

## Striking the Right Chord

I'm trying not to bite off what's left of my nails. Not only is it unsanitary, it adds moisture to the sweat on my fingers, making them even slicker. What could I have been thinking? Just behind where I'm waiting here backstage there's a door to the street. Five minutes left for me to bolt for it. *Bolt*. Funny that word should pop up.

Miss B is out there center stage, introducing me as though I'm some world-famous pianist. The hall is almost full. I wonder who these people are. How many are Chopin fans who showed up because they saw the article in the paper, and how many are gawkers expecting a side show? Some are my friends and family. And my dear husband Joe, whom I've rechristened Job for his patience, sits in the third row, left of center. I'm betting his knuckles are white in anticipation of my imminent screw-ups.

I hear Miss B telling snippets of my bio, how I'd shown no musical inclinations as a kid. Well, it wasn't quite *zero*. As a teenager I played hard rock CD's at top volume, more to drive my father to distraction than anything else. And I did have six months of piano lessons. But she's right. I never cried when I heard Brahms.

Things are different now. I'm standing here waiting to share music I've been obsessed with for the past year and a half.

It started with the bolt. Looking back on it, it never should have happened. Why wasn't I more observant? I'm an ornithologist. All I do is observe birds, all day long.

But that day eighteen months ago, I was not paying attention. Maybe because I wasn't at work and I was trying to get into party mode. It was July 4, and the family was over for a picnic. I'd been fussing at Joe to get the burgers on the grill because his nephews were starving, and it looked like it might rain. It was a typical summer afternoon in west central Florida, highs in the 90's, humidity off the charts. I didn't take the storm clouds over the gulf too seriously.

My father had come down with some kind of flu and couldn't be there. He seemed to be recovering, but I was still worried. At 77 things like that can send you south. So my fatal error was a decision to call him just as it started to spit rain. I had wandered to the front yard where it

was quieter, and stood beneath an oak talking on my phone. Dad was fine. That's the last thing I remember before the flash.

An atomic bomb went off in my face. A blinding light, whiter than white, came with the force of an explosion. I felt my feet knocked from under me. I must have screamed, because something got someone's attention. I'm not sure how long I was unconscious, but I know that Joe's cousin Enid was first on the scene. I don't know how I know that. But she apparently heard something through the thunderclap and rushed to my dead-ish body (I'm seriously not sure I *wasn't* dead). An RN, the conscientious type, Enid was up on her CPR.

I saw this going on. I hesitate to call it an out-of-body experience for fear of being written off as crazy. But I was dreaming—or something—that I was watching Enid pump on my chest. I didn't feel anything. I was like a med student staring down into an operating theater. *Somebody's getting CPR, that's interesting...shit, it's me. Oh God, am I going to go toward the light next?*

But Enid was good, and I was jerked back into my body. Just like that I was looking up at her. I heard her voice from what seemed a distance.

“Kate?... Thank God! Can you hear me? Katie?”

“Enid...?” I smelled beer. I was foggy, confused about why I was lying on the ground with Joe's cousin breathing heavily over me. Water dripped on my face. I wasn't sure if it was from Enid's hair, which was sopping, or from the oak limb overhead. A large piece of the limb was on the ground to my right.

My breathing felt shallow, and I noticed Joe kneeling at my left side now, his weight constricting my rib cage. “Katie...honey...” he was sobbing. “The ambulance is coming. You're gonna be fine. Just lie still.”

I struggled to get up. “Ambulance...no...it's raining, we need to go inside...”

“No honey,” said Joe. “Lightning—you were hit by *lightning*. The rain's almost gone now. We need you to chill here for just a minute 'til they get here. They'll take care of you.”

A searing pain was getting worse in my left cheek and right foot. I later learned the bolt had struck the tree, zigged along the ground, then zagged up my foot to my face, scrambling a lot of circuits in between. One was my heart rhythm, which Enid corrected, and others involved my brain, which of course she could do nothing about.

It was a terrible idea, in retrospect, to stand under a tree with a storm brewing. This was central Florida, the world's most struck-by-lightning place. In July, the height of thunderstorm season. Having Enid there was great luck. Joe didn't know CPR. He's an accountant. Long story short, it's thanks to her I'm alive and well.

I wanted to do something for Enid, but didn't know what. How do you properly thank someone for saving your life?

I pondered this for some time, and what ended up happening was, Joe and I gifted her our heirloom 1895 upright piano. Neither of us played or truly appreciated the instrument, outside of how nice it looked in the dining room. Enid did play a little, and often admired the piano. It matched her antique mahogany curio, too. So the gift made perfect sense, right?

Things didn't go exactly that way. The day the hospital released me I stepped back into the house and sat down at that piano to play. It didn't matter that I had no idea how. The instant my fingers touched the keys, the essence of the lightning bolt came to me.

*How is there an essence in a random accident?* That thought occurs to me only now. At the keyboard I was alive with something I can only call *meaning*. Just as the electricity had zapped a path through my body, something—a liquid epiphany—flowed up through my fingertips to take over my entire being.

I managed to pick out the tune to *Yesterday*. The notes were mostly wrong. But each key I pressed emitted a little piece of heaven. Then the key would rise back up to be pressed again. The instrument—it almost seemed conscious.

Why had I never understood this before? This was an interaction, a dynamic dance of artist and art. Music seemed to appear out of nothing, but it was always there, just waiting for the right medium—the right dance partner.

By the end of that week I could play *Yesterday* with an accompaniment of sorts. And if I played badly, I thought my nineteenth-century partner, untuned for decades, was just unable to help because it was in worse shape than I was.

Joe seemed happy that I'd found this distraction, although it was hard to read his expression as he set the table for dinner while I was into my third hour of practicing.

“Hey Kates,” he’d say, “It’s 6:30. You want to quit for the day and eat supper before it gets cold?”

He was turning into chef, homemaker and breadwinner all rolled into one. It was completely unfair to him. Stan Gould, my neurologist, hadn’t cleared me to go back to work yet. I was still having a few issues—short-term memory glitches, a mild dizziness. I secretly knew I could work, but I’d been putting off going back to Stan for that follow-up appointment.

Truth is, I didn’t want to go back.

I wanted to play the piano.

I discovered a wonderful website that had classical sheet music you could print out for free. All the great music in the world, with a click of my printer!

After a period of weeks, I wasn’t making tons of progress. Sitting at the old piano, freshly printed sheets of Chopin preludes and Brahms rhapsodies propped in front of me, it was dawning on me that, as much as I *felt* the music, I was not just going to up and play it.

I listened to YouTubes, teared up, welled with emotion that music never evoked before. I was especially enamored with Brahms’s *Intermezzo* Opus 118, number 2, a lyrical masterpiece of unrequited love. Brahms was in love with his best friend Robert Schumann’s wife Clara. I imagined his heart nearly bursting for her, expressing itself in this wistful yearning. The piece looked doable. But reproducing the sound, the purity...hopeless. I was willing—*begging* the piano to come to my rescue.

I stared at the ivory keyboard, yellowed and worn with age. Some of the keys weren’t quite level with the others. Two or three stayed silent when they were struck. The piano hadn’t been attended to for years. It might never hold a decent tuning. Despite my gratitude to it for putting up with my playing, I knew I had exhausted its resources.

And thus began my search for a new instrument. Joe saw me looking online.

“Um, so Kate,” his voice was soft, the way you talk to a kid you’re about to disappoint, “how are we gonna fit a baby grand in the dining room?”

I looked up at him, not taking the hint. “Baby grand? Did you know technically there’s no such thing? There are just different sizes.”

“You know what I mean.”

“And it’ll have to go in the living room, not the dining room.”

He nodded slowly. “So what size are we looking at?”

“Look at this one.” I pointed to an online photo of an ebony satin-finish Steinway that happened to be in a store about 30 miles away. “I want to go check it out, Joe, it’s gently used, a 1998 Model B.”

“Model B? What—wait, does that say seven *feet*?”

“Oh no, it’s only six-foot-ten. We’ll just have to rearrange the living room a little.”

“Like, remove all the furniture?” Joe laughed, but I could see a hint of alarm in his eyes. “Hell, we’ll probably have to sell it to afford this thing anyway.”

He wondered, not unreasonably, what a newbie needed with such a—well, *grand* piano. But he soon stopped resisting and drove me to the store.

We bought the Steinway. Because it was second-hand, our savings were out a mere \$49,000, a fraction of what a new one would run. But it sounded like bells lined with velvet, if there is such a thing.

So it was that Enid finally inherited the upright. She was thrilled, but just as mystified as Joe as to why I needed a piano that took up two-thirds of the room and could fill a small auditorium with volume.

I did sound better on it. And we were slowly developing a rapport. At first it intimidated me, a bear of an instrument balking at my clumsiness. But there was really no balking. The response of the keys was exquisite; it was what the keys were responding *to*. Lightning-induced inspiration, even with an amazing piano, was not enough.

I needed a teacher.

My next quest was to find an instructor who would take an adult beginner who wanted to—no, *had* to—play the Great Masters with the soul of an artist. And who also didn’t think I was crazy.

Enter Ruth Bartholomew. She was the third teacher I interviewed, a tall, pale, serious woman of about 70 who seemed to get me in a way the others hadn’t. She didn’t exude one iota of skepticism or doubt as she listened to my weird history. She heard my nerve-filled audition on

my newly-tuned Steinway as though she were hearing Argerich or Wang. I didn't see her eyes blink.

"Kate," she said, finally blinking, "You have a long way to go, and it will take a great deal of hard work to master the music you want to play."

She must have seen my face fall, because she cracked a huge smile.

"Nevertheless!" A dramatic sweep of her hand. I noticed her long fingers had blunt tips. "You have potential. There's something...*uncommon* about the way you approach the music."

Uncommon...*approach*? I had an approach? Mostly I just plodded through the notes, waiting for some hidden magic to emerge.

"So...do you think you might—"

"Take you on as a student? Absolutely. But will you have time, with your scientific career? You'll have to devote, oh, two hours daily practice time, minimum."

I had to laugh. "Miss Bartholomew, two hours is nothing. I have this compulsion to play. My husband thinks I'm nuts. He's trying, though. He's even okay with me only going back to work part-time."

"Very well. I leave your schedule up to you. And just call me Miss B. All right, let's begin."

"Now?"

"I'm here, and I have an hour. Why waste it?"

And so began my weekly lessons with Miss B.

She was nothing if not exacting. I had been trying to play Chopin and Brahms without even knowing how to play the scales, chords and arpeggios of the keys the pieces were written in. That was soon rectified.

Bach was a staple of hers, and it was carved in stone that I would work on something by him at all times. She didn't insist that I play music I disliked. I wasn't exactly a young prodigy looking for a concert career. But Miss B said I had to grok Bach. She actually said "grok." Sometimes people surprise you.

Meanwhile I finally saw my neurologist. I had known Stan Gould for years, never imagining I would need his services, but glad to be in the care of someone I trusted. Stan told me I could go back to work full time. I said thank you, but I was planning to devote my time to the study of piano and keep ornithology part-time.

Both bushy eyebrows shot up. “Piano? I didn’t know you played.”

“Well...” I followed with a quick rundown.

“Okay,” he smiled and shrugged. “Why not? I’m a little jealous...sort of a pianist wannabe myself. But sadly, the god of musical talent didn’t bless me.”

So Stan gave me *his* blessing. He had seen personality shifts after head trauma and brain disease, and he apparently didn’t view this as warranting further MRIs or neuropsychiatric testing.

“You know,” said Stan as I got up to leave, “Oliver Sacks should write you up.”

“Who?”

“Oliver Sacks. Prominent British neurologist. Brilliant guy. Lives in New York. Remember the movie *Awakenings*? Robin Williams played Sacks. You may not...it was twenty years ago. Anyway, he writes case reports of unusual patients. He’s published several books of them. This abrupt switch of yours to ‘piano whiz’ might interest him. Check him out.”

“Oh, well, I wish *whiz* were the right word. But thanks, I will look him up.”

I fell in love with Sacks after reading two of his books. He had one called *Musicophilia* that I devoured in one day. This man understood the power of music. He knew the effect it could have on a brain, and vice versa.

I thought of writing to him, and actually started on an email, but then chickened out. I felt foolish just introducing myself to this famous neurologist and author. He probably got thousands of emails and letters, and would never see mine anyway.

I did want to tell my story to someone who might understand what had happened to me. Friends listened politely, marveled at my strange musical compulsion, and then went on to talk about their kids or their knee surgery. I couldn’t really expect more, but my frustration was building.

Time didn't help, either. It got harder and harder to open up a conversation at all. As though I'd built a wall and couldn't peer over it. And if I managed to, whoever was on the other side wasn't paying attention.

Small talk was intolerable. I used to be at least okay at it, but now my brain would buzz as soon as it detected a chatty monologue or unnecessary tangent. Even if I tried to listen to what someone was saying, I could barely wait to get out of the room.

So I spent my time at the keyboard.

After about six months I could play two Chopin preludes. Miss B smiled when I pulled out my beloved Brahms *Intermezzo*.

"This is a wonderful piece, Kate. You're almost ready for it."

