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## *Musician, Interrupted*

*By David Goodman*

When I was 18, I knew exactly what I was going to do when I grew up. I was going to be a professional musician. I played the clarinet and was studying with a famous Juilliard professor. Next stop: the New York Philharmonic or the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Those were my favorite orchestras, so naturally I assumed I was destined for one of them. The principal clarinet chair in either ensemble would suit me fine.

I wasn't cocky so much as blissfully, stunningly ignorant about the Real World—especially the rough-and-tumble world of music. I was as naïve as the high school basketball player who, having won all his games in his hometown, figures he is the next Michael Jordan. To my mind, it was a straight shot from where I sat to the seats my musical heroes occupied. It never occurred to me that anything could knock me off course.

In my senior year of high school, I was confronted with a fateful choice: my clarinet teacher offered that I could study with him at the renowned Juilliard School of Music in New York. Or I could attend college, perhaps majoring in music. I agonized over the decision. My parents, who had been nothing but supportive of my musical pursuits all these years, weighed in with advice that shocked me.

"You may get to the Philharmonic or the BSO," my mother granted. "But it may be by way of Oklahoma, Mexico, and Iowa. It's called paying your dues."

My teacher, David Weber, was more oblique. Despite having dangled the prospect of studying with him at Juilliard, he refused to press or lobby. He wanted me to make up my own mind. "Music can be a hard life," he conceded. He related that his son was a professional trumpet player. "It hasn't been easy for him."

After much soul searching, I decided to go to college. I figured I would get the best of both worlds: I would study with Harold Wright, principal clarinet in the Boston Symphony and my musical idol, while getting a liberal arts education.

Within two weeks of starting my freshman year at Harvard, I suffered the fate of so many big fish who arrive there from their small ponds: I was abruptly put in my place. Of the two college orchestras, one had no openings for clarinets, while the other had one seat available. (This is the curse of woodwind players, all of whom are gunning for two or three seats in the orchestra. "You end up waiting for people to die," one pro recently confessed to me.) I auditioned for the one open seat and made the final round. But the seat ultimately went to a senior.

My hunt for a new mentor also went badly. Harold Wright informed me that he didn't teach college freshmen; I should call him in a few years if I was intent on a career in music. He referred me to the second clarinetist in the BSO—a kind old gentleman whom I found neither inspired nor inspiring. After a few lessons with him, I stopped.

So there I was. I went to Cambridge thinking my musical world would expand vastly, but in a few short weeks I found myself with no teacher and virtually no performance opportunities. I did manage to land a spot playing lead alto sax in the jazz band. It was fun consolation, but not the musical Big League I had in mind.

Throughout my freshman year, my clarinets receded slowly to the back of my closet. New passions—politics, academics, mountain climbing, girlfriends—crowded in to claim the time and energy I'd once devoted to music. I had taken a momentous turn, but was barely aware of having done so.

After college, I embarked on a career as a writer. I became a telemark ski fanatic. I fell madly in love with a fabulous woman. We moved from Boston to Vermont; we married and had two children. Somewhere along the way, a couple decades went by. At age 43, my life has been rich and full of adventures. But my musical ambitions—both the desire to play beautifully and the fantasy of recognition—remained in the back of my mental closet, as it were, encased,

*continued on page 18*

untended, and hauntingly unresolved. I had given my wife and children only a vague awareness of my former obsession. They would get a glimpse into this world whenever we moved, and a moment would come when I would lovingly extricate my instruments from hibernation, only to place them unopened and unplayed in a new resting place in the next home. Now and then my family would insist that I take out my clarinet and “play something!” Like a circus performer I would oblige, eliciting giggles and wows. But I found it too painful to consider playing seriously. That risked igniting passions—or were they regrets?—that felt beyond control.

Then, last fall, my 10-year old daughter Ariel had to choose a band instrument in school. I gently suggested she try clarinet. “Maybe I could help you,” I offered. I retrieved my first student clarinet (the beater) from the back of my closet. Its pads had been eaten by bugs, and the keys clicked and clacked like worn valves of an old jalopy. I had it fixed up, then proudly presented her with the burnished old horn. She found she liked playing. Soon, intrigued by the instrument’s heritage, she began asking me about my own youthful interest in music.

