

The Prairie Light Review

Volume 23
Number 2 *anti-*

Article 16

Spring 5-1-2003

Music Lessons

Laura Toops
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr>

Recommended Citation

Toops, Laura (2003) "Music Lessons," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 23 : No. 2 , Article 16.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol23/iss2/16>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Prairie Light Review by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

Music Lessons

-Laura Toops-

I just know I can save the boy.

His mother is frantic - when I met her at Herbstritt's on Monday I could tell she had been crying. I hesitated to ask what was wrong, but she confided all right there on the sidewalk in front of the grocer's, her shopping basket over her arm, weighed down with the cabbage and the heavy blood sausage that Herman likes to eat.

By now the boy has been held back so much that he's older than all his classmates, Frieda confessed. Herman wants to send him to a military academy in Illinois for the 1922 school year in the hopes that he'll graduate, but Frieda is afraid it's too close to Chicago and this time he will run away for good.

It's the music, she moaned, he wastes all his time at the piano playing the worst kind of popular music but can't read a note. They've been trying to teach him for years but to him it's just like mathematics or Latin, he simply can't comprehend notes on a stave. "I think he's addled, Rowena," she sobbed.

I've watched the boy in town with his friends, ice-skating in the winter in LeClaire Park or just last week, playing baseball on the lawn in front of Davenport High School. He's swift and well coordinated and has lots of friends, I hear from Richard Wilhelm at the high school. He isn't wild or bad, and it doesn't seem there's anything wrong with his mind. I told Frieda this, and it seemed to make her feel better.

I didn't tell her what I really wanted to say - that all this is probably her fault, her and everyone else in town who have coddled and cosseted and made much of him since he was a baby, just because he's always been able to play piano by ear. There were silly articles in the newspaper about him before he was even in the first grade, and his parents encouraged him to flaunt his ability all over town, like some sort of trained monkey. No matter how talented, a child needs discipline, needs to learn the rudimentaries of sight-reading and time signatures and note values before going on to perform.

But then, what do I know? I'm only the respectable widow lady who teaches the town gentry's youngsters how to stumble through a few piano pieces to impress their visiting relatives. I'm not one of them, with their afternoon socials and charity balls at the white-pillared Outing Club, their children all destined for four years of college, then jobs in their fathers' businesses.

Frieda has persuaded Herman to put off the military academy plan until the beginning of summer to see if the boy can learn to sight-read music and improve his grades.

She wants me to try and teach him, and I told her to send him over next week for his first lesson. But he has to truly want to learn. Desire is half the battle.

Lesson One

He stood on the porch, fidgeting. I could see him from behind the lace panel on the beveled glass front door -- a compactly built lad with auburn hair parted in the middle, a round face, and large, almost protuberant brown eyes.

"Hello, Miss Rowena," he said, mouth working around a wad of chewing gum. "My mother sent you a bundt cake."

"Thank you, Leon. Please come in." But he was already ahead of me, after unceremoniously clattering Frieda's best cut-glass cake plate onto the dining room table.

"Oh, it's a peach, all right," he said, cracking his knuckles and sitting at the gleaming black Steinway that takes up most of the parlor. He immediately began chording something syncopated from one end of the keyboard to the other, as absorbed as if I wasn't even there.

"One moment, please." He looked up, cocky grin in place, which faded after he saw I wasn't going to be taken in. "First of all, your hands are filthy. Second, get rid of the gum. You're not playing at a high-school dance. Now, please go wash. It's around the corner and to the left." After I saw the crestfallen look on his face, I thought I might have been a little harsh. I heard him turn on the tap and splash in the sink, and considered using a different approach.

He came back in, looking abashed. "Gee, I'm sorry, Miss Rowena," he said, standing next to the piano as if afraid to touch it again. "I just got excited and forgot myself. It's such a beautifully piano."

I motioned him to sit next to me on the bench. He sat, his hands on his thighs. He didn't have the stereotypical hands of a pianist, I thought - the long, spidery fingers required for a full octave reach. "Piano hands," my mother used to call mine. Young Beiderbecke's hands looked as if they would be more comfortable snuggled into a baseball mitt, fielding a grounder, than on a keyboard. The fingers were wide, the tips blunt, the fingernails chewed.

"What was that you were just playing?" I asked.

"Just the chords for 'Tiger Rag'," he mumbled, eyes down, his carefully pomaded hair now loose and flopping down over his dark

brows.

"Could you play it again for me, please?"

He looked up, surprised, a plainly distrustful look on his face.

"You mean it? I mean, I know I'm here to play classical and stuff."

"It's all right. Go ahead."

He could play; there wasn't a shadow of a doubt about that. As he romped through the thumping tune, grinning in pleasure at his own proficiency and closing with a wry little glissando "rip" in the upper registers, I realized that everything I'd heard about this boy was true. He was a natural.

I sat there looking at him, realizing that I couldn't teach him the way I taught my other pupils, with rote memorization and baby songs. He was too far beyond that.

"Very nice. Where did you learn to play like that?"

"Oh, I've got all the Original Dixieland Jazz Band records at home," he said. "I just kept listening to 'em 'til I got 'em right."

"Well, anyone with the patience to transcribe a song from a record by ear can easily learn to read music." I opened the book of Kuhlau scales and placed it on the music rack in front of him. "Let's start out with some simple scales."

He sighed loudly and his hands clenched and went to his lap again.

"Well?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

"I can't read music real good," he muttered, his round face bunched into an expression of pain. "I guess my mother told you." He looked up and met my gaze, a hint of defiance in his brown eyes. "See, I'm pretty stupid, I guess. All the teachers at school think so. The only thing I'm good at is music. And I'm even to stupid to read notes." He stared down at the keyboard and for an instant I was afraid he was going to cry. A strange feeling washed over me and I suddenly wanted to treat him the way I treated my younger students when they got discouraged, with hugs and pats of encouragement. But this boy was seventeen years old - less a child than a man. It certainly wouldn't do to humiliate him that way.

"Nonsense, Leon," I said briskly. "Everyone has to start somewhere. Don't try and fool me - you're far from stupid. Now. Hands in the middle C position. Let's get started."

* * *

That night I dreamed I was with Clarence again, on our honey-

moon in Chicago at the Edgewater Beach Hotel, with the sun rising over Lake Michigan. If you listened hard enough, you could hear the sounds of the waves and the seagulls on the beach. Or maybe it was just me, crying.

I woke up in a sheen of sweat, my hands trembling, and it wasn't sunrise at all, but the suffocating black hour of three a.m.

A faint breeze stirred the curtains of my bedroom window, so I got out of bed and stood there, looking into the darkness outside and trying to bring back the dream, the sound of the lake, Clarence's mouth. But the closest body of water was the sluggish brown river down past the railroad tracks, struggling along its banks like a great scaly serpent trying to break free of its own skin. The tide was low and the oppressive, hot air smelled like mud, and fish, and the sheets of our bed at the Edgewater Beach Hotel.

Lesson Two

"Look what I have." He pulled a crumpled brown paper bag from behind his back.

I laughed. "Your lunch?"

He shook his head, grinning, and slid his hand into the cracking paper. The bag fell away, revealing a battered brass cornet, which he held in his hands as if it were the Holy Grail. "Pretty, ain't she? Bought her off a friend of mine, and Uncle Fritz is givin' me lessons. See?" He raised the horn to his lips, which he pursed in an effort at producing proper embouchure. A series of bleating, blatting, squealing sounds emerged, sounding huge in the closed house, as if a pig were being castrated in the parlor. I stopped my ears with my fingers.

"My Lord, that's horrible! I don't think it's supposed to sound like that."

