

Rhythm of Life

Prelude: 'An introductory piece of music, most commonly an orchestral opening to an act of an opera, the first movement of a suite,'

Dracula, or Mrs Drayton, was the fearsome fourth year maths teacher at junior school. Even the bravest, boldest pupils sat in silence in her class. I'm not sure why she was called Dracula. I used to think it was an unimaginative association with the letter "D", but looking back, she had a supernatural ability to mesmerise her prey and suck out all their confidence.

Lessons were terrifying. We recited the table of furlongs and times tables: "thirteen, twenty-six, thirty-nine..." desperate not to pause or hesitate. One slip meant surrendering to Dracula's power and chanting mathematical incantations alone.

Oddly, she taught music too. At junior school we progressed from clashing and banging wooden percussion instruments and the triangle, to reading music and playing descant recorder instead. I was lucky and had a head start. I could play piano, but for most of the class, my best friend included, music was a tortuous session spent deciphering blobs on a line. As for the sound, 31 descant recorders created a cacophony of bum notes and bad rhythm. Tunes were distorted by intermittent, ear-piercing shrieks due to nerves, breathing fits or sweaty fingers slipping off a fingerhole. You had to admire any teacher who could stand half an hour of this. I know my head and ears were ringing by the end of each lesson.

But even in music, Dracula had a peculiar talent for singling out her prey. One day she announced an end of term exam. Each of us would play a piece of music - solo. There were three choices. The easiest piece could only achieve a C grade. The more difficult pieces would achieve a B or A grade. The horror of the announcement sent shockwaves through the class. My best friend shuddered at the prospect, and we made a pact to do the shortest, easiest piece.

On the day of the exam, I listened to each painful rendition. The sickly sensation in my stomach increased as my turn approached. My friend did her best, but I could barely recognise the childish tune of Three Blind Mice. My turn was next. I played quickly; rushing to the end, relieved when I hit the last note and could turn the spotlight off. But something strange happened. Time stretched and silence followed. Dracula gazed at me.

“Never hide your light under a bushel.” She announced, regarding me strangely.

I was momentarily confused. Praise? Dracula must have sensed my disorientation because the spotlight held fast. She asked if I knew what that meant. My face burned under her rays. Blood rushed to the capillaries. I was told that the tune was too easy, and I would have to play another one. So, without practice, I played one of the harder tunes, conscious somehow of breaking the pact with my friend.

Movement: 'A self-contained part of a musical composition or musical form.'

I suspect that the end of term exam was just a ruse to audition us and I must have played well. I found myself conscripted into a lunchtime recorder group and was presented with a large tenor recorder. The tenor fitted my hands and produced rich, mellow notes. Even my classmates wanted to try my 'cool' recorder.

Still unaware of the endgame, a few of us were sent to Saturday sessions and a multi-school recorder ensemble formed under the tuition of a strict, musically gifted, but less formidable teacher. The combination of alto, descant, bass and treble recorders created a wonderful sound and we discovered our ensemble was going to feature in the forthcoming Junior Schools Music Festival at the town hall.

The festival was a prestigious affair and rehearsals intensified. As the performance dates approached, we began to practise in the town hall's huge auditorium with its high-stage and vast seating; it was a place where symphony orchestras and rock bands performed. Standing in line as we waited for our last rehearsal, rumours of a boy fainting quickly filtered down; a boy fainting? Conditioned by black and white melodramas and technicolour westerns, I thought only women fainted. The gossip was puzzling and piqued my interest. As the boy from a school choir was ushered past by his teachers, I stared at his pale face and an unconscious snapshot was taken.

Concerto: 'A concerto is a classical music composition that highlights a solo instrument against the background of a full orchestra.'

I met that boy again, but I didn't recognise him initially. Emboldened by another five years and five pints of John Courage bitter, he'd cornered me and told me I should be going out with someone like him, while my date that evening looked on and party music pounded in the background.

Crescendo: 'a gradual, steady increase in loudness or force. a musical passage characterized by such an increase.'

Sorting through a cupboard about 30 years later, I unearthed the original musical score, festival programme and a photograph of the recorder ensemble at the town hall. Memories of the performances surfaced, and I recalled a news cutting stating our recorder group had played beautifully. I boasted to my husband that "I'd performed" at the town hall.

"So did I." he retorted.

Incredulous at the idea of him having any sort of musical ability, I probed further and discovered that my husband – who cannot sing – had joined his school choir for reasons only pubescent boys might understand (a girl). Sure enough, his school was listed on the concert programme. He told me he'd been unwell, had to sit down

and was told to take his jumper off during one rehearsal. Slowly recognising that young boy again, I quizzed him about the rumour I'd heard so long ago. No, he didn't faint he insisted, he'd just got a 'bit hot'.

It's funny how memories, music and words stay with you. I often wonder if our lives are truly spontaneous or pre-planned. What I do know, is that I stared at the boy who 'nearly' fainted, and that boy is now my husband. You could say that Dracula orchestrated our introduction. I should thank Mrs Drayton for that, and for the times when I've needed more confidence and her message comes back to haunt... and help me.
