

Oregon Musician

Sharing ideas about music and the teaching of music

Music and Gratitude

The Editor's Comments



About the Editor

Diane Baxter, pianist, educator and consultant, is the editor of *Oregon Musician*. She recently retired as Professor of Music at Western Oregon University where she received the Faculty Honors Award for Outstanding Creativity and the Pastega Award for Excellence in Teaching. Diane taught studio piano and courses in Ethnomusicology, Performance Anxiety, and Research Methods. Diane consults, performs and adjudicates far and wide, often giving workshops on performance excellence. "The Science of Artistry: The Fourth String" was published in *Clavier Companion* in Nov/Dec 2013. Diane's article, "Ethnomusicology and Alchemy" was published in the April/May 2020 edition of *American Music Teacher*. Diane began Piano at Tigh na Breac in 2018, an international annual workshop on the shores of Loch Etive in the Scottish Highlands. The focus is on performance success and doing our best when it matters most. The workshop is thriving. She lives, writes, plays and thinks in Brownsville, Oregon.

If you truly love nature, you will find beauty everywhere.

—VINCENT VAN GOGH

Greetings to all of you. In France this summer I participated in a lovely yoga session one morning before our piano workshop was to begin. At the end of the session in the early morning sun, the instructor asked us to think of ten things we were grateful for that day. It was a lovely, calm way to enter the day. My entire list was of people, with the exception of . . . music.

Music changes us.



Yoga studio at Chateau d'Aix.

It changes events and their meanings. It changes time. It changes perceptions. Music embeds memories. It makes us laugh. Music bonds us and heals us. I read once of a Native American mental health therapist on a reservation in eastern Oregon. She asked her clients: When was the last time you told your stories? When was the last time you sang? When was the last time you danced? Years ago some of us sat with a dying friend who loved John Denver songs. After liberating a CD player from the nurses' station, we played his favorites. "Rocky Mountain High" and "Country Roads" have never been the same. The recent

funeral events for Queen Elizabeth II were marked by music, for the entire week. Spectacular music. Even the long walks behind the caisson had musical accompaniment (and those musicians will probably never feel the same again about those particular pieces of music). Imagine watching "Apocalypse Now" or "Platoon" without Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* and Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. One of my musical friends told me that as a child she thought she was drawn to the theology of her particular church, but later in life she realized it was the music that really attracted her. Many years ago now, my archaeologist husband and I were driving out in the long tall grass and deserts of eastern Oregon. The only radio reception we could get was Country Western, which came in loud and clear. I still remember the words to two of the songs. "I'm standing on the street corner of my life, waiting for the light . . ." and "Last night I came in at 2 with a 10, but at 10 I woke up with a 2." No one could make this up.

Recently my husband, our son and I attended a concert from this brilliant series:

Founded in 2016 by classical pianist Hunter Noack, IN A LANDSCAPE: Classical Music in the Wild, is an outdoor concert series where America's most stunning

landscapes replace the traditional concert hall. We bring a 9-foot Steinway grand piano on a flatbed trailer to National Parks, urban greenspaces, working ranches, farms, and historical sites for classical music concerts that connect people with each landscape.

To meet the acoustical challenges of performing in the wild, music is transmitted to concert-goers via wireless headphones. No longer confined to seats, you can explore the landscape, wander through secret glens, lie in sunny meadows, and roam old growth forests.

Our particular concert was at Smith Rock State Park outside Bend, Oregon, on a hot summer day. It was absolutely stunning. Approximately 1/3 of the audience had never been to a classical concert. I had heard about Hunter's project and had seen him on CBS *Sunday Morning*. But nothing ahead of the concert prepared me for how powerful and moving it would be. Our particular concert had a pre-concert concert by the brilliant Brit-



Hunter Noack performing at Smith Rock.

ish singer/songwriter, Ned Roberts. Wind gusted through the high desert, blowing dust clouds over audience and performers alike. Canada geese flew overhead and became part of the sonic experience. Hunter invited the audience members to wander through the landscape. He invited people to come up on stage and lie under his nine foot Steinway while he played. I thought to myself “Oh, no one will take him up on it.” But they most certainly did.

When the concert was over, I heard an elderly woman say to Hunter, “Thank you for transforming my life.” Not my day, not this evening—no—“my life.” And that is what music does for us.

I hope you enjoy the essays in this edition. I thought when I invited the authors to write about “music and gratitude” it would be a very easy assignment. It turned out not



Hunter Noack performing at Smith Rock.

to be so. Our deep connections to music and how it transforms us become complex threads woven through our very cores. Solveig Holmquist tells us that “choral music can and does alleviate and lift us out of loneliness.” Melissa Livengood says that she is “grateful to be able to collaborate with other musicians, to teach, to perform, to communicate through the medium of music. And I pray that this is how I can return some kindness to this world.” Michael Johnson gives a rundown of his day’s listening habits, which would exhaust most normal mortals. He says, “It is with humility and gratitude that I have made the piano a large part of my life, enriching me, stimulating me and amazing me.” Michael Ward speaks of performance this way: “Without performers we would not have music to hear. I hold great gratitude for those brave enough to bring a score to life, but no less so to the trees and the makers that give pianos their life.” And finally, Jill Timmons gives us some encouraging and practical advice along the musical path: “My definition of practicing is simple: rehearsing effective solutions to technical and musical issues. As I regularly ask my students, if you aren’t rehearsing solutions in your practicing, what is it that you are playing? Or are you engaged in what I call Piano PE—moving at the piano while attention is elsewhere?”

As always, I welcome your feedback, your thoughts, and your questions.



Ned Roberts performing at Smith Rock.

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The Union of Spirits

by Dr. Solveig Holmquist



About Solveig

Dr. Solveig Holmquist is the founding artistic director of Festival Chorale Oregon. Under her leadership, the chorale has developed a reputation throughout the Northwest for musical excellence. She is Professor Emerita at Western Oregon University, where she served as Director of Choral Studies for 18 years. She has been a guest conductor for several performances at Carnegie Hall and at Lincoln Center. In 2021, Dr. Holmquist was named by the American Choral Directors Association as one of 15 U.S. and Canadian “Women Choral Conductors You Should Know.”

“Talking about music is like dancing about architecture.” Whoever coined that witticism nailed the truth and the mystery of both art forms. That said, here I go, talking about my favorite subject, and in fact focusing on the specific world of choral music. You could say that’s a total contradiction, since choral music uses words and to that I plead guilty. I love words, and words skillfully set to music can reach such depths of the human soul that one can only respond with gratitude for this form of language! I certainly won’t claim that choral music is the highest and deepest way to make or hear music, only that I know it best and thus can explore its unique power. I completely agree that, “music begins when words fail,” explaining the immense power of your favorite symphony or horn concerto to speak to you with joy beyond words.

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My contribution here is that choral music can and does alleviate and lift us out of loneliness, one of the most powerful and painful results of the two-year horror we have just come through. Let me give you an example. "Always Something Sings" is a piece composed by Dan Forrest on a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson. The poem reads:

Let me go where-'er I will,
I hear a skyborn music still:
It sounds from all things old,
It sounds from all things young,
From all that's fair,
From all that's foul,
Always something sings.

It is not only in the rose,
It is not only in the bird,
Not only where the rainbow glows,
Not only in the song of woman heard,
But in the darkest, meanest things,
There always, always something sings.

'Tis not only in the high stars alone,
Not in the cup of budding flow'rs,
Not in the robin's mellow tone,
Not in the bow that smiles in show'rs,
Not only in the highest stars alone.
But in the darkest, meanest things,
There always something sings.

I recently performed this piece with Chor Anno, a choir consisting of choral conductors from three northwest states who come together once a year to prepare and perform programs. We're all too busy with our own groups to rehearse regularly, but we treasure this yearly opportunity to experience this kind of community. After all we have been through, not only in our work but in the loneliness brought on by the pandemic, we were all overwhelmed with gratitude by this text set this way. I wept throughout, and heard a number of my colleagues sharing that personal response with each other. Our pain, like that of the whole world, had been too much for words. None of us could say exactly what our tears expressed, but we were so grateful for them. The power and comfort of this text reaches very deep places when set to music. However, the gratitude I want to highlight is that experienced by singers themselves in such settings.

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Being in the middle of this music-making is truly a connection beyond words. We are so very grateful to be able to make music TOGETHER, and to be comforted by this text. (I encourage you to listen to the Calvin College Alumni Choir under the direction of Pearl Shankhuan on YouTube.)

There are many, many examples of choral music texts that provide a connection to the deep, otherwise inexpressible aspects of our humanity, comforting us in the knowledge that we are not ever alone, and that music can serve us even during ugly times. It's encouraging to me that contemporary choral composers find fertile ground in texts by very well-known writers from the past: Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the case of "Always Something Sings," and Charles Dickens in the case of "Things That Never Die," set to music by Lee Dengler. Many years ago I chose that piece as Western Oregon University Concert Choir's signature piece, and it served us well for all of my years there. Every year we delved into the skillful way Dengler treated these words, and it was amazing how much our singers brought to the table in these discussions. It reads:

The pure, the bright, the beautiful that stirred our hearts in youth,
The impulses to wordless prayer,
The streams of love and truth, the longing after something lost,
The spirit's yearning cry, the striving after better hopes,
These things can never die.

The timid hand stretched forth to aid a brother in his need,
A kindly word in grief's dark hour that proves a friend indeed,
The plea for mercy softly breathed, When justice threatens high,
The sorrow of a contrite heart;
These things shall never die.

Let nothing pass, for ev'ry hand must find some work to do,
Lose not a chance to waken love;
Be firm and just and true,
So shall a light that cannot fade beam on thee from on high,
And angel voices say to thee;
These things can never die.

Certainly a typically Dickensian text, with lofty, rather preachy phrases, it's somehow brought into the present by Lee Dengler's way of setting it. As with our first example, I do urge you to go to YouTube to hear this transformation by music for yourself. Our students found it meaningful to delve into the possible reasons why and when Dickens would switch from "can never die" to "shall never die," and back. There's a command in

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"shall", demanding that the word be stressed even more. Together we always agreed that the core phrase is "Lose not a chance to waken love." Sung more slowly and reverently, it always brought us to tears. Best of all, I often found that phrase written in chalk on sidewalks around campus!

To my mind, the great American choral conductor Robert Shaw expressed it perfectly: "It seems to me that this union of spirits before goodness and beauty and truth is as close as men come in this life to the ends for which they were born. This establishes their humanity." "Alway Something Sings" addresses individual need, while the second text shows community at its best. In the example of "Things That Never Die" we see precisely the way in which choral music can bring "this union of spirits before goodness and beauty and truth." We need both to "establish our humanity."



To Return Kindness

by Dr. Melissa Livengood



About Melissa

Dr. Melissa Livengood is a pianist, teacher, and collaborative musician. A native Oregonian, she studied piano at Willamette University, the University of Oregon, and completed her DMA at The Catholic University of America. Melissa is active as a chamber musician, often appearing with her husband, clarinetist Lee Livengood. Since her time studying collaborative piano with Gwen Koldofsky at the Music Academy of the West, she has devoted much of her career working with singers. She maintains a large private piano studio of wonderful pianists of all ages. When not practicing, accompanying, and teaching, Melissa

enjoys her time gardening, painting, and baking sourdough bread in Salt Lake City.

Diane asked me to write something about *Music and Gratitude* several months ago. The topic has been bouncing around my head ever since, but my main thought was: WHY IS THIS SO HARD?!? Could it be that I haven't written much (or at all) since finishing my DMA paper thirty years ago, when I said to myself, 'That's it, I'm never writing another paper again!?' Or could it be that I'm overwhelmed getting ready for 30 returning piano students and my work as an accompanist/coach? Or is it the garden and sourdough starter that require my constant attention?

Or, said a quiet voice that I had been steadfastly ignoring, "Maybe I don't feel all that grateful."

There it is. And yet, how can that possibly be? I have been a musician my entire life. The process of writing this essay has helped me rediscover the gratitude I feel for music, which is in many ways, gratitude for my life. Let me explain.

Some years back, during a very stressful time, I tried keeping a gratitude journal, just to draw awareness to small but important things, and to appreciate them—things like my husband making me home roasted coffee every day, a glimpse of the beautiful great

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Salt Lake during my morning walk, reading bedtime stories to sleepy boys, an amazing Utah Symphony concert. It worked for a while and helped me get through the hard time. Then I moved on. Got busy. Kept teaching and playing. Gratitude took a back seat.

In some ways, it's easy to feel grateful. I can easily remember those people who gave me the gift of music—my parents, first of all. We kids all took music lessons, had recitals, and attended concerts. Mom and I often went to the Portland Opera. *Fidelio* is still one of my favorites. Dad would listen to operas on PBS. He loved reading the subtitles, and would weep as Violetta sang her last aria before dying. I heard Van Cliburn, who began his recital with the *Star Spangled Banner*. I'm not sure if the tears that come to my eyes now when I hear it are from a childhood instilled patriotism, or from Van Cliburn's electrifying performance.

I'm grateful to my piano teachers. They had a love of music that I could hear and feel. I still remember as if it were yesterday when my first teacher, Doris Lind, played a duet with me. My simple piano part became a whole symphony when she played on her piano. Perhaps that was the seed that grew into my great love of playing with others. When I sit next to my students, and play even the simplest duets, I think of her.

Other teachers gave me much more guidance and insight into the rich world of piano music. I wasn't always ready to accept it. Sometimes I was stubborn (oh why did I not learn to play the organ??). Often I experienced crippling self-doubt, and would not believe or accept the encouragement they offered. Strangely, I still hear their voices, and recall their words. They are all with me.

I am grateful to my musical friends, for their performances that go far beyond notes and mechanics of playing. Through them I've learned how music can say something wonderful, or sad, or funny, or heartbreaking. From my husband, I've learned that the sound of his clarinet reaches into my heart. I will never forget hearing him for the first time, playing Schubert's *Shepherd on the Rock*. His sound and the shaping of his phrases resonate in me.

I have a lifetime of recitals and concerts—I am grateful for each one. Hearing a 95 year old Horowitz play an incredible recital (the audience included great pianists like Serkin) . . . the Guarneri and Emerson quartets . . . witnessing my teacher fight back to play Brahms after a stroke . . . every recital of my piano students. Often the music itself is an expression of the composer's gratitude—music as gratitude. All of J. S. Bach's works, even the small preludes, feel like prayers to me. Elgar's depiction of his friends in the *Enigma Variations* never fails to move me to tears. Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, where he expresses gratitude for this life, for its beauty, for the wonder, even for the end of the journey as we walk hand in hand . . . all of these have enriched my being . . .

Then what is my problem? I can easily recount the people and events that have shaped my musical life. But here's the thing: by making my living through music and all that has demanded over the years, my direct relationship with music itself had somehow

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became complicated and obscured, and feelings were lost. I asked myself if the pandemic somehow permanently tarnished how I feel about music. All of the FaceTime lessons, variable lag time when accompanying singers on computer, cancellation of concerts, wearing of masks, disruptions of schedules, dependence on electricity and bandwidth—did it make me less grateful? As someone who has spent the majority of her life in the company of other musicians in acoustic settings, the solitary Covid life was harder than I ever could have imagined. I resented music making to a degree. There was an ever present worry of whether in-person concerts would actually return. Would I need to find another job? Worse yet, would it involve computers??

