

## **I Hate Music**

**By Judith Edelman (Puremusic.com, 9/2005)**

I hate music. I hate it the way you sometimes hate the person you made a beautiful, if innocent, commitment to a long time ago, on the best day of your life. You are still together, living, perhaps, in a smaller and less glam place than you had imagined, and they still have that annoying habit of leaving their dirty [your least favorite type of undergarment or personal hygiene product here] out for you to step on, clean up after, or throw on the floor of the closet before the guests they invited over without asking see it, even though you've been having the same conversation about please, please, please, trying not to do that anymore, for years. Yeah—that's how I hate music.

Music and I have had this ferocious and unsettling relationship since before I can remember being unhappy about anything. That puts me at about five. The only spoken rule I can recall in my parents' house was that each of us kids had to choose an instrument on which to take classical lessons before we hit kindergarten. The choices were piano and violin. I picked piano. It never occurred to me to wonder if there were other instruments out there, nor did it dawn on me until recently that my dad may have just wanted to start a band. Were we actually *conceived* to be a family band? After I had been taking lessons for a few years, Family Chamber Nights were born.

Here's the routine: three kids, ages 8, 13, and 16, spend three interminable hours struggling through the chamber piece of the moment, Dad conducting and playing violin. I'm playing the piano, my middle brother is on violin, and my eldest brother, who also plays piano, is at the harpsichord (yeah, we had one; yeah, my dad built it—another story). I don't remember what we played—how many pieces could there have been for two violins, piano and harpsichord?—but it doesn't matter, because by 9 p.m., Family Chamber Night is disintegrating into a painful violin lesson for my middle brother, a crying jag for me, a lecture for my eldest brother, and massive frustration and a sore throat for Dad.

It was the hard truth that none of us, except my dad, were any good. I'm sure there were visions of little classical prodigies dancing in his head, but, like many fantasies we have about other people and family vacations, the reality was much bleaker. I think it was around that time that my dad started using cryptic sayings about how real life never lives up to our imagination. He started calling Family Chamber Nights "The Triumph of Hope over Experience." He could also be heard muttering darkly around the apartment, "Never visit the Easter Bunny." It's hard to be so much of a disappointment to your father that he compares your musical ability to the Easter Bunny turning out to be a bastard if you're stupid enough to try to visit him.

My first piano teacher was a man named Mr. Goldberger. Another little girl who also took lessons from him and I called him, predictably, Mr. Hamburger. Except we made it into a chant: "Mr. HaaaaaaaaaamBURGER!" Never to his face. Actually, he scared the shit out of me. I got so nervous around him, I'd forget whatever I'd practiced that whole week. And I *did* practice. Because I had to. Because my parents made me. Every day. For

an hour. I'm here to tell you, that is a *long* time when you're five. Anyway, I'd screw up in my lesson and he'd stop me and say—so quietly it was creepy—“You didn't practice, did you?” But it wasn't really a question. And even though I had, I'd just swing my feet hard a few times, stare at his bald head, and give a weak giggle. Mr. Hamburger would pull out his imaginary handgun from his imaginary holster, hold it to my curly head, pull the imaginary trigger and say, “Kapow.” Not loud, either. In that same creepy whisper. Then he'd bring the gun up to his face, blow on the invisible barrel, and make me play whatever it was again, thinking—what? That after I'd had my little head blown off with his imaginary 45, I'd somehow play better? Ok, I'm sorry, but that is sick. The Easter Bunny may turn out to be a bastard if you ever meet him, but at least he isn't a sick bastard like my piano teacher.

Eventually, my parents did find me a great teacher, who I continued with until I stopped taking lessons when I was 18. Still, the damage had been done and I didn't really play the piano again until last year, when I turned 39.

The truth I've fought with, the truth I've hidden and been ashamed of, is music has never been easy for me. In the years I didn't play the piano, I learned how to play the guitar and to write songs, I played bluegrass, I went professional (whatever that means), I've recorded, I've toured, I played Americana, then folk-pop. But not without struggling ceaselessly against bad stage fright, self-doubt, and deep ambivalence. More often than not, it has been compulsion rather than joy that has kept me playing and writing. Lately, when I've thought about quitting music altogether, it's been the profoundly disconcerting thought that I don't know how to do anything else anymore that has kept me onboard another day. And another day.

When my husband (with whom I'd played music literally from the moment we met at a jam) left a few years ago, I entered a deep and extreme darkness that I was sure would never lift. I thought I'd never play again, and the longer I didn't play, the harder it was to find any way back into music at all. I couldn't even listen to it. It reminded me of him, of us, of failing.

Then—I don't know exactly when or how—I remembered classical music. I found I could listen to it and even take true comfort in it. It reminded me of my family, who, after all, never did desert me in all my jags and swings and changes. I thought of my father trying, through some form of strange psychic surgery, to implant his own love of music into us. I thought of years of weird piano lessons and thousands of hours of enforced practicing and of Beethoven and Rachmaninoff and Bach and Puccini all being played at ribcage rattling volume till ten at night when my mom would yell at my dad that the neighbors were going to complain, or sue, or kill us. I remembered all this—and then, I sat down at the piano and started to write again.

It turns out that, like my family, music had never left me, even though I tried every way I could to run from it, forget it, rebel against it, hate it. Thirty-plus years later, I can give myself a good chill thinking, “What if they hadn't made me do it?” Whether they know it or not, the plan worked. When they're gone, they will have left me something I couldn't

get rid of if I tried. And I have tried.

I wasn't a prodigy and I didn't grow up to be a virtuoso or even a great pianist. So maybe my dad's philosophy about the Easter Bunny still holds for him. Maybe if you thought he was supposed to be a sane, happy little guy, joyfully living out his destiny hiding candy and hard-boiled eggs (!) for kids to find on Easter, you'd be disappointed with a six-foot, neurotic rodent with a warren of kids to feed and a job to do. Keep visiting him, though, and you might see the appeal in his steady crustiness. Always there, doing his job. Maybe it would even be a relief to find out that, after all, there was no such animal other than your mom or dad, still doing *their* job, day in and out.

Turns out, I love music like you love the people who made a commitment to you a long time ago, say forty years. They have never left you even though you've pushed them away, fought with them, wished they were someone else, and left your dirty laundry around for them to deal with. They make you crazy, but you're relieved that they've stayed by you and surprised by your own joy in simply having their company.



[Judith Edelman first appeared in the pages of Puremusic in 2000 when we reviewed her CD *Drama Queen*. If you haven't yet had the pleasure of hearing her music, check out a couple of clips from that record on our Listen page #2, plus the clip on Listen 22 of her great vocal performance on "No One to Love" (from the highly-acclaimed Stephen Foster tribute album *Beautiful Dreamer*). Judith has lately been contributing record reviews to Puremusic—she covers recent releases by Red Rooster and Nick Drake in the current issue.]