



Confessions of a Music School Drop-out

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My bachelor's degree is not in music. Yes, I began my college career—bright-eyed with excitement and hope—as a piano performance and pedagogy major, but along the way something happened. I'd like to share my story with you because it is one which many of you may have experienced. Perhaps some of you are living it now and don't know it. Above all, this is for you.

My early experiences at the piano were probably rather typical. There was rapid progress, lots of technical facility, much positive feedback from admiring family and friends for playing ever more demanding pieces (usually fast and showy). There was also, however, deep satisfaction in being able to express my feelings and to share those of the composers. I often lost myself in a vivid and personal world of sound, motion, and feeling. What a thrill it was to accompany my friends and schoolmates when they sang and played other instruments! In high school, concerts and competitions were added to the equation. By my senior year, it was clear to me that there was nothing I would rather do with my life than devote it to what I loved most passionately: music.

College was thrilling at first. To be immersed in the milieu of talented students, high-powered teachers, theory classes, and the many new experiences offered to me was exciting. It was also humbling and intimidating. Looking back, I can see that everything I did was pressure-ridden and goal-driven: getting through the next lesson, piano class, jury, or recital. It was also externally referenced. I became fixated on technical mastery, stylistic correctness, living up to my teacher's expectations, pleasing the jury, and not disappointing the people I accompanied. There was little pleasure involved. My music-making was no longer a labor of love. I had lost my personal connection with the music.

What a contrast to the little girl that my mother still delights in describing: dancing, singing, marching happily around the coffee table to the sound of her favorite record, stuffed green rabbit clutched firmly in hand. Where had that little girl gone?

At some point in my life, she had died – quietly, without a whimper, and so gradually that I didn't notice she was gone. Her absence left a hollow space inside me, though, that ached and throbbed and just wouldn't go away. Disillusioned, I left the field of music and got a degree in linguistics. For six years I did not touch the piano.

My return to music was through the back door. Shortly after moving to Texas, I met a voice professor in need of an accompanist for an upcoming competition. He expressed his need to me and I heard myself say, "I play the piano...." After this competition came a series of recitals in which I accompanied

other singers, instrumentalists, and choirs. Next came the question, "Do you teach?" and I began teaching.

Although I found it deeply satisfying and my students progressed well, I was racked by feelings of inadequacy. Since I had not finished my music degree, I felt like a fraud. The old feelings of inferiority came flooding back. To assuage those feelings, I became nationally certified by MTNA, but I was still unhappy with my playing. And I still felt like an imposter.

I decided to return to school and finish that music degree. More than a decade had passed since my first encounter with music school. Married now, and the mother of two sons, I felt that I had things more in perspective. Although my intent was to get a second bachelor's degree, I ended up in the master's program and was awarded a teaching assistantship. My life became a flurry of piano lessons, classes, recitals, teaching piano to non-majors, and commuting ten hours a week.

Quite some time passed before I noticed that old achy feeling. Something was still missing. The scary thing is that empty feeling can become so much a part of you that it goes unnoticed; it seems normal.

Before I finished my master's degree, my husband got a job in Kansas. I was devastated. It seemed like the end of the world. After two years of pushing, we were moving and I hadn't finished my degree. Now what?

The day before we moved, I had lunch with my pedagogy professor, Dr. William Westney. During our conversation, I confided my feelings about music. I asked him for feedback and he said, "Take a dance class!"

In Kansas, I enrolled in a dance class. New worlds opened to me as I experienced what it felt like to move through musical phrases and actually *feel* them build, peak, and ebb. I experienced spontaneous physical and emotional responses to music. The little girl was waking up.

I began piano lessons with Dr. Westney, first by phone, then by monthly flights to Texas for long, intense, lessons. We danced, sang, pantomimed, laughed, and played the piano. This teacher reconnected me with imagination (*my* imagination), self-acceptance, self-reliance, what music is really about, and most of all, with *joy*. For the first time in my life, I experienced performance as an act of giving and sharing! It was an experience so pure and intense that I felt my heart swelling out to fill the entire room. Surely pursuit of that feeling is what drives us to make music. Surely that is what performance should be.

These days, my aim as a teacher is to help my students forge and maintain a personal connection with their music rather than going through the alienation that I had experienced. That precious spark of connectedness is fragile and seems to die silently. For many people, the event passes unnoticed. Some continue leading empty, unsatisfying lives as musicians. Others drop out as I did—but never return. I was one of the lucky ones because an extraordinary teacher found me and cared enough to wake me up.

—Julia Scherer
Editor