I had passed to the unofficial second round: a private lesson with the university’s violin professor. It felt a bit like an awkward first date, each of us sizing the other up and trying to decide whether or not to commit to the next four years together.

Dr. Luby crouched down at the end of my scroll. Looking over the tops of my fingers, I could see his smiling face looking expectantly into my own. He had wild gray hair, speckled with white, and his thick glasses kept sliding down his nose. As I played, his elvish face became more and more animated, until he could contain himself no longer. “Yes!” he exclaimed. “That’s it!”

“*What’s it?*” I wondered.

He pointed to the page. “Right here, when you slowed down and then moved into *spiccato* [bounced the bow on the strings]—why did you decide to do that?”

“Ummm ... I don’t know. I guess it just ... felt right?” I said, wishing I had a more artistic vision to offer.

A pause, which lasted an eternity. “Well, I liked it,” he said.

This, I would come to learn, was high praise. Dr. Luby demanded, if not perfection, then as close to it as I could muster. He never minced words or hid his opinion. Even during this first lesson, as we wooed each other, he assigned me homework: finger exercises that he promised would improve my technique by the time I arrived on campus the next fall.

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I cringe as I draw my bow across the strings. I am painfully out of practice.

For the past decade, I have pushed music to the margins. I juggle full-time work, part-time freelance gigs, and two small children. There is never enough time to prioritize playing “just for fun.” But now that a pandemic has shut down schools and canceled all my upcoming symphony concerts, I find myself pulling sheet music off the shelf that I haven’t touched since college.

Dr. Luby’s familiar handwriting lines the edges of each page. The sight of his words transports my mind to the practice rooms where I once spent so much time. My fingers, however, remain firmly planted in the present, where they fumble through every phrase.

Because I am the kind of person who copes with crises by hatching elaborate plans, I resolve to practice daily for the remainder of quarantine. I even sketch little boxes in the back of my planner so that I can add checkmarks to keep track of my progress.

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“*It’s a dance,*” Dr. Luby told me for the seventeenth time. I was working my way through a Bach partita, whose movements bore fancy French names like *Courante* and *Sarabande*. “Each movement has to feel like a different type of dance. You must play so people can keep up with the steps.”

Despite my best efforts, I wavered between two extremes. When I labored over the notes, they sounded too heavy. But when I focused instead on grand sweeping gestures, I missed the notes entirely.

Dr. Luby glanced at the clock above his piano. My lesson was over. Instead of returning to my dorm, I descended to the basement of the music building and commandeered an empty practice room. There, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the kind of dances that Bach had envisioned. Since my roommate and I had been watching *Pride and Prejudice* on repeat, my mental image was of Keira Knightley in a ball gown, curtsying and circling around Mr. Darcy.

I took a few tentative steps around the room, trying to sync the music to my body’s rhythm. Over and over I started and stopped, adjusting my elbows and breathing in deeply. I said a silent prayer of gratitude that the room had no windows and therefore no one could witness my ridiculous movements.

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With a flourish, I finish the *Giga* movement of the D-minor partita. My older son looks up at me. "I like that one, Mama," he says. "Will you play it again?"

I am happy to oblige. *It's a dance*, I remind myself as I begin. There is no need to conjure up a fancy ballroom this time; instead, my five-year-old gallops around piles of Legos on our living room floor. Somehow the image seems fitting. Bach himself fathered 20 children, and I feel a sudden kinship with the Baroque master as I imagine him composing magnificent works of art while his children played at his feet.

Two weeks into my daily practice routine, my fingers have regained a bit of their old, nimble muscle memory. I accelerate through the song, a thrill of excitement racing through my body. I accept my new challenge: to hold my young audience's attention as long as possible.

From my trance, I realize my toddler is shouting to me over the music. I set my bow down to listen. "Mommy!" he calls. "I pooped! Will you come wipe my bottom?"

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Under Dr. Luby's watchful eye, I concentrated on the music in front of me: a slow, mournful theme that grew into a whirlwind of notes. My fingers clamped down onto my bow, crunching the strings as I struggled through the unfamiliar chords. I resembled the six-year-old beginners I taught each Thursday, who had not yet learned to control their tone.

"These notes are not all equally important," Dr. Luby advised. "Some of them just provide harmony. Figure out what is most important and bring that part forward." (Easy for him to say. He had earned his doctoral degree in Baroque music.)

"Again," Dr. Luby commanded, hovering over me. I detected no benign twinkle in his eyes this time, just a look of intense focus. Silently I willed my fingers to fall into place and comply with his requests. They did not.

I burst into tears, surprising us both. He straightened and took a step backwards. "Why don't you take a moment," he asked, gesturing toward the hallway, "to collect yourself?"

I sniffled and left the room without knowing where I was going or caring who saw me. I found myself wandering outside, where I noticed the autumn trees bursting into a vibrant shade of red.

Until that moment, I had spent most of the day holed up in the college newspaper office, revising my article to meet the wishes of a finicky editor. Then I had rushed down to the music hall basement to squeeze in a few extra minutes of practice before my lesson.

My pace was not sustainable. The newspaper and the music department both demanded so much of my time and energy that I struggled to produce my best work in either realm. A few months later, I will switch my major away from both journalism and music, and in so doing, rediscover the joy of both. But I hadn't made that decision yet.

After circling the building a few times, I returned inside, my eyes still blotchy. Without a word, Dr. Luby wisely moved on to the next piece. He still pushed me, but I heard a new gentleness in his voice.

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I set my sights on the final movement of the Bach partita, the *Chaconne*. It is a 14-minute masterpiece: longer than the other four movements combined. It opens with a series of dense chords that stretch across all four strings of the violin. My fingers must be perfectly precise, my bow perfectly poised, in order to achieve the right harmonic balance.

I brace myself for screeches. But to my utter surprise, I hear luscious chords reverberating throughout my living room. Of all the songs I've relearned during the pandemic, why does this one feel the most natural?

*Figure out what is most important and bring it forward.*

It's the same lesson I've learned from fellow mom-friends who negotiate their schedules in order to arrive home for dinner each night. It was my guiding principle whenever I'd dash from my office at precisely 2:52 pm so I could slide into the back of the kindergarten car line. Even now, it's the reason I make time for Bach between the Zoom meetings and homeschool classes that I never anticipated teaching.

I suppose motherhood has taught me more about balance than my 19-year-old self ever could have fathomed.

I begin the *Chaconne* again, more confidently this time. I know I will probably fall short of my expectations. I'll focus on the wrong thing, push a little too hard, and throw the entire harmony out of whack. But now I also know how to adjust my fingers and keep going anyway.

There is a melody woven somewhere in the noise: elusive to find, even more difficult to sustain. With practice, I'm learning to hear that *most important* thing and let the rest fade into the background.

Every once in a while, it even feels like a dance.

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*Callie's essay was the first place winner of our summer essay contest in Exhale, our online creative community.*