I nearly wept when she suggested more Bach first. Not because I disliked Bach, but because I wanted to play *Brahms*. My new piano was perfect for it. Those deep, resonating bass strings...they were made for Brahms, just waiting to resound with joy or rumble with shivers of despair.

Joe was voicing concerns about how long I would be pursuing this "piano thing" so intensely. The poor man was forced to listen to three hours of practice morning and evening, lots of it scales, repetition and passage work. And there was literally nowhere in the house that you couldn't hear the Steinway.

"I don't know, honey." I knew there was no end game other than the joy that would spring from bringing this music to life. Would I ever be satisfied? Fulfilled, full-circle done? Ready to go back to full-time bird study?

I couldn't see it. If anything, my desire to throw myself into music was stronger than ever. I wanted to do well for Miss B, but it wasn't just for her.

It was never exactly just for me, either. I was channeling Beethoven, Mozart, Schumann. I had barely developed the chops to play their easiest pieces. Yet when I touched the keys in those simple melodies, I was touching their souls.

This was real, when nothing else quite was.



Dead composers I could commune with, but not with my contemporaries. People wondered what was going on with me. I knew they were sincere, and I cared about them too. But I had long given up trying to explain anything to them.

Again I had fleeting thoughts of contacting Sacks, but I was conjuring an idea: If I could express myself through music, couldn't I communicate through music? I would *play* for the folks who were concerned. That way I could reassure them I was okay.

When I proposed this to Miss B, I fully expected her to tell me how foolish it was to think of performing in public.

Here's what she actually said:

"Kate, now that you bring it up, I love the idea."

"Seriously? You don't think—"

"—that it's premature? Not at all, in fact it might even be good therapy. Let's plan it. The Musicale is a nice venue, not too big or intimidating."

I had been studying with Miss B for just over one year when we reserved the mildly dusty and antiquated but charming Musicale auditorium for an afternoon piano recital.

We programmed the two Chopin preludes, two Bach *Inventions*, and a whole Beethoven sonata. The Beethoven was the easiest of the thirty-two sonatas, but Miss B proclaimed that technical difficulty mattered not at all, as long as it were played with conviction.

Miss B is done with the intro. I look out to the stage and see her motioning for me to come out. I'm paralyzed. Wait, me? Play in front of all these people? I shoot one more glance at the back door.

*I can do this.* I get one foot moving and walk onstage, hoping to God I don't trip. My new teal silk dress swishes. Applause. Miss B smiles and hugs me as she goes backstage. I do the bow I practiced at home, and take my seat at the piano. It's a Baldwin grand—old, not as cooperative as the Steinway. The keyboard grins at me a little snarkily, daring me to challenge it.

I glance at Joe in the third row. Cousin Enid is next to him, and behind her is my neurologist Stan. I recall his remark about being an amateur pianist, and I hope he doesn't know the pieces I'm playing too well. Sitting by him is a stocky bald man with a trim white beard.

I take a long, deep breath. I look at the keys and forget what note the first Bach *Invention* starts on.

After what seems like an eternity I hear Miss B stage-whisper "*C Major.*"

Okay, C major. It starts on Middle C. I know this. *I know* I know it. I could play it blindfolded.

It finally comes out—not half bad. The second one is a piece of cake. Beethoven suffers a few slips, but no disasters, and Chopin emerges almost...beautiful.

I play the last chord. I feel my heart racing. *Deep breath.* I manage to stand on shaky knees and bow to applause. And it's not just polite, they really seem to mean it! They're actually standing up. Joe is clapping wildly in the third row.

I hurry backstage. Miss B hugs me again. "You were wonderful, Kate! Listen, they're still applauding. Go back out and take another bow."

"Miss B..." I have a secret. "I practiced an encore. It'll probably come out terrible, but do you think I should try it?"

"Why ask me? You know the answer."

I walk out one more time and sit at the piano. *Okay, Johannes, here we go.* The *Intermezzo* begins softly, whispering from the sweet middle strings, building to a peak of yearning, then calming...but never to complete peace. More to an acceptance of eternal yearning. Half the notes are wrong and everyone can surely tell. But Brahms seems okay with it.

I tear up as the audience applauds again.

Afterward at the reception I'm talking with Enid and sipping white wine. As I tell her about the next Brahms piece I hope to tackle, two men walk up. It's Stan and his bearded friend.

The friend smiles. His dark brown eyes twinkle.

"Hello," he says, "I'm Oliver Sacks."



