



essay

The Violin in Greater Minnesota

by Bill Holm

Walt Whitman, the great music lover among our poets, says this wise line in “A Song of Occupations”: *All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments.* Now listen for the next violin in earshot, be it six-year-old Sven scratching away on his Suzuki, or the ghost of Jascha Heifetz playing the Bach *Chaconne* on an old record. That violin awakes in me the existence of magnificent orchestras manned by a whole sea of violins, but it also reminds me of the determination of stubborn human beings to make and possess music, thus beauty, whatever their unlikely circumstances.

I grew up in a world without violins on a farm in western Minnesota. One neighbor, Old Steve, played fiddle for barn dances; Frank, the town druggist, collected and sold old violins but didn’t play them. In high school we had a band, no orchestra. I played alto saxophone, a far cry from a violin. We marched for parades and football games, much Sousa, no Mozart. The Minneapolis Symphony did not include little Minneota on its tours.

Rural high school teachers in the fifties were paid a starvation pittance so we often found ourselves with odd ducks, desperate for any work. Mr. Peabody, my English teacher, surely qualified as an oddity—a small reserved man with wire-rimmed spectacles. Every day he wore the same heavy gray wool tