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## **My Life as a Musician**

My mother, Ruth Ann Papke Silbar, grew up playing the piano in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I believe she even wrote the class song for her high school class. After high school she went to a two-year teacher's college and came out qualified as a music teacher. She then took a position in a school somewhere in middle Michigan – I don't know where. That lasted until she re-met my father at a high school reunion and they soon after got married. I was their first offspring.

I don't know if, or whether, RAPS was active in music for the next seven or eight years. She was busy enough raising two sons. However, I do know that, after the war, there was a piano in the house in Birmingham. She decided that she would teach me to play that machine. And how to read music. So I did, but I didn't get good enough at it to give a piano recital. One thing we did do together was to play some simple music for four hands. One piece that sticks in my mind was the Andante movement of Beethoven's Seventh. I played the repetitious bass notes.

In addition to Ludwig, she introduced me to the other two B's of long-hair classical music. (Not the long-haired music of today's pop scene – times change.) And she instilled in me a dislike of Tchaikovsky, probably because she had to play his Marche Slav too often as a youth. And shrieking opera.

I could also use that piano to improvise my own tunes. And write them down. By the time I got into middle school and started playing the cornet, the piano helped me score a version of "My Little Margie" for a group of my fellow "musicians" at the Baldwin School. It actually wasn't a very good transcription, because I never set it up for anyone to have a solo – i.e., we played in monotonous unison. Somewhat later, maybe about age 14, I discovered 20<sup>th</sup> Century classical music (starting with Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" and Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony). Hey, I thought, *I can do something like that!*

So I used the piano to write a piece for two oboes, a viola, and (was it?) a French horn. I remember it started with a discord consisting of simultaneous b-and-c notes. I of course never heard it played. I did work up courage to leave a copy for the high-school music teachers to read and criticize. I think they actually looked at it but I never heard anything from them about it. And thus I decided that maybe I shouldn't try to become a composer. I am still a bit sorry, however, that I never kept a copy of the piece for myself.

My maternal grandmother, Elsie, also had a very nice piano, a baby grand, which may have already been in her home in Grand Rapids from when RAPS was still in high

school. On at least one of the occasions when I was visiting her and Grampa Freddie, I would sit down at it and improvise Debussy-like chords and riffs. That might have been why, near the end of her life, she told me that, when she passed, that piano would be mine. It, along with the two large Karastan rugs in her living room.

At the time of her death Maggie and I were already settled in our Los Alamos home. It was somewhat difficult to arrange shipment of the rugs and piano, so, my mother, who was her mother's executor, made the following suggestion. We would allow the people moving into the now-vacant house to *temporarily* keep them there until I could figure out how to bring them west.

Unfortunately, these tenants also became accustomed to having these items in their living room, and we had some trouble getting them into our possession. But an occasion soon came up when we drove our Plymouth Valiant to Michigan for a family visit. (Both of our families at that time lived in western Michigan or near Detroit.) We were able to extricate the rugs, but not the piano, from the new tenants' home. And get them wrapped and tied onto the top of our car for the ride home. Those rugs, of which I am still quite fond, now occupy the floors of my living room and bed room here at my Brookdale apartment.

But the baby grand was *not* something we could put on top of our car, and it would stay in Elsie's former home until I could figure out its transportation to Los Alamos. Well, not so. The Birmingham piano disappeared when my parents bought the Fenton Independent and moved into a smaller house where it couldn't fit. RAPS decided that she had lived too long in Fenton without a piano there. So, without consulting me, she *sold* her mother's piano. And used the proceeds to buy a small electric organ which *could* fit in the Fenton living room.

Oh, well. Family hassles. When RAPS passed away several decades later, that little organ also disappeared. Nobody asked me if *I* wanted it, but of course I didn't.

Let me now go back in time for a bit. I mentioned above my switching to a cornet about the time I entered middle school. I played in their concert band (no strings). This carried over into playing with the high school concert band. (I don't remember *marching* with the band, but maybe I did.) As for playing the cornet, one thing I had a lot of trouble with was double- and triple-tonguing. I eventually solved this problem by sitting on the toilet by the front-door and trying to learn that tonguing on my green plastic bugle. (This bugle was what I was using in my role as my Boy Scout troop's bugler.) The reason for the far-away location, of course, was (hopefully) to not annoy the other family members (and the dog). It all took a while, but I eventually *did* learn how to triple-tongue, much to the surprise of the high school music teacher who led the band.

I dropped out of the high school band in my junior year so I could participate as a member of the debate team. Although I basically stopped playing the cornet at that time, I did keep it in my possession. However, it was soon the late Fifties and Sixties, and that was the time of the folk music craze. About the time I was finishing high school, I acquired a guitar and joined that craze. Later, when I was in graduate school, I traded in my unused cornet for a case for that guitar.

So, with a guitar accompaniment, I sang mostly folk songs for many years, along with some of the “bawdy” songs we used to sing as Boy Scouts around campfires. This lasted well into the years of my marriage with Maggie. I would serenade her while she prepared supper, but it was mostly for my own entertainment. Eventually, however, the folk music craze petered out, to be replaced by Rock and Roll. Not my cup of music, and the guitar also fell into disuse.

When we were on the exchange visit to Moscow in 1978, one of my fellow exchangees had bought a cheap Russian guitar, which he then passed on to me when he returned to the States. That was when we still had a few months left to our stay, so I picked it up again. This involved a certain amount of re-learning how to play it, but I was able to amuse Lukyanov, the jazz flugelhornist, by playing my version of “Won’t You Come Home, Bill Bailey.” (Of course, he complained that *that* wasn’t really jazz.) On leaving the USSR, I carried the guitar along to Switzerland and ended up giving it to one of the Gruebler boys.

On our return to Los Alamos, I left my folk-music guitar standing decoratively and unused in the corner of our living room. After a decade or two I realized that, like my mother, my aged singing voice had also pretty much deteriorated. So we were able to pass it on to a new owner in one of our garage sales, prior to our translation to Santa Fe. That was a fitting symbol for the end of my career as a musician.