But as I look back over the past few years through all that worry and isolation, I have discovered a silver lining that has slowly surfaced. I found an appreciation of music without audiences, a harkening back to music before it was a job. Music returned to being a balm for my soul. Relieved from the pressure of upcoming recitals, I practiced for no reason other than the joy of improving and learning, of comforting my anxious and worried mind. Hanon, scales, arpeggios, and solo piano music became part of my days. I am rediscovering my love for piano, finding a way to keep playing and exploring despite aging hands and eyes.

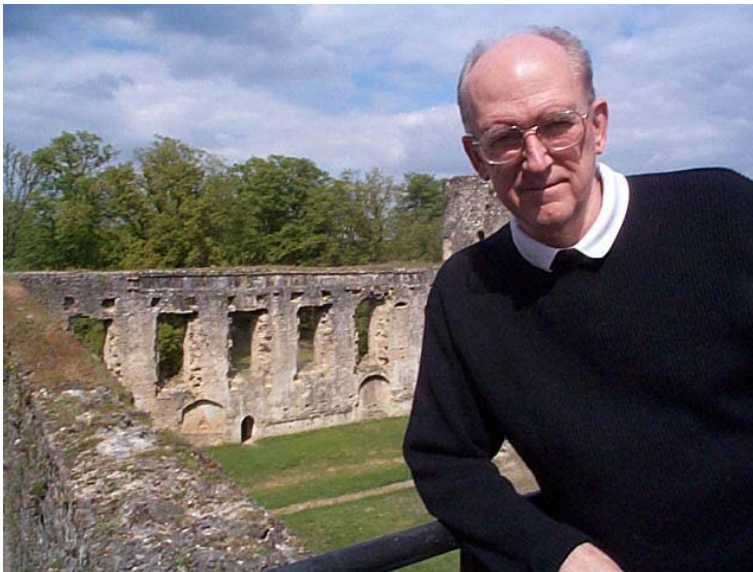
The *Oxford Dictionary* defines gratitude as “the quality of being thankful, readiness to show appreciation for *and to return kindness.*” I have received so much in my life. I am grateful to be able to collaborate with other musicians, to teach, to perform, to communicate through the medium of music. And I pray that this is how I can return some kindness to this world.

And thanks to Diane’s invitation, I am reawakening my relationship with music. I am profoundly grateful for its ability to raise my spirits, to dance and sing, to allow me to celebrate, to grieve. To feel. To be.



A Listener Speaks: Altering the Mind

by Michael Johnson



About Michael

Michael was born and raised in a small town in Indiana. From the age of 17 he never stopped traveling. After graduating from San Jose State College he went on to Columbia University, New York, on a fellowship in international reporting. In 1967 The Associated Press hired him and sent him to Moscow for four years as a general news reporter. He then worked as a business and economics writer in Paris, New York and London, finally settling in Bordeaux ten years ago where he became a music journalist, critic and portrait artist. His special interest is piano performance and composition.

When Diane Baxter asked me to describe my gratitude for the world of piano music, I was at a loss. There is so much to be thankful for in so many ways. The problem was where to start.

First, I am thankful for various electronic devices that make the entire keyboard repertoire available virtually free to the listener. Sheet music too is floating around the web for reprinting at home. I don't mind that more and more paid subscriptions and other charges cropping up. Performers deserve a good slice of the pie.

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Second, I could not make it through the day without the stimulation I get from piano performances and compositions. My home resounds with music all my waking hours, ever renewed from the thousand-odd CDs I have accumulated.

I know of no legal substance that can alter your mind like music, and it does so without a hangover.

To show my gratitude in detail, I have started my story at the beginning of a typical day:

EARLY MORNING—My morning never starts until I flip on the CD player and rearrange the five discs it rotates. I am grateful to Bach and Mozart for neatly chasing the cobwebs from my brain before I put on the coffee. Specifically, I put on Glenn Gould's *Goldberg Variations* (1981 version) and Mozart's wonderfully inventive piano sonatas played by Mitsuko Uchida. Next, to lighten the atmosphere, I like to do 15 minutes of Erik Satie.

STARTING TO WORK—I spend most days writing and painting, always grateful to have great music in the background to courage the creative process. The trick is to find the right volume so it tweaks your nervous system but does not interfere with your concentration. As I write this, Brahms' *Scherzo in E-flat minor Op. 4*, quietly played by William Grant Naboré, is the best medicine I can find.

FIRST COFFEE BREAK—Now I can turn up the volume and change my perspective with Prokofiev's piano sonatas, preferably played by Murray McLachlan. I'm truly grateful for these. It's stirring music, dissonant, wild and avant-garde for the 1930s but a particularly shocking chord that always catches my attention. At one point Sergei calls for the player to hit the keyboard "con pugno" (with fist). This is a cluster chord, a percussive sound that can be found scattered throughout the 20th century repertoire, notably in Charles Ives' *Concord Sonata* and bits of Sorabji, Messiaen, Louvier, Xenakis, Ligeti, and yes even Stockhausen. Someone has written that Prokofiev used it to frighten "the old ladies of both sexes" in the audience.

BACK TO WORK—Volume down to moderately quiet, the speed racing with Franz Liszt's *La Campanella Grande Etude* (Paganini) or *Gnomenreigen*, both melodic wonders and sunny virtuoso exercises. Thank you, Franz, for making me want to dance. These pieces have defeated numerous pianists over the years but dozens of fine recordings are out there. Take your pick. As a listener, I know them by heart and hum along as they spin.

A Listener Speaks: Altering the Mind

REVISIONS—At this point I look back, sometimes appalled, at my morning's work, and attack it again. For this, I am grateful for the aggressive stimulation of Alexander Scriabin, ranging from his early Chopin derivatives to his later ground-breaking rhythms and harmonies. Recordings worth a visit are Ashkenazy, Berman, and Hamelin. I finish in a sweat, either from the music or my revisions, I'm never sure which.

LUNCHTIME RECITAL—I allow myself the freedom to wander gratefully around 300 years of music in small samples, like my own DIY piano recital. Keeping the volume at medium so as not to annoy my wife, I go through some of Bach's 1722 shimmering masterpiece *Well-Tempered Clavier* (Happy Anniversary), played by Sviatoslav Richter, to another collection of preludes and fugues, Rodion Shchedrin's treatment of the sharp keys and the flat keys, to Messiaen's solo piano, beginning with *La Colombe* (The Dove) which juxtaposes the dissonant and the consonant. And finally, as a dessert, the stunning Cziffra arrangement of *Flight of the Bumblebee* played by Georgy Cziffra himself.

AFTERNOON—Following my relaxed and musical lunch, nothing gets me back to work like Rachmaninov's little gem, the *Prelude Op. 23 No. 5 in G-minor*. My player here is one I am grateful to—the willowy Belgian-Russian Irina Lankova, a product of the great Gnessin School in Moscow and now a happy expat. She brings a driving momentum to the work, probably exactly what Rachmaninov desired. The piece leaves you panting for more but it ends peacefully at 3:43. (I never told her I wanted to buy her a Srelnway D and offer her room and board à perpetuity.) To complete my afternoon I will put on Schubert's monumental *Sonata in C-minor*, with its contrasting darks and lights, played Brendel. As Andras Schiff writes in his new book "Music Comes Out of Silence," he knows where to expect "the proverbial goose pimples" in Schubert, and at the end of the first movement in the C-minor is a passage that reverberates in a different way—"terrifying me in the true sense of the word." But he plays it to perfection.

TWILIGHT—I am grateful for some fun after a demanding day. One needs to smile a bit, and Grieg's *Wedding Day at Troldhaugen* provides it—a celebratory Norwegian dance number full of Peer Gynt allusions and Norwegian folklore, played with bouncing good humor by Garrick Ohlson. Completing the day's adventures is Chopin's *Berceuse in E-flat major*, a quiet piece guaranteed to bring your mind back to total calm.

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DINNER—In the background as the table groans with a full French evening meal, I need some pep and vigor, and I gratefully find it in the dancing Spanish themes of Enrique Granados delightfully played by French pianist Jean-Francois Dichamp. His recording marries Granados with Scarlatti, a pairing that came to him as an inspiration while on a solitary evening stroll in summertime Barcelona. He plays them alternately in recitals, convinced that the audience hears a piece differently when compared to the work that precedes it.

LIGHTS OUT—One of my favorite compositions in the repertoire is floating, lilting *Au Lac de Wallenstadt* performed by Wilhelm Kempf. I listen to it over and over with increasing gratitude. It seems conceived for snuggling or sleeping or both. Still awake? Turn to Morton Feldman's *Palais de Mari* or all of Bertrand Chamayou's recent CD selections *Good Night*.

It is with humility and gratitude that I have made the piano a large part of my life, enriching me, stimulating me and (as with Cziffra) amazing me.



From a French Chateau

by Michael Ward



About Michael

Michael Ward has worked as a designer and craftsman in theatre and television and more recently has created numerous gardens in Italy and England. He is currently working on a digital design project, his own vegetable patch in central France and endless scales and arpeggios.

Dear Editor,

I did not know how to speak this until this evening.

I looked at a newspaper and my horror grew.

I naively believe that anybody of sound-mind is deeply alarmed by our 2022 global chaos.

I grabbed at my own gratitude for being asked by you to write about the thing I most love. Music . . . and in this instance, its relationship with gratitude.

In my late 50s, having not really played piano for many years, I read Alan Rusbridger's book *Play it Again: An Amateur Against the Impossible*. Worried about his faltering memory, the author attempts to learn a great chunk of Chopin, the *Ballade in G Minor*. My father was at this time clearly showing early signs of dementia, and much seemed so close. I faced some devils, and following the author's inspiration, signed up for a piano course in France. Fear like I'd never known took me over on arrival. I re-packed in a panic to leave, but someone blocked my exit in the kindest of ways.

From a French Chateau

I write from here now, my sixth year in a beautiful French château, attending and playing in masterclasses.

The French author Balzac wrote that “Love is perhaps merely gratitude for kindness.” It’s rather hard-nosed when interpreted in terms of human romance but seen from another angle and applied to cherished arts, it has a very different resonance. Is it possible my love of music is merely gratitude for its kindly existence? I edit carefully what I listen to and what I play, just as a Glastonbury Festival Fan may choose from any one of the five or six constant live performances overlaying each other, pulsating through the valleys of Somerset. So maybe could I say that my love of music is partially gratitude for the freedom to choose?