He put down the horn and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The silence was now deafening. "I know, it's pretty bad. But it's getting better. Shoulda heard it when I first started! He sat down at the piano and dutifully ran through the Kuhlau scales, glancing up now and then to the fireplace mantel across the room, with its anniversary clock and a photo of Clarence.

After a half-hour of steady work, I let him stop. "You're getting better," I said. "Now it's time to tackle a real piece of music. Oh, don't worry," I assured him as his brows gathered across his nose, "nothing difficult for you." I opened the sheet music to MacDowell's "To a Wild Rose" and played through it once, hoping its simple left-hand chords and sparse right-hand melodic arrangement would be fun for him

to navigate. I watched him as I played. His eyes were closed, his little red mouth slightly open. Listening? Concentrating? Dreaming? I couldn't tell.

When I finished, his eyes opened. "Okay, I'm ready," he said. He nudged me over on the bench and assumed the middle C position. Then he proceeded to play the piece from beginning to end, with every forte and pianissimo I had put in - not once looking at the sheet music.

I closed the piano lid on his fingers and he laughed, getting the point.

"Follow the notes, please," I said, trying to be stern. And the next time he did follow the notes, although I could tell he already knew the tune by heart and didn't need the sheet music at all.

* * *

Later that week I saw them as I was leaving the library at closing time, when evening was just beginning to sift over the city like purple chalk dust. They were swinging along under the streetlights, their arms around each other's waists. She was a dark-haired girl in a white belted jacket and a tam, and Leon was whispering in her ear, making her giggle.

I followed a half-block behind them, and they never saw me. I watched as he yanked her into the alleyway just north of the bank and I knew what happened because when she stumbled out a moment later her face was set and fierce and he was behind her, saying he was sorry and calling to her to please wait up. She did and he caught her and kissed her there under the streetlight in front of the darkened drugstore window, their reflections entwined in the black glass, ghosts trapped in an enchanted mirror.

I turned and ran all the way home.

Lesson Three

"You've made wonderful progress," I said, switching the sheet music to Debussy's "Claire de Lune."

"I love this one," he murmured, eyes half-closed as he listened to me play. "If I could only play this kind of stuff, I could die and go straight to heaven."

I looked at him. "I'm surprised you like this. It's a far cry from 'Tiger Rag'."

"Yeah," he said. "Like the cornet is from the piano."

I thought about it for a moment and realized he was right. The

loud, brassy, insistent shouting of the cornet was the product of an instrument with visible valves, one just for draining spit, a big bell emitting the sounds. The piano, though, could do more than shout. It could whisper and sigh, and the straightforward keyboard concealed an intricate web of taut copper wires and felt-stoppered wooden pedals that gave it its voice.

"But you can play both," I said. "I hear you're in a band now, soloing on cornet. They say you're good."

He reached over me and mimicked my chording, depressing the foot pedal and making the sound last louder and longer than I did. "That's just for fun. This music is different," he said, and began adding notes and chords of his own, changing the melody from Debussy to something tinged with poignant minor notes and a touch of syncopation. He looked up at me, his eyes intense, and I quickly looked away.

"Here," he said, jumping up from the bench. "You liked this the first time I played it. 'Tiger Rag.' Come on, give it a try."

"How?"

"It's easy. Go on, put your hands on C." He stood behind me and placed his warm, damp hands over mine, as easily as if putting on a pair of gloves. "Walking bass on the left hand, basic C chords on the right. Piece of cake. See?" His fingers over my hands made them dance on the keys like marionettes over the simple chords, and together we finished the tune.

"There," he said, his breath in my ear. "Now you can play jazz, too."

* * *

In the spring the riverboats returned, great steam-belching whales migrating back to Davenport again from their wintering in New Orleans and other points south.

The warm weather came early that year and by mid-May it was already in the 80s almost every day. The nights were warm and sticky with pungent with the smell of the river.

