**ME AND THE PIANO**

My earliest memory of being at the piano is around 4/5 years old. We always had a piano in the house and my parents organised lessons for me with Miss Bianca Pecorini in Sutton, Surrey, not far from where we lived in Cheam.

Miss Pecorini, as I had to call her then, was quite a daunting figure to me and I was actually quite scared of her! She was an extremely strict teacher and expected a lot from me over the years. Practice, practice, practice was what I had to do at home every day from week to week.

I recall Miss Pecorini’s hair was always the same – curled at the edges into a tight loop around her head, with lots of pins. She lived with her mother, who appeared to be a gentler character, obviously older and a shorter lady, but with the same hair. When, on occasions, I was a little early for my lesson she would open the door for me, and I would sit in the lobby by the front door waiting for my turn as the previous pupil finished their lesson.

I was very nervous and didn’t say much during my lessons, which lasted for 10 years or so. I can remember, if my fingernails were too long and clicked on the keys, I got a good ticking off and told to cut them … Miss Pecorini actually had nail clippers at the ready! I think I only got scolded once for that. I have never had long fingernails!

One of her ways of teaching was to record my playing on her ‘tape recorder’ – one of those ones where you can see the tape spinning round and she would mark the beginning and end of the recording with little bits of paper … it was a long time ago! She would then point out all my errors! She wasn’t too good at praise.

I dutifully took all my grades, as instructed, and achieved some good results.

I was also entered into the Sutton Music Festival for many years and used to get good remarks and high marks, along with the certificates, but the nerves were incredible. I did not enjoy entering these competitions and waiting for my turn was just awful.

Once I was taking my O’levels at school, after much thought, the lessons discontinued because I had a lot of homework, revising and studying, but also I had just about had enough of the pressure. I nearly didn’t take Music O’level (which was not a tricky subject for me) and when it came to A’levels I was encouraged to take Music, but I just didn’t want to. It was only when my French teacher (I was due to take French A’level) said that I wouldn’t get it, that I had to find another subject to take so, having lost a term’s education, I ended up taking Music (along with Zoology) … and it was the only A’level I got (Grade D)!!!

However, I never lost my love of the piano – I just had a break and I can say now, after all these years, that I am so grateful for my strict teaching and the regular piano practice that I was encouraged to do every day (mainly by Mum). Dad loved listening to me play – so he used to say!

My mother was a very accomplished pianist herself having attended the Royal College of Music in London and became a music teacher after that. My grandmother was also a fabulous concert pianist in Jersey. The one piece, amongst many, that I can remember loving to hear her play when we visited her in Jersey, where she lived, was ‘Le Petit Ane Blanc’ (The Little White Donkey) by Jacques Ibert. It is a difficult piece, and I can recall, even now, watching her fingers and being in awe of her. I did go on to learn that piece myself with Miss Pecorini.

Whilst we were visiting Granny in Jersey, all those years ago, my brother, my cousin and I used to put on a ‘concert’ for Granny and her friends … she had a large open hall where the piano was positioned. The ‘audience’ would be offered nibbles and a glass of something and very politely listen to us! My brother played the recorder, as did I and my cousin and I played duets and solo piano pieces. I can remember getting really nervous ‘performing’ even in a supposedly relaxed atmosphere.

These days I love to sit at the piano and play for pleasure. It is probably the most therapeutic activity that I do. I am very lucky to have inherited my grandmother’s piano (a Steinway) and I also have a Yamaha piano which my Mum bought for me which will be passed on to my daughter (also a very good pretty much self-taught piano player) when the time comes, and she has the space!

The teaching is such a joy to me as I feel that I am passing on my knowledge to others so they can get pleasure from the piano too. I have a different attitude to how I was taught – it is important to be able to read the music and play correctly of course – but more importantly, to me anyway, is to enjoy it. I am flexible with my teaching yet structured at the same time and I always encourage practice. Everyone needs to go at their own pace.

Colin (my husband) loves to sing (he has a wonderful voice) and I enjoy accompanying him – it gets quite loud in our house sometimes!

