

Learning Harmony

“Early again!” Jacob Stern mutters irritably as he fumbles with the door. He was trying to listen to Mozart.

He takes in high cheek bones, pulled back hair, and an ill-fitting t-shirt. This is not his student.

“Sorry,” says the woman. “We hear your music. My daughter, she want play violin.”

A small girl stands beside her: a miniature of her mother. Behind, in the street, the usual gang of kids are playing loud and rough.

“I don’t teach children,” he says, and shuts the door.

No beginners. It’s too exhausting to explain the basics of notation and tonality, in which he has been fluent for nearly eight decades. For years, he taught only talented, advanced players. Now, just a handful of adult amateurs. No great ambition or talent, but they pay enough to serve his meagre needs. He has no pension: the instrument he played in the Symphony Orchestra was supposed to provide one, but even though his arthritic fingers no longer play to his satisfaction, he cannot bring himself to sell it.

He turns off the music and prepares for his student.

Next day, he recognises the little girl outside, skipping. She is singing as she does so, perfectly in tune. Intrigued, despite himself, he puts on some Tchaikovsky, loud. Some of the children cover their ears and make rude gestures, but the girl stands still, listening. He wonders, briefly, what it would be like to have had children: for grandchildren to fill his house.

A few days later, the doorbell rings again.

“Her name is Anna,” says the mother. “She ask every day. I not can pay every week. I am cleaner. But she come every two week? Please?”

Perhaps the accent reminds him of his own immigrant status. Or the determination to provide education for her daughter, to prioritise music over new clothes, reminds him of his parents. Something shifts in Jacob and he decides that, perhaps, he might find energy for a child once a fortnight.

“She can come on Saturday,” he says, “and we’ll see.”

She comes.

“She not have instrument,” says her mother.

Jacob nods. They will not play today. Instead, he asks her to sing; to clap in time. She does so with a serious joy and a hunger in her eyes. He pulls out a small, dusty case. A precious possession carried to England in 1941. He doesn't know what his parents left behind to make space for it.

"I will change the strings and you can have it next time," he tells Anna. Her eyes shine.

"How much?" asks her mum, warily.

"I lend all my students their first violin," he lies.

Next Saturday, she is with friends in the road. He makes a sweet, black coffee and sits down to watch.

The week after, she receives the violin with reverence, stroking it, courteously requesting its friendship. Jacob finds himself able to explain the basics with surprising freshness. A pattern develops. One week, he teaches her, the other he watches her.

One Saturday, he cannot see her. Probably, she is indoors, playing on a computer. He doesn't understand such things.

But perhaps she is ill. It worries him – reminds him of his older sister, who survived the perilous journey in 1941, but not polio, three years later.

Should he check on her? He's learnt that she lives across the road. He assumes they rent a flat. He is so lucky that his parents were left this house.

He deliberates until his next student rings the bell, and the moment passes.

Next lesson, he opens the door swiftly. She has learned everything he asked. Her fingers find the precise pitches along the unmarked strings. Her right hand draws the bow like a paintbrush, the sound clear and resonant. Jacob is close to tears of frustration over waiting two weeks before he can show her more.

"Anna," he says, as she leaves. "Would you like to come next week? I don't mind about payment. Will you ask your mother?"

"Thank you," she says, "but my mother says we must pay for things. We must not let people say that we live here as 'spongers'."

Jacob nods. He understands what it is to have to be twice as good as the natives.

But she is twice as good.

All week, he thinks of his own mother. She never quite believed that this house could be hers, though the couple who took them in left it to them in true friendship and gratitude for all she had done. Eventually, he makes a plan.

He cancels his Saturday morning students so he need not rush. He leaves his house warily, noticing that Anna is again missing from the rabble.

“Alright, Grandad!” shouts one of them, laughing raucously as if it were an insult.

Jacob approaches Anna’s house, wondering which floor is hers. Beautifully, the sound of a violin answers two questions. She is not outside because she is practicing, on the ground floor.

“Mr Stern!” says Anna’s mother. “Is everything good? Anna work hard?”

Jacob smiles.

“My dear, Anna is a delight. I wanted to ask you to help me.”

He is plied with tea and cake. The family’s aversion to hand-outs matched by fierce generosity. He explains that he is struggling to keep up with his housework.

“I wondered whether you might work for me, perhaps twice a week?” He tells her what he would pay.

“Mr Stern, you are neighbour. Let me do this for you. It is gift.”

He shakes his head. “You pay me for Anna’s lessons. I will pay you to clean my house.”

She concedes. It is fair.

“But you can give me another gift,” he continues. “You can bring Anna and let us practice together while you work.”

Slowly, she smiles, then laughs. Her pride is preserved and her daughter will learn more quickly. Better than that, they have become friends.

As Jacob crosses back to his home, he waves to the playing children.