Once the riverboats started coming back to town I resumed my walks down to the levee after midnight, when no other respectable women were out. I'd been doing it for years, always long after dark, so nobody would see me there. Armed with a cardboard fan from the First Presbyterian Church, I'd find a park bench near where the boats disembarked and listen to the musicians talk and laugh and play, the sounds bleeding and drifting out into the night.

I heard everything, all the tunes and inflections brought up from New Orleans by black men with booming voices and gaudy satin band uniforms, their instruments honking and moaning with a beat that made my feet tap, made my fingers move along with the melodies as if I was playing an imaginary piano to accompany them.

Sometimes the musicians, black and white alike, came into town to eat and drink and look for women. I'd watch them as they got off the boat in the darkness, carrying instruments of every shape and size, smelling of bay rum cologne and liquor.

One night I worked up the nerve to stop one of them, a lanky man carrying a trombone case, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

"Sir, could I ask you something?"

He stopped and stared at me, his mouth twitching up in a crooked smile. "Sure thing, sister. How can I help you?"

"You're in the band on the riverboat. Have you ever run into a trumpet player named Clarence Howdell?"

His smile faded when he saw I was serious. "Don't sound familiar to me. But say, do you know where I can get a quick meal and a drink? We put off again for Sabula at half-past two, and I'm itching for a drink."

I shook my head, disappointed. I could have just as easily directed him to the dancehalls and black-and-tan joints in the next town that I wasn't supposed to know about, but I didn't.

"Well, listen, ma'am, if you don't mind me saying so, this ain't a time nor a place for a respectable-lookin' woman like yourself to be talkin' to strangers. You'd best get home, before somebody gets the wrong idea about you." He lurched off into the night, a swaying shadow in search of sustenance.

I sat awhile longer, listening to the snippets of music rising from the boat, searching for Clarence's horn. After all these years, I could still remember what it sounded like.

Lesson Four

He didn't have his music with him this time. He was pale and silent and his hands were trembling. I didn't want to ask him what was wrong, so instead I tried to get him interested in the lesson, coaching him through the Debussy. Halfway through the piece he banged his fists on the keys in a discordant jangle of notes.

"We got our report cards today," he said. "I failed everything. All Ds and Fs, with nothing but a C in phys ed. And now he'll send me

away." He put his hands over his face, rocking back and forth on the piano bench. "I told you I was stupid," he said from between barred fingers.

I put a hand on his shoulders. "Leon, I'm so sorry. Is there any way I can help?"

He reached up and twisted his fingers through mine. "you're the only person in this town who didn't treat me like some sort of a freak," he said, staring at the sheet music on the rack. "Thanks for that. And for the lessons." He glanced up at me. "You're a beautiful lady. You should get married again."

"I can't."

He looked at me, puzzled. "Why not? Your husband's dead."

"No, he isn't. I'm not a widow. He just left me, years ago. I don't know where he is, or whether he's dead or alive."

"Jesus," he whispered, looking at the floor. "Sorry."

"So you see, if all the respectable people in town knew, they'd treat me like a freak, too."

"I won't tell anyone," he said, his fingers tightening around mine. For an instant I let me hand relax in his, before my thoughts caught up. What if some neighbor passing by looked through the window and saw us, a grown woman and teenaged boy, sitting together like this? What would they think? I tried to get up but he was all but holding my hand.

"Leon, let's get on with our lesson, and -"

"Jeez, Miss Rowena, when are you going to call me Bix?" he laughed softly. "Nobody calls me Leon, not even my grandmother." He put his face close to mine, smiling.

"We shouldn't -"

"Stop," he said, touching my lips with his fingertips, which tasted like salt and brass. "Don't talk. Don't make me talk. Everybody talks too damned much, anyway."

Lesson Five

There was no lesson the next week. He never showed up at his regular time. As I waited I sat at the piano, playing the Debussy over and over, trying to make it sound like he had the last time he'd played it for me. I couldn't.

Clarence stared at me from our wedding picture on the mantel until I finally had to go over and turn it face down.

I promised myself I'd take the hour that I would be teaching him

to think about him, about what happened last week, and then after the hour was up I'd stop. So I went over everything again, remembering how his lips tasted, how his body looked, the feel of us together against each other. I thought of those things the same way I rehearsed a recital piece in my mind before actually performing it, only this was a piece I would never be playing again.

After the clock on the mantel chimed the end of the hour, I went upstairs to my bedroom and opened the closet. Back behind my winter dresses was a cloth-covered hanger with Clarence's wedding suit on it. I took it out and checked for moth holes, looking at the sleeves and the satin lapels, figuring how much material I would need. Then I got the pinking shears and carried the suit to the sewing room downstairs.

* * *

When the doorbell rang at one in the morning. I wasn't surprised. I'd been lying awake waiting for it.

I saw him standing on the front porch just as he had the day of his first lesson. But now his eyes were bloodshot, his hair disheveled and stringy, and his breath rank with beer. The cornet was tucked under his arm to its plain brown wrapper.

"I'm leaving tonight," he said, swiping back the hank of hair that fell into his eyes. "Got a job playing cornet in the Plantation Jazz Orchestra on the Majestic riverboat." He took my arm and pulled me against his chest and I stood there a moment, listening to the heartbeat beneath his shirt. "I want you to come with me," he said, his voice sounding blurred from inside his chest. "There's nothing keeping either of us in this lousy town."

"I was supposed to save you," I whispered.

"But you did," he said. "You helped me learn to sight-read good enough to get the job and get out of here."

I reluctantly pulled out his arms, led him to the parlor, and pointed to the piano. "For you."

The black cornet bag was on the piano bench, waiting for him. He picked it up, turning it this way and that, examining the lining, running his fingers over his name embroidered in gold floss along the length of it.

"You're too good for a brown paper bag," I said, taking the instrument from his hands and holding it in the light for a moment before sliding it into the satin-lined bag. "Someday you'll have something better than this beat-up old horn and you'll need something pret-

ty to carry it in."

"Oh, it's a peach," he whispered as I handed the bag back to him, the cornet tucked safely inside. His hand went to my face. "Thank you. For this. For everything." He leaned down and kissed me, his mouth tasting like beer and chewing gum.

I closed my eyes and strange images flickered behind my eyelids, bandstands and parties and the biggest cities in the world, everyone cheering and clapping for me. And then, in the briefest flash of all, a glimpse of him racked and dissipated, lying in his underwear on a stripped bed in a bleak furnished room in some granite graveyard of a city. Alone.

He was right, I thought. I should go with him. I could prevent it, I could save him as I'd failed to save him here. But as I listened to the steady, calming beat of his heart, I knew I didn't have the power to save anybody, probably not even myself. Especially not even myself.

So all I could do was stand on the porch, the paper bag crushed in my hand, and watch him lurch into the darkness.

* * *

Springs come and go, and so do the riverboats. He isn't on them anymore; he's gone to the big cities, St. Louis and Chicago and New York, where everyone who loves jazz knows his name.

He's taught the cornet well. For him it doesn't just shout; it whispers and moans and chuckles and murmurs melodies no one has thought of before.

As for me, I still come down here to the banks of the river when the boats come through trailing spring, only now I don't care who see me, or what they say.

There's the Majestic now. The gangplank's down and the musicians are back, laughing and passing a hip flask among them, the ends of their cigarettes glowing in the darkness.

There's one all alone, carrying a banjo case and whistling softly to himself as he comes toward me on the bench.

"Hey, there, beautiful," he says, pausing to tip his straw boater. "Can you tell me where a fellow can get a good square meal in this burg? And maybe a drop of brew?"

I smile at him and pick up my purse. "Funny you should ask," I say. "I'm just on my way there now. Come and join me."