When I was perhaps three or four, I sat under a grand piano at Mrs Grimby’s Toddler Music Classes with my triangle, merrily tinkling along with marches and waltzes, aimed, I imagine, to help us take our first tentative steps into 2/4 or 3/4 (5/4 was to come later). I don’t remember Mrs. Grimby, but I do remember Helen. She sat at the piano, not much older than me, but she seemed to have some notion of what the keys were actually for. (Helen went on to become a fine doctor. Sixty years later she intermittently works with refugees as a medical volunteer on the front line between Serbia and Hungary. Desperate but determined people attempting to leave Serbia scale the five meter high razor wire fence to cross into Hungary. Helen deals with all ailments. I cannot imagine how grateful I would feel for someone willing to risk life and limb to simply help, were I one of those desperate fellow humans. I simply cannot imagine.) In any case, I would reach up and ‘tickle the ivories,’ as my grandmother would say. I loved those classes and persuaded my mother to allow piano lessons: my first moment of gratitude to my mum and her generosity.

My piano lessons took up normal and sometimes dull years, with some teachers who didn’t inspire but no doubt taught well. Then out of the blue, a new and different approach appeared through a teacher who was himself a very fine pianist and organist. A new piece was first prepared with an exploration of the time of its creation . . . details, details. Politics, wars, painters, fashions, the composer’s life and work. Only after these contexts were assembled could Debussy’s prelude *Minstrels* be approached at the keyboard, fighting to be heard above the din of my imagined early 20th century Paris. This wonderful man gave me the context and a map of life, in the face of an otherwise blinkered British boarding school education. My gratitude to him is enormous. I saw that neither the *Minstrels* nor I need be lonely, but that we come from the same streets, even the same family tree.

In my early 20s I became caught up in career and London life, I doubted my abilities, and though I always attended concerts, gradually my scores gathered dust. I lost my confidence at the piano but so much more.

From a French Chateau

I am English by birth but I now live in France. Oddly when you asked me to write, my first thought was the music of Aaron Copland. If I were American it could well make me grateful to be so. Copland's music is perhaps not just 'statement on a landscape,' but North American landscape itself, a gentle wind across the vast continent. It welcomes you to the dance, and makes me long for that particular America. I've asked myself if composers work to inspire gratitude or to express it. The chorale at the end of Bernstein's opera *Candide* comes to mind, and the end of Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*. Both to my mind hook in to Copland and seem to say "we live on this planet . . . we should celebrate its unfathomable beauty and bounty." There is something of an expression of a communal ideal here.

My 'native' European music is more respectfully aristocratic in foundation, cautious and quite polite in its history. When I was fourteen, it was Benjamin Britten's operas which lit a fire in me. The rhythms of speech, intonation and even dialect seemed electrified when sung. The textured sonorities of the *Four Sea Interludes* in *Peter Grimes* let me swallow the air and light of the Suffolk coast. Britten's pictures are not picture post cards, they take us through darkness, power and fear. Perhaps that youthful love was gratitude for the earliest realisation of how wonderful growing up would be. How many musical and other wonders would I casually but significantly stumble upon?

I worked for many years as a designer in opera. Rehearsals and preparation can be long and difficult. The first stage rehearsals seem the most taxing: one pianist (or two in the case of Wagner) filling in for the orchestra, anxiety about difficult stage directions, an unflattering costume or an unfortunate wig presented seemingly insurmountable problems. With the arrival of the orchestra these problems would mellow, as the intention of the composer would finally be heard. Often standing in the wings, I would be astonished by a particular singer's turn of phrase or their crazy willingness to sing through the long works of Richard Strauss or Richard Wagner. A happy bond forms between many singers and the backstage crew who support them: performers grateful for the support offered, and crews' sheer thrill in supporting live performance.

A pianist giving a recital similarly takes on a marathon on an instrument that has been carefully built, chosen, and maintained. At its simplest a recital involves a pianist, a piano and a composer. Without performers we would not have music to hear. I hold great gratitude for those brave enough to bring a score to life, but no less so to the trees and the makers that give pianos their life. My awareness of the depth, time and fantastic skills behind such a creation show that I'm never just grateful to the front man.

Six years ago I tried to run from this Château. Like Helen assisting immigrants, someone stepped in. The finest of musicians and teachers stopped my flight. My gratitude to him is amongst the greatest gifts the planet has given me. I had imagined that later life would quietly close doors, but here they fly open. The week under his guidance

From a French Chateau

is too short, but it sets me up to study for the next year. I always doubted my piano playing, but now I am amazed that I play better than I did at 18. My repertoire expands along with my spirit.

My love for life *is* gratitude, for all its most wonderful and its darkest moments. Music is my found path through the many peaks and troughs, and for this, I embrace it with profound gratitude from a full heart.

In writing this I've realised that my greatest gratitude lies with those who have helped me breath more easily daily. Thank you Nigel Allcoat, Benjamin Britten and Paul Roberts, I salute you. I would be a lesser human had I never met and learnt to listen to you.

