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Six o'clock in the morning

I had to set my alarm for 6 o'clock in the morning to drive to the airport. Whenever I set my alarm for that time, it evokes a particular memory. It's like Bill Murray's alarm clock in the film *Groundhog Day*, clicking round implacably to the fateful moment, waking him with a jolt every morning at the same hour in an unending sequence.

As a schoolchild, I used to get up at 6am every day to practise the piano before I went to school, and 6am is still That Time for me. In Edinburgh it was dark, of course, or it feels now as if it was always dark, as well as freezing cold. My round metal blue alarm clock would jiggle noisily on the chest of drawers, and I would half-fall out of bed in the attempt to bang it on the crown of its head to stop it. Our house was not centrally heated and there was no heating in my bedroom. At first I got washed, dressed and grumpily went straight to the piano, but after a while my piano teacher decreed that I must eat something before I began to practise. This was a welcome innovation because it meant I could delay the start of my practising by slowly eating a bowl of cereal. Eventually, my delaying tactic was rumbled, and I had to set the alarm ten minutes earlier to allow for the cereal. I was grumpy because it struck me as unfair that I had to get up while my parents were still in bed.

I began my practice with scales and arpeggios, which eventually I could do on automatic pilot, thinking about something completely different (often making up stories in my

head). My main practice was devoted to the three piano pieces I had to prepare for my lesson. Between pieces, I popped over to the electric bar fire and crouched down to warm my hands. Finally, my favourite bit, when I was allowed to play through something new just for fun. I was a good sight-reader and had an insatiable appetite for what Dave Eggers calls 'non-required reading'. My mother sympathised and was always borrowing music from the library for me, or buying me albums like *Jewels from the Ballet*, *Favourite Strauss Waltzes*, *Oklahoma* and *Russ Conway's Piano Magic*. By now Dad would be in the kitchen putting the finishing touches to the family's cooked breakfast of bacon, sausage, beans, black pudding and fried bread, a meal my sisters and I loved on those cold mornings, but an example of the kind of diet which was later implicated in Scotland's obesity crisis.

The idea of getting up early in the morning to practise the piano was not mine. It arose because there was so much homework to do when I got home from school, and the amount increased as the years went by. Especially when I started playing the violin as a second instrument, taking music theory exams, and eventually learning percussion too, there just wasn't enough time to fit everything in. I left the house at 8am to get the bus to school. When I got home, often after 5pm if we had orchestra practice, hockey or debating after school, I was tired. It was scarcely possible to embark then on piano practice, violin practice, and a couple of hours of school homework. So my mother decided there was no alternative but for me to start my day earlier. In due course, my piano teacher said I should really be doing more than the hour and a half I was fitting in before leaving for school. I added a second burst of piano practice in the afternoons, though perhaps burst is the wrong word. Looking back on the teenage years when I did my national school exams, it seems to me that I was on the go from before 6am until bedtime with scarcely a moment to stare out of the window (an activity which I now treasure). In a way, I never had such an intense timetable again, at least not day after day and month after month like that.

January

I was caught in a pincer movement operated by my mother and my piano teacher. I resisted, even though I did basically like playing the piano. My mother always said that I would thank her in the end (and she was right). But, like so many other youngsters in that position, I felt that I was practising to gratify someone other than myself. My teacher was pleased with me, my mother was pleased with me, and from time to time I got to play in a concert and realised that other people enjoyed hearing me play as well. I got enough positive feedback to justify the effort. Left to my own devices, however, I would never have set that alarm for 6am of my own volition.

In my student years, both at music college and later at university, I had a prolonged crisis about practising. This too seems to be very common amongst musicians who've already notched up years and years of practice by the time they leave school. When it was up to me to decide whether to practise or not, I felt completely at sea. My mother was no longer alive by then. Nobody was going to prod me into getting up; in fact by the time I got to university nobody would have reproached me if I hadn't practised at all. Nevertheless I found it very hard to forge any schedule of my own. I still felt kind of mutinous about practising, even when there was nobody to mutiny against.

It dawned on me eventually that I had to make the transition from reading someone else's script for my life to writing my own. I think I'd always found a certain perverse satisfaction in telling myself I was only practising because someone else had made me. I wasn't the insufferable prig who actually wanted to get up while it was still dark to play the piano. I only did it because I was made to, didn't I? But now, if I was going to continue with any kind of purpose, or even become a professional musician, I had to choose it of my own accord – if we ever make 'free' choices. I was the one who had to want to do it, and I wasn't sure if I did. It took years – probably into my thirties – before I was sure I was playing the piano because I wanted to, rather than because someone else wished it. Had I wanted it all along?

Bilbao

The first concert of the year always brings a mixture of feelings. A break from daily piano practice over Christmas and New Year is welcome, partly because time away from the instrument provides an opportunity for that mysterious thing, appetite, to make itself felt again. I often practise simply because I *have* to, so it's good to be reminded of what it feels like to play because I *want* to.

My first concert of this year is with my trio, the Florestan Trio, at the Philharmonic Society in Bilbao, one of Spain's oldest concert societies. When I first played there, I rather hoped the Spanish audience would be hugely demonstrative, standing on their seats and cheering. In fact, the Bilbao audience is very reserved and dignified, a characteristic I've come to like now that I've understood a bit more about the seriousness of this northern city, with people hurrying about in their berets and winter coats in the rain. I like to take a newspaper into a café and watch them dispatch their morning espressos *con brio* on their way to work, every inch the proud architects of modern Spain.

The Philharmonic Society Hall in Bilbao is like a Spanish counterpart of the Wigmore Hall in London, with its cosy old 'green room' full of photographs of artists who've played there during the last hundred years. It's always touching to be surrounded by visual evidence of musicians from earlier decades,

and it comes as rather a shock to think that we ourselves are part of that line. So many of those earlier performers, particularly the Spanish ones, have a fiery dark glamour which makes me literally pale in comparison.

Coming off stage, I realise I have been holding my breath, as I often do in concerts. Sometimes I only realise it when I've done so for long enough to provoke a fit of explosive coughing, difficult to combine with graceful piano playing. It's very contrary of me to hold my breath, because when I'm on stage I have the feeling that playing to a large audience is the equivalent of *exhaling* hugely. It helps to imagine myself radiating out to the listeners, especially because, as a pianist, I don't actually face them and therefore don't have a natural chance to establish a rapport. Before I start to play, I sometimes try to summon up a mental image of myself at the piano like the sun in the centre of a child's drawing, its rays fanning out into the hall. Occasionally the audience seems to send back its own reciprocal rays of warmth.

Against this background thought of 'breathing out' over the audience, it's perplexing to find myself holding my breath. The effort of communicating with the listeners, projecting sound to the back of the darkened hall, seems to be counteracted by a need to conserve my own forces. I want to give, but need to find a way to do it without feeling depleted. This is a constant battle which seems to open new fronts all the time. Some musicians speak of drawing energy from the music, others of drawing strength from the audience. Certainly one needs to find a balance between breathing out and breathing in, or one wouldn't last long as a performer. I remind myself of the literal meaning of 'inspiration'.