

## Mum's Gifts by Fiona Johnston

Mum left behind traces of her life in numerous places. When we emptied her unit we found her notes from phone conversations and radio programs on scraps of paper recycled from our old school exercise books. Sorting through her correspondence we came upon lists of questions to be asked and news to be told on the backs of bulging envelopes.

Now that I am back home again Mum surprises me with hand written messages in the margins of her bible, or in additional notes to her recipes. Her writing is so familiar to me, in its round cursive fluidity and until her death, I always took it for granted, knowing there'd be more.

Last night I nearly missed a message from Mum. I was putting one of her LP records back in its cover when my eye caught the words, 'Effie and I played' with a wobbly arrow drawn to *Mozart Concerto in E flat for two pianos, K.365*. I'd already listened to the concerto, but I took the old record from its sleeve and returned it to the turntable. Now I listened with new purpose.

In the rippling, delicately spaced tread of the music, I heard Mum's desire and ability to communicate through her loved instrument, the piano. I remembered her talent for melodic precision as the steady, rhythmic ring of the two pianos filled the lounge room. As the pianos' melodies stretched out alongside the body of the orchestra, I wondered which had been Mum's part. I could barely distinguish one piano from the other, for they were played as one, the music expansively and generously tumbling from the pianists' fingers.

I remembered Mum telling me she'd played a piano duet in the Sydney Eisteddford with her cousin Effie when she was twenty-two. Could this demanding concerto have been that piece? Was Mum so talented? How could I have lived with her for eighteen years and not known this, not heard her music? Her self-effacement bore no relationship to this concerto of passionate, self-assured certainty. The two pianos were leading the orchestra and each other in joyous dance!

Immersed in the concerto, I skimmed the back of the record cover and discovered that one of the pianists, Yakov Zak was born in Odessa in 1913, the same year as Mum's birth. I wonder if she read this and experienced a spark of connection with Mr Zak, a man in a society which treasured classical musicians; my mother on the other hand was destined to play mediocre pianos and breathless church organs, in a society where even the most talented musicians, especially if they were women, struggled to pursue their art.

In 1935 Yakov Zak graduated from the School of Higher Mastery of the Moscow Conservatory. In 1935 Mum gained her Licentiate of Music (London) in Performance and Teaching, and won first prize with her cousin for their performance of Mozart's concerto for two pianos in the Sydney Town Hall.

In 1955 Yakov Zak was a professor at the Moscow Conservatory and busily engaged with Emil Gilels and the State Orchestra of the USSR recording Mozart's Concerto in E Flat for two pianos.

In 1955 Mum was the mother of three, living in a cramped weatherboard house in small town Australia, teaching piano to her twelve year old son and nine year old daughter. Her skills as a pianist and organist were publicly recognised. She conducted and accompanied the Sunday Kindergarten's concerts and at Saturday afternoon weddings and Sunday services in the Blackheath Presbyterian Church. But I have no memory of Mum playing simply for her own pleasure, or as soloist, for the pleasure of others.

Squeezed next to Mum on the piano stool as she tried to teach me to play, my fiery impatience and frustration with the keys surprised me as much as it did her. I wanted to please my mother, but in this I was a disappointment. The only part I liked about the lessons was watching Mum write instructions in pencil in her round, curly script on the manuscript paper next to the language of notes she'd drawn up and down the five parallel lines.

But although I may write romantically about Mum's hidden talent and pursue my feminist analysis of her lack of opportunity, I suspect she lived her musical career as fully as she wished in her family, church and community. When I gave Mum a poem I wrote called Mum, Me and Creativity, which addressed some of my questions about her creative life, she said she didn't regret her choices and had no sense of having missed out.

The concerto was reaching its dramatic ending and I found myself thinking of Mum's death. Suffering a second heart attack one week after her eighty-fifth birthday, on admission to the hospital she told the doctor she wanted no intervention. He listened carefully and asked, 'So you're ready to meet your Maker?' And Mum replied, 'Yes'. The doctor phoned my sister to check this line of inaction and gained her agreement. Twelve hours later I arrived from Adelaide and said my good-byes to Mum. She died soon after, her family gathered around her. No lingering for Mum, she gave us her death as adroitly as the final movement of a Mozart concerto.

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