—*Michael*



Playing Well—Cracking the Code

by Jill Timmons



About Jill

Jill Timmons performs internationally as both a solo pianist and ensemble artist and has offered performances and educational residencies on three continents (www.artsmmentor.com). She has performed under the auspices of the National Endowment for the Arts and has recorded on the Laurel, Centaur, and Capstone labels. Ken Burns chose music from her Amy Beach recording with Laura Klugherz for the soundtrack to his PBS documentary, *The War*. As an NEA Fellow, she re-recorded the complete works for solo piano by American composer, William Bergsma. Timmons is a recipient of the Wilk International Literary Prize from the University of Southern California, and in 2023, Oxford University Press will publish the second edition of her best-selling career guidebook, *The Musician's Journey: Crafting Your Career Vision and Plan*. Since 2012, Timmons has served as the Artist/Teacher Affiliate with Classic Pianos in their seven locations throughout the US, and as a consultant to the Yamaha Corporation of America. In 2021–2022, she was a Visiting Fellow at Yale University. Timmons divides her time between Oregon and Indiana.

She is a sensitive musician . . . Her playing is graceful, lyrical, detailed, and intimate.

—Tim Page, *The New York Times*

Playing Well—Cracking the Code

Fall is upon us and with that seasonal change comes a renewal of our teaching and performance work. If you are like me, the overlay of Covid has sculpted my instructional approach, curriculum, performance schedule, and so forth. Last year, however, amid the pandemic, I made some striking discoveries about teaching and performing. I spent the past academic year as a Visiting Fellow at Yale University, and amid a strict campus lockdown, I rediscovered a deep commonality that we all share. I'm giving a lot of thought to that eternal and universal question that all musicians pose. How do we play well? My students at Yale asked this question, my Oregon clients pose the same query, and I continue with lively conversations on this topic with my colleagues far and wide. Answering this question is at the heart of music study and our temporal art form. It is our deep commonality we share as musicians and educators.

This fall, I am renewing my commitment to what I believe are the two essential components that bring us and our students to a fine performance; a performance that is fluent, musical, polished, artful, and effortless; a performance without struggle, and congruent with the score. In short, playing well. The two pillars of a fine performance are 1) preparation, and 2) availability of self; and in that order.

Preparation is underscored by the kind of practice we pursue, and in tandem, how we convey this to our students. With so many competencies to cover and the vast piano repertoire to explore, the weekly piano lesson may offer scant time to anchor the process of effective and efficient practice. Without a doubt, there are numerous excellent books available that explore a wealth of useful practice strategies. For this brief narrative, however, I'd like to suggest several critical essentials for thorough preparation that touch upon the non-negotiable aspects of skillful practice.

My definition of practicing is simple: rehearsing effective solutions to technical and musical issues. As I regularly ask my students, if you aren't rehearsing solutions in your practicing, what is it that you are playing? Or are you engaged in what I call Piano PE—moving at the piano while attention is elsewhere? We've all done it of course, but as I remind *myself*, I may run the risk of learning things incorrectly, or wasting my precious time!

Our practice vigilance begins with meticulous honest self-talk. Have I mapped out the score, what about my fingering choices, am I rehearsing from difficult to easy, eschewing the dangerous practice of habitually starting at the beginning (think about the codas in the Chopin Ballades!)? Am I well-grounded in the particulars of historic performance practice? Do I know the notes: what they are and where they are!? Have I explored several superb recordings of the repertoire? Sometimes it can be very useful to have a virtual "lesson" via a great recording—pencil in hand, score at the ready! Is there sufficient time to learn the repertoire in question, with ample hours of constructive practice, arriving to the performance solidly prepared? Can I say *honestly*, "I know my music thoroughly without doubt; I am eager to share this extraordinary music with an audience." Lastly, have I rigorously tested my command of the repertoire in "practice performances?"

Playing Well—Cracking the Code

We know that there is no rehearsal for the performance per se. It resides in the temporal moment. It will be what it will be. We can, however, prepare ourselves for that fully present moment by playing our repertoire with increasing levels of distraction: family, friends, teachers, colleagues, a house concert, and so forth. It's Baltimore before New York City.

Playing well in the practice room is the first step, but it is a static environment: your piano, your acoustic space, your routine. On the other hand, by testing yourself outside your practice space, you can discover those possible hidden weak links that can bedevil a performance. Moreover, public performance can gradually become a regular routine. What's more, that routine can serve to quell performance anxiety. It's simply the thing you do. And with that comes the next component of playing well: availability of self.

Availability of self refers to being completely present to what you are doing in that moment of performance. One's focus is on an unfolding process as opposed to outcomes. With our thorough preparation, we can respond to the ever-changing temporal environment with poise, attention, and a responsiveness that allows us to lean into our musical performance. We manage the performance, avoiding the notion of controlling things. Often, I choose a "sight point" in performance. I borrowed this idea from the world of ballet. One cannot do a pirouette without a sight point that remains fixed for each spin. Otherwise, there is a loss of balance. My sight point becomes the right notes! It quiets my mind from distracting chatter, and it puts me in razor-sharp focus for the unfolding process of connecting deeply with the music. I remain in the present, not dwelling on the past nor imagining a future moment that has yet to arrive.

There are no absolute guarantees for any performance, but solid preparation and the availability of self does offer a path toward greater reliability in what one can do and with a greater sense of ease and joy in making music. Furthermore, as we make performance a routine, we can in essence "practice" that availability of self. We get better at being in the present moment and artfully navigating all manner of variables and distractions.