As promised, I took out my own instrument to play alongside her. When I opened the familiar case lined in chocolate brown velvet, the past roared into the present with unexpected ferocity. Intending to demonstrate a simple scale, I found myself playing a long-suppressed Brahms clarinet sonata. When I showed Ariel how to place her fingers, a Mozart concerto burst forth. To my amaze-

ment, it was as if my fingers had waited patiently for me to return the ebony and silver instrument to its place. By some strange miracle, my mouth and fingers knew just what to do.

That was a year ago, and ever since then I have been like a parched man who has stumbled onto an oasis holding cool water. I cannot drink enough.

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My musical life seems to have begun at around age four. At least, that’s how old I was when a family photograph captured me conducting Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony wearing only underwear and a cape that I had fashioned from a towel. I strike a flamboyant pose in front of my record player.

Around kindergarten, I began taking piano lessons with Mr. Multer. He would draw funny pictures of figures with oversized heads in the back of my lesson book. I couldn’t wait for the weekly installment of drawings of Prunella and Priscilla. The lessons themselves weren’t as memorable.

In third grade, I began playing cello and clarinet in school. After a year of ping-ponging between lessons, it was clear that I had to pare down the orchestra amassing in my bedroom. My decision was ultimately guided by lust: I had a crush on Lila Ianello, the girl who played clarinet in band next to me. I became a clarinetist. Lila, unfortunately, was unimpressed.

My first clarinet teacher was Mr. Caputo, whom I took up with around seventh grade. He was a rotund, jovial man who amazed me by how fantastically loud he could play. By ninth grade, I was starting to show enough determination and aptitude that my mother went looking for a new teacher. She found Lawrence Sobol, a fine musician, teacher, and recording artist on Long Island. My mother schlepped me 45 minutes each way every week to study with him in the basement of his mother’s house, where he lived.

Mr. Sobol introduced me to the world of chamber music, performance, and musical history. A corpulent man with combed-back hair who dwarfed the licorice stick in his hands, he recast my humble music making in grand terms. He regaled me with stories of the great musicians, encouraged me to listen to recordings of clarinet masters such as Harold Wright and Ralph McLane, and trained me in a French style of playing that strove for a beautiful, liquid tone. When I was 17, in a time-honored rite of passage, Mr. Sobol informed me that I was ready to study with his former teacher in New York City, David Weber.

This was a serious step up. Weber was then principal clarinetist with the New York City Ballet and a faculty member at Juilliard. He had performed under many of the great conductors: starting as a clarinetist in the NBC Symphony under Arturo Toscanini and going on to play in the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, and the Symphony of the Air. He was now among the last of the great old school pedagogues.

I traveled two hours on trains and subways each way from Long Island to take lessons with him. He lived in a lovely, spacious apartment on the Upper West Side. As I would enter the front hall with its dark wood trim, I felt as if I were being ushered into a musical sanctuary. He taught in a large room where we sat beneath autographed photographs of the great conductors with whom he had worked. Bernstein, Toscanini, and Stokowski peered down at me. Sufficiently humbled and occasionally terrified, I would offer my week's efforts to Weber's scrutiny. A short, trim, mustachioed man, he was sparing with compliments, and could be severe with criticism.

"The most important thing," he would implore me, "is to have a beautiful sound." He would then demonstrate, bringing the clarinet to his lips. A rich, round, mellifluous tone would fill the room and ring in my ears. All my learning flowed from the magnificence of those notes.

I felt lucky, intimidated, and fond of Weber. A mentor in the old fashioned sense, he tempered his austere teaching style with grandfatherly concern. "Do you have a girlfriend?" he would say, interrupting my scales. He wanted to know about my life, what I was planning for my future. "You must be a romantic," he beseeched with a twinkle in his eye. "You cannot play music well until you know what love is."

I had studied with Weber for a year and a half when I went off to college. Though I had hoped to stay in touch with him and to maintain the sort of passion and rigor he instilled, these intentions did not survive the disappointments and distractions I encountered in college. I took a few lessons with him on school breaks that first year. But by my sophomore year I had stopped making the trip. I didn't know how to be a musician if it wasn't an all-consuming passion. My mentor, and my musical dreams, retreated slowly into the past.

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Just before raising her baton to begin rehearsal, conductor Anne Decker paused. "There are some new faces," she said. "Let's go around and introduce ourselves." It was the opening rehearsal last fall of the Monteverdi Capitol Orchestra, a 14-year old community ensemble in Montpelier. The orchestra's qualification rules are simple: Anyone who wants to may play. The

musical skill of participants ranges from those struggling to read music, to experienced musicians. We meet weekly at the local high school; you chip in five dollars a night to help cover the music and lights. It's a long way from the BSO, but what the group lacks in raw musical talent, it makes up for in enthusiasm.

