

# The best of *Bon Journal*

Monday 14 October 2002 <http://www.bonjournal.com>  
Volume 1 Issue 5: If music is the food of love, play on

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**M**usic is the universal language. Without knowing a word of Spanish, a pianist befriends musicians in Cartagena, Colombia after making music with them for five hours non-stop. Here are stories of music making around the world.

## **Improvising piano duets**

In between our conversations, we performed our own compositions for each other. Our styles were very different. Here was someone who was pursuing my dream: to be a full-time musician. We sight read some of the duets I had brought with me. Then he suggested that we improvise playing piano duets together.

I've never done this before. Just sit together and talk to each other on the keys without sheet music. Soon we got ourselves into a rhythm of sorts. Syncopation. Chromaticism. Dissonance. Talking back and forth on the black and white keys.

## **Restoring a piano, restoring a soul**

We came across the topic of "pianos" by accident. My editor colleague in Houston mentioned he was restoring an upright as a project. A year later after he started, I couldn't wait to see it.

The piano dominated the living room. It was an old rosewood upright of above average height. He had opened it up completely, cleaned every bit of it, tuned it, and most of all, mended the case. He had polished it until it shone.

It was no longer an ordinary, abandoned piano after nine months of labour. It was his baby.

I played some scales, some chords, and finally improvised to bring out the sound. It was the same make as my sister's upright, but infinitely better. It sounded like a grand piano.

His next project? restore another abandoned piano? Try a grand piano, I told him. But where could he put it? If I were him, I'd get rid of the living

room sofas. The living room is for the piano to live, I told him. But his wife wasn't so sure.

## **Cold hands, not cold feet**

One of the most common, unfortunate things that could happen to musicians just before they go on stage is getting cold hands. Another is to get unwanted visitors before the show starts.

We had already warmed up in the Lutheran Church in Bussum, Netherlands where the concert was to begin at 3 pm. But the room in the back wasn't heated. And the 30-minute wait cooled our hands.

I kept blowing hot air into my palms. The guitarist was first to go on stage. Then the violinist. Then me.

Would it be a full house? Would it be embarrassingly empty? We couldn't tell from our waiting room.

Was I nervous? No. I was only a guest performer whom nobody knew.

Were they nervous? They shouldn't be. They've done this hundreds of times before.

No matter how much I practised, each performance would still be different and even unpredictable.

When it was my turn to play solo, I noticed the baby grand getting out of tune with each key I played. This distracted me.

By the time we played the Piazzolla trios, our hands had warmed up. The tangos even got the audience moving!

## **Dueting in Amsterdam**

I sent the Dutch pianist Heleen some piano duets, before I had even met or spoken to her. On this Sunday afternoon, we sight read Faure's Dolly Suite, which he had written specifically for four hands and one piano. It was a fun piece.

Heleen showed me some of her compositions - the latest being variations on the happy birthday

tune and other jolly pieces. I presented my piano duet on the happy birthday theme.

We had only planned to play for a couple of hours - but Heleen's husband returned home and insisted that we stay for dinner.

We connected through music, red wine, Dutch cheese, and Thai take-away. There was really no need for words, as our double dueting was about love and passion: our love of music and our passion to consume it.

## **Second-hand sheet music**

One of the things I do to reward myself is to visit the Archive Bookstore on Bell Street, near the Marylebone tube/train station in London. The basement is filled with second-hand sheet music collected from estates, libraries, or donations.

Yesterday I cycled in the bitter cold, having already decided that I needed to pamper myself with new music to sight read. Without a hat or a scarf, even four layers of clothing were insufficient. Still, I was determined to reach my destination and spend an hour there before cycling to my friend's singing lessons.

The bookstore was spilling over with old books and sheet music. There was hardly any room to stand. I wedged myself between two shelves and quickly pulled out scores from the 2-piano 4-hands collection. I found several Mozart and Beethoven piano concerto scores, but nothing more exotic.

In the basement, I found a piano duet arrangement for Handel's Zadok the Priest. Later that afternoon I met a professional accompanist who happily sight read that with me. The entire afternoon was like a chapter from Vikram Seth's novel *An Equal Music!*

## **On sight reading**

Sight reading refers to playing a piece by reading the music for the first time.

I learned to sight read because I was impatient, but more importantly I loved variety and novelty.

Perhaps you could try sight reading easy and short pieces. Just select pieces below your level. And then gradually move up. I say "select" because you should choose pieces you like and enjoy. I borrow pieces from the library because I don't have to "buy" or commit to a piece. That's what sight reading is all about - not committing yourself.

There is tension involved in sight reading. You're fully alert because you're reading - just like when you read something out loud to an audience. It's very different from playing a piece you know well.

Beware of the overconfidence bias. When you first sight read a piece, you are alert because you've never seen it before. After the first time, you may play less well because you are less alert. So don't attempt to sight read when you are tired. And don't perform a piece you've sight read only recently.

The secret to sight reading is nothing more than "practice makes perfect." The more pieces you try to sight read, the better you will be at sight reading. Of course, when you're sight reading, you're not studying the piece. You're merely reading from sight and getting an impression.

### **An hour of Houria**

The softly lit candles and cushions on the rugs reminded me so much of the Arabic teahouses in Granada. Houria, the singer and artist, had deliberately set the mood for her evening programme.

She introduced each piece and sang against the beautiful accompaniment of the English guitarist Keith on the Arab lute. Each song was a love song, sung in Arabic. When I closed my eyes, the music took me back to that magical evening in Granada, after visiting Alhambra. The only thing missing was the incense.

Houria's voice carried the exotic melodies far into the conservatory where the wine and bread were

waiting. When she sang the "flower song", the lutist joined in the chorus. It was an enchanting meditation detailing each individual flower, but actually representing each individual soul. When the programme ended, we asked them to sing that one as an encore.

### **Accompanying flute auditions**

It's not as trivial as I had expected. All these things I must remember when playing with the flautist:

- play all notes evenly
- keep in tempo
- start with the right tempo
- listen to the flautist
- figure out the page turns
- make sure I don't goof up at her audition

Years ago in college I accompanied a flautist's senior recital. Actually, the piano part was on par with the flute part. So really, it wasn't an accompaniment at all. We worked through pieces by Olivier Messiaen, Franz Schubert, and Walter Piston. Quite a challenge!

Today I'm practising one of J.S. Bach's flute sonatas, Gabriel Faure's Fantasia, and Taktakishvili's Sonata. These are not as challenging as that senior recital, but then again, I don't get to practise 3 hours a day anymore!

### **Home among musicians**

Musicians are expressive and passionate people. But there are different types of musicians, and one shouldn't generalise.

The chiropractor turned self-taught painter and songwriter gave up his previous professional life to pursue art and music in Maastricht. He had no regrets about leaving materialism. In his quest for truth, he has transformed other musicians.

Is there enough room for all musicians to live as musicians in this world? If there is, why do some defect into other professions?

The pianist has no trouble finding work. The soprano has built an

international career for herself. The contrabass player has a teaching job. What does it take to live as a musician?

Passion more than talent, said the pianist. You need to constantly network. It requires dedication and believing that you can do it.

### **In search of Scarlatti's Sicilienne**

After playing Faure's famous Sicilienne, I discovered that JS Bach had written at least two. Thus began my hunt for Sicilienne pieces for my forthcoming Sicilienne Christmas concert.

Someone told me that Domenico Scarlatti had written one. A Sicilienne is a form of slow dance, usually in 6/8 or 12/8 time. The right hand is a slow melodic line, accompanied by arpeggios in the left hand. The arpeggio isn't necessary, as demonstrated by Robert Schumann's Sicilianisch.

I looked in Houston, Brussels, and London. Finally, I went to Italy. Surely, the Ricordi music shop in Milan would have it. After all, Scarlatti was Italian.



**Anne Ku**

### **Editor's note:**

If we're all busy making music and making love, we won't have time to make war anymore.

### **Feedback from readers:**

**Chicago:** *I accidentally found your website searching for information on Prima Vista or Sight-reading exercises. I found your sight-reading stories very encouraging.*

**Germany:** *I stumbled across your variation of Fur Elise (I too don't quite know how to place the umlaut!) while I was searching for the sheet music for my 10 year old son. He, like you, has been fascinated with Beethoven and in particular Fur Elise.*

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