Of course, there is much more to say on this topic of playing well! I would welcome ideas and comments from my OMTA friends and colleagues. In the meantime, as the Fall unfolds here in Oregon, let's find new and joyful ways of teaching and performing, even amid Covid, sharing our deep commonality with gratitude for our art form and for community.





Donna Henderson is a poet, graphic artist and psychotherapist living in Maupin, Oregon. In 2007, she co-founded Airlie Press, a shared-work collective press dedicated to publishing northwest poets. Her work has widely appeared in magazines, anthologies and recordings, and two of her collections (“Transparent Woman” and “The Eddy Fence”) were named finalists for the Oregon Book Award in Poetry. Her new collection of poems (“Send Word”) is forthcoming in 2022.

More information about Donna can be found at:
www.donnacatehenderson.com

The Poet Speaks

Ode to a New Refrigerator

Amana—
even your brand-name’s maternal,
festooning the blouse of your door like the name-tags
pinned to the uniformed breasts of the school cafeteria ladies of childhood,
efficiently dispensing mashed potatoes with their stainless spoons.
New fridge, you command the room with your shine,
all the chrome and glaze and gaskets and condenser coils of you
still unchipped, dustless and greaseless,
your operations themselves spacious, icy,
precise as Kathleen Battle’s voice just now on the stereo,
scaling the upper reaches of *Je Suis Titania La Blonde*.

Inside,
your shelves are not the grilled tiers of a prison or cage for food,
but glass,
transparent to light and to darkness,
on which clusters of condiments appear to suspend themselves
like schools of fish along the ocean's layers of current . . .
And, what a thrill that, being new,
you came replete with a manual,
your crisp instructions speaking to us as to the Apostles at Pentecost:
in our own tongues, on page seventeen
reassuring me in english, spanish & french
that all your noises are normal,
each quirk a thing I'll get used to,
all potential failures the result of something
I've done wrong.

Quotidian miracle, summers your cold ensures the slide of sorbet
down a parched throat,
the tannic chill of iced tea.
Winters, you save our stews and lasagnes.

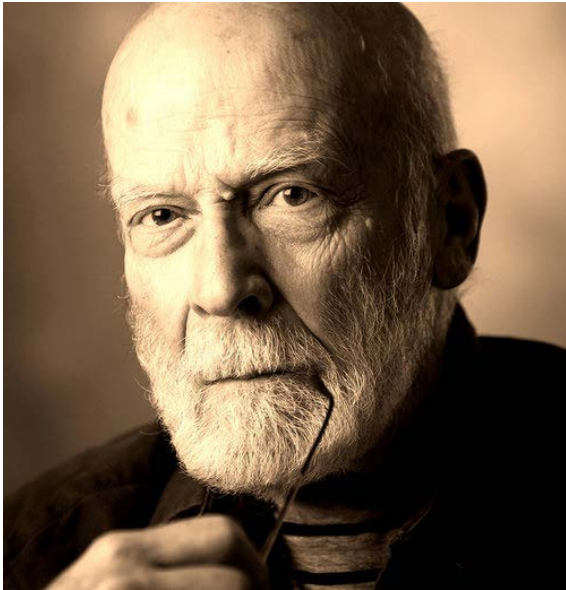
And this afternoon, hot from gardening among the new
foods I will fill you with in the fall,
I flung open your door to drink in
simply the mists and frosts of your exhale,
while my skin basked in their spill.

And as I did I gave thanks for your invention,
for all that keeps you charged—

Oh may I be graced to never take you for granted!
You, and all that refreshes us daily,
all by which we are, each day,
preserved.



The Poet Speaks



Conks and Crocuses. A Nature Poem

*In the duff
around an old gnarled oak stump
bearded with conks,
two dozen fall crocuses
have sprung up—
petals a delicate purple with traces of white,
and bright yellow stamens.*

*As a kind of prelude
to the season of melancholy and gloom,
the earth has given a little flourish,
a reminder
there will be spring again.*

Clemens Starck was born in Rochester, New York, in 1937. After dropping out of Princeton, he continued his education on the road, riding freight trains and working at a variety of jobs around the country. He has been a ranch hand in eastern Oregon, a newspaper reporter on Wall Street, a door-to-door salesman, and a merchant seaman, among other things. For over twenty years he worked construction up and down the West Coast, as a union carpenter and carpenter foreman on projects of all kinds, from bridge work in San Francisco and Oregon to custom homes in British Columbia.

As a poet he has received a scholarship from the Breadloaf Writers Conference as well as a grant and year-long residence at the Helene V. Wurlitzer Foundation of New Mexico. He was the Witter Bynner Fellow and poet-in-residence at Willamette University, where he has taught on several other occasions, and was a visiting poet at the University of California at Santa Cruz. A number of his poems have been read by Garrison Keillor on National Public Radio and included in Keillor's anthology, *Good Poems for Hard Times* (Viking/Penguin, 2005).

A collection of Clem's work, *Journeyman's Wages*, received the William Stafford Memorial Poetry Award and was selected for the 1996 Oregon Book Award for Poetry. He lives on forty-some acres in the foothills of the Coast Range outside Dallas, Oregon.