

MUSIC 1

“If you don’t start now, you’ll never be able to play anything properly”. It was Spring 1942 and my parents were telling me in a very direct way that I was old enough to have piano lessons. After all, they had a point. I suppose I had been idling my spare time away running wild in the woods and fields of Branscombe, although I had already shown an interest in music - first of all during Ann Driver’s wireless broadcasts ‘Music and Movement’, which I had listened to with my mother. I had also picked out tunes on the piano in the front room and watched my father improvise and play from memory. I wondered how he could do that.

It was decided that my father was not the right person to teach me so they made arrangements for me to have lessons with Mrs Gertrude Restorick, organist at the Parish Church, experienced piano teacher and village worthy. My parents prepared me for my first visit by pointing out that Mrs Restorick was a very particular lady and I must always be polite and listen carefully to what she told me. Armed with this advice, I was soon on my bike riding down through the village to Mrs Restorick’s house on Vicarage Hill, with my little brown music case on the handlebars. This was to be my Saturday morning routine for the remaining years of the war.

Mrs Restorick was in her mid 60s when she took me on as a pupil. Her manner was kindly and encouraging, but she made it clear from the outset that learning to play the piano was a serious matter and regular practice was essential for success. How right she was! At this distance in time it’s interesting for me to reflect a little on how she helped me on this long road.

I can’t recall my very first lessons with Mrs Restorick but there must have been quite a lot of preliminary work before she presented me with my first music book - ‘Scenes at a Farm’ - 20 pieces by the Manchester - based composer Walter Carroll (1869-1955). Each piece has two lines of music prefaced by a little poem. Mrs Restorick would play a section to show me what I was aiming for. Then she went through what I would need to do - learn the notes, count the time aloud, repeat passages slowly, hands separately until I could speed up with hands together, and so on. Only when she was satisfied with my playing would she give the piece a pencil tick. I still have my music books and I’m pleased to see that she eventually ticked each piece in the set from 1. ‘The Farmhouse’ through 10, ‘The Lost Lamb’ to the last piece 20. ‘Round the Maypole’. All twenty are highly musical and delightful to play.

After 'Scenes at a Farm' I progressed to Book 2 'The Countryside' - 18 more demanding gems, inspired by landscapes and the countryside, with titles such as 'Up with the Lark', 'Purple Heather', 'The Village Band' and 'The Poor Road Mender'. These characterful little tone-poems require patience, attention to detail and a creative approach - qualities needed for good piano playing. One piece in this set which I've played over and over again is 'The White Tailed Rabbit'. About twenty years ago we were amused when our three year old grandson took to hopping around the table every time I played it.

Leafing through the pages of these two Walter Carroll music books, I see that Mrs Restorick added some margin comments in pencil. They show that as I learned the Carroll pieces I was also doing piano exercises and learning scales. For instance, she wrote 'The scale of C has no sharps or flats' 'Remember that the scale of G has one sharp, F'. Another margin comment told me that I must note the difference between a tie and a slur and always pay attention to phrasing and expression. These days when I play the piano I often start with some scales, trying to remember the correct fingering, as taught by Mrs Restorick 75 years ago. In one margin note she wrote '11am PROMPT next Saturday'- so I was late for at least one lesson.

Looking back on my time with Mrs Restorick, I think I was fortunate to have her as my first teacher. For me Walter Carroll's music was an inspired choice and I see that 'Scenes at a Farm' and 'The Countryside', first published in 1912 and 1913, are still available. I now know that he had a long and distinguished career in music education and recently I've been pleasantly surprised to find lots of videos on Utube of children and adults playing his piano music, showing that interest in his compositions has continued long after his death in 1955.

As she approached the age of 70, Mrs Restorick retired from piano teaching and from her post as organist of the Parish Church. The vicar appointed my father as the new organist and I had a break from piano lessons. Later on I was taught by Clifford Brown, organist of Sidmouth Parish Church - but that's another story.

I saw Mrs Restorick for the last time in 1952 and she asked me what I was playing now that I was having lessons with Mr Brown. I mentioned some short pieces by Chopin and Beethoven - "Oh!" She exclaimed, "They were very good composers!"..... I still have fond memories of her.

Geoff Squire.12/8/2017.

