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Pianos and Pianolas

Sylvia Townsend Warner*

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Abstract

A biographical reminiscence by Sylvia Townsend Warner describing the piano-playing of her grandmother Fanny, her own first piano lessons and the way that her father played the pianola.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; life-writing; music; piano; pianola.

My great aunt Anne, the eldest of five daughters in a country rectory had no vestige of music about her; but as she had well-shaped hands and arms she was made to learn the harp, which would display them. All the music in those rectory daughters and all the marrying too was in Fanny, my grandmother. Fanny died a few months before I was born. Some of her bound-up volumes of piano pieces persisted about the house – Weber, Mendelssohn, Heller, the showpieces of her date, arrangements of Handel's Overtures. Looking at them as a child I was impressed by the dark masses of semiquavers, the arpeggios swirling from end to end of the keyboard. One day later on when I was practising a Beethoven sonata my mother came into the room and said, 'You play that exactly like mother.' I broke off. I had heard that Fanny was a remarkable Beethoven player.

'You stick out your lower lip just as she did.'

My mother's education in music persisted about the house like Fanny's volumes, but she did not resort to it except for the practical purposes of keeping me amused when I came down from the nursery after tea or supplying me with exercise when it had been too wet (it

needed a tempest) for me to be taken for my twice daily walks. She played on Fanny's grandpiano and I pranced about the room to Heller's *Tarantella* or Schumann's *Schlummerlied* or *The Harmonious Blacksmith*. She had a small pretty mezzo-soprano voice and a repertory that I now see was remarkable for its practical selectiveness. She sang nothing that was not within her scope of compass, technique and emotion. Instead of the *Drawing-room Ballads* of the day she sang the ditties of English ballad opera: *Black Eyed Susan*, *Sally in our Alley*, *Bid me Discourse* – things utterly despised by her acquaintances – and for the rest some Handel and a little Schubert. With her slightly disdainful good sense in music, good sense rather than good taste, she combined the primitive habit of humming. Whenever she was alone and occupied (she was seldom not occupied) she hummed; and when the occupation demanded particular attention, instead of desisting from humming she remained on whatever note she had been humming when the difficulty arose and prolonged it till the ticklish moment was over. Yet when one day in her old age she noticed that she was no longer humming in tune she decided to give up the habit; and never hummed again.

This iron will duly immolated me on the fact that my father liked listening to music and would be the better for a daughter who could play to him in the evening. A piano teacher was found. My hands were set on the keyboard and coerced into playing scales in unison – a hateful proceeding – and in contrary motion which was enjoyable. I studied *The Bluebells of Scotland* and doubtless *The Merry Swiss Peasant*, though I don't actually remember him, and a gavotte. I don't think my music teacher was good at it. She handicapped herself at the start by using a Manual by some theorist who thought reading music would be made easier for the beginner by the notes being printed in gigantic type. I felt that this was treating me like a baby, and was resentful. (She also had some informative nonsense about the crochet being a penny, the quaver a halfpenny, the semiquaver a farthing; which, as they were all of the same giant proportions, was demonstrably fallacious and not worth attending to.) I hated the whole thing. Yet I continued to like listening to music. It just did not occur to me that there was any connection between music heard and the music lessons endured. I progressed from sheer boredom and exasperation, till the day when my first teacher left and a new one arrived – a lady of very different notions, who took me by the scruff of my neck and dropped me into a Haydn sonata. To this day I can recall every circumstance of the moment when she broke in at a double bar to commend my bravura arpeggio approach to the cadence in the dominant. She stayed long enough to enter me to Bach before she

went on to a teaching post. Bach at that date was considered dry. I did not find him so. He seemed to sanction my first penchant for scales in contrary motion.

Fanny's piano, a Broadwood, had a very light keyboard. I discovered how much of my agility was due to this when it went to its makers for an overhaul and refelting and was replaced by a hired Bluethner. Bluethners were admired for their 'singing tone' (a poule de luxe instrument). But whatever I played on, my father did not listen to it in the evenings. He played himself on his new pianola.

A pianola is played by air pressure. The player pumps with his feet as with a harmonium, the air pressure is directed onto a roll of tough paper with perforations which correspond to the duration and pitch of the notes which pianists' fingers would strike and through these perforations animates the pianola's mechanism of hammer and string, while at the same time unwinding the roll. The performer is not fully automatised. He can achieve a rubato by his feet and in front of him as on a dashboard are little levers which allow him to control the tempo and volume of tone. A practised pianola performer can achieve a very tolerable scorzando and observe the cresc. and dim. and rit. and accel. directions printed on the roll in their appropriate places. Or if he prefers he can give his own reading. The only thing he can't do is to play a wrong note.

When piano tuners have finished their work they strike some chords and play some flourishes up and down the keyboard. Pianola tuners bring a small roll with them and play it. The result is technically more impressive, but the purpose is the same. But there is one essential difference. One cannot extemporise on a pianola. The pianola tuner's morceau must have been composed. Our pianola tuner played his morceau *sine espressione* with his arms folded across his chest.

Note

- 1 This typescript is undated, and the title is added by hand; the handwriting is not Warner's but seemingly her typist's.