

Remembering My Piano Teacher Katinka Daniel, 1913–2010

Katinka Scipiades Daniel, piano teacher and fixture in the local classical music scene for many years, died recently at the age of 97. Thirty years ago I was one of her students.

She lived at the top of an impossibly steep hill behind my junior high school, and every week I would trudge up to her house for my lesson after school. I dreaded the climb up the hill, as it always seemed to be hot and I would arrive sweaty and out of breath. I dreaded my lesson just as much, for no matter how much I had practiced that week, I knew it would never be enough. Mrs. Daniel (as I always called her) more than lived up to her reputation as a demanding teacher.

Over time the pages of my music became blackened and reddened from her repeated, colorful markings. Here the phrase begins! This is the line! Subdued here! Expressive there! I often mused how it might be possible to reconstruct the original notes from her markings alone.



The eventual appearance of all my music.

In this way, week after week and year after year, a musical education was slowly forged. We worked our way through Bach, the classical composers, the romantics, and near the end, her personal favorites and countrymen, the Hungarians. As a good but not great pianist, I had some modest successes along the way. One time she teared up after I played a piece by the Hungarian composer Liszt particularly well. She said I had

reminded her of her departed, beloved husband, who had been a renowned concert pianist and conductor. The moment would not be repeated, though internally I often wished it would be, not because I wanted to upset her, but because I interpreted her tears as a supreme compliment. I wanted to show her that I, too, could understand and communicate the essence of music.

In those few idle moments when she was perhaps occupied with something else, her house provided an interesting place to explore, full as it was of rare and fragile mementos that we were all cautioned to not touch. The mementos, along with fragments of stories overheard here and there, hinted at a long previous life that was both illustrious and fraught with horror: life under a Communist regime; a forced, 12-year separation from her husband; survival through the Hungarian revolution; and, ultimately, a dramatic escape to this country. These were experiences that I, in my tender, middle class Santa Barbara existence, could not relate to. Mrs. Daniel herself scarcely mentioned them, nor did she appear to be affected by them. As a result I was deeply impressed that from these travails she emerged stronger in spite of them, or perhaps because of them.

Mrs. Daniel was tremendously energetic. She never sat placidly. Instead, she whisked into a room like a whirlwind, a busybody of activity the whole time, and whisked back out again. Did she quietly slurp her cornflakes in the morning like the rest of us? Surely she must have, but I prefer to think of her as whisking down to the kitchen in the morning, grabbing a piece of toast at most, and rushing off to her first task of the day.

She was passionate, upbeat, and uplifting. She always smiled; she was not one to scowl or frown. Her passion for music, for her students, for her own children, for everything in her life it seemed, was simply intrinsic to her being. In her warbly, richly accented voice with the drawn-out vowels, she never muttered; everything she said was expressed as deeply felt truth tinged with excitement.

She could be comical, though perhaps unintentionally so. She was utterly incapable of operating any technical apparatus. She never learned to drive, and it's probably a good thing for the rest of us since even a point-and-shoot camera would fluster her. Worse yet, she was aware of her ineptitude in this regard, which only served to make her nervous. The metronome wound up on the floor more than once—it was the metronome's fault, of course.

We parted ways when I went off to college. Many years later I visited her again, and there she was, her behavior and appearance unchanged from my recollection, busy with a new crop of students. It could have been a moment of disappointment: I had changed and grown so much in the intervening time while she, unchanged, could have been viewed as diminished by comparison. But then I realized that I had forgotten the depth of her passion and vitality, qualities that are not inherent in me but that inspire me. I came away from that visit as impressed as ever.

Thank you, Mrs. Daniel, for a musical education. Thank you, too, for sharing with all of us the example of your life and passion. If I may speak on behalf of all of your former students, in the intersection of our lives with yours, we surely came out in the bargain.

*Greg Janée
December 2010*