The introductions worked their way to the woodwinds. "I planned to be a professional clarinetist in a major orchestra," I said sheepishly when it came my turn. "This is my first rehearsal in 20 years." The other musicians clapped and laughed. With that, we launched into an animated reading of Brahms Fourth Symphony.

It had been barely a month since I began playing clarinet again alongside my daughter. But it had taken me only a week to realize that I could not stuff the genie back into the bottle. Thus the Capitol Orchestra, and later the delightful Montpelier Chamber Orchestra: I needed to play. Making music again—with Ariel, with friends—has been pure pleasure. Gone is the pressure of ambition and identity that were once intimately bound up with my practice and performing. Now it just the unfettered joy of connecting with others, with music, with myself. But there is a curious urgency to my music making now. Partly it is hunger: I am frantically making up for lost time. But there is also a faint anxiety, as if I dare not put down my clarinet, for fear it might be another decade before I pick it up again.

I have been playing like a man possessed, with a fearlessness that astounds and delights me, and slightly puzzles my family. And I've found in central Vermont a vibrant, warm, and welcoming community of players, ensembles, and audiences. By December, I played a Brahms clarinet sonata at a local church. By January, I had formed a chamber group with a wonderful pianist and violist, and we gave a concert last spring. Over the past year I have performed in three concerts with two different orchestras.

Astonishingly, it feels as if I have picked up where I left off two decades ago. Only I think I am a better musician now. I like to think, as Mr. Weber hinted in a lesson long ago, it's because in my years off I learned to love, as well as to live.

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Not long after my musical past exploded into the present, I realized I needed to tie the circle back. I needed to visit my old teacher. I dialed the number with trepidation, as if I were the 18-year old disciple hoping for a audience with the master.

"Mr. Weber? This is David Goodman. I don't expect you to remember me, but I was a student of yours many years ago. I was wondering if you are you still teaching clarinet."

There was a momentary silence on the other end of the phone. "I'll be 90 years old in a few months, but I'm still teaching," he said with a chuckle. "Not bad, eh?!" He was leaving to give a master class in France, but he offered to give me a lesson on his return. He wasn't sure he remembered me, but that didn't seem to matter. "It will be a pleasure to re-make our acquaintance," he said.

A few weeks later, I drove down to New York and made my way to the familiar building.

"Come in, come in," he said when he answered the door. He was just as I remembered him. I walked back through the dark wood entry, and into his studio, where I took the seat that I left 25 years before. Bernstein, Toscanini, and Stokowski still peered down at me. But this time, I thought I detected smiles on their faces. I wasn't scared to be here anymore. Just honored.

Mr. Weber picked up his clarinet. "I'm not going to sound the way I did the last time you heard me," he warned. "But I do OK for a guy who's ninety." He raised the instrument to his lips. A rich, velvety sound poured out, caressing my senses and filling every corner of the room.

"The most important thing," he began, "is to have a beautiful sound."

We played, talked, and laughed for four hours. The strict taskmaster of my youth, whose sparse feedback could once ruin my week, had morphed into a kind, gentle guru who was generous with praise. Several hours into my lesson, he interrupted me.

"You would have done fine," he said.

I was unsure what he was referring to.

"You're a fine player," he said. "You would have had a seat in a major orchestra." I was taken off guard by the comment, and mumbled an understated "thank you." I continued playing.

"But you were lucky," he broke in a moment later. He smiled gently as he peered at me through his horn-rimmed glasses. "You had other talents. You didn't have to make a living from your music."

With that, we returned to working on the Mozart Clarinet Trio, the supposed reason for my visit. An hour later, my lesson was finished. I promised to return and bring him a copy of my latest book. He was excited about that.

I ambled down West End Avenue carrying my clarinets and lost in thought. I had abandoned a dream more than two decades ago, confused and unresolved about my choice. I walked away from my clarinet lesson with a wistful pang, wondering where that road not taken could have led me. But I strangely somehow also felt a little freer. A little more sure of the choice I had made. I had left music, but it had never left me—and it never would.

Maybe that's why I had returned. I had come back to Mr. Weber to learn something about music. He knew better, and taught me something about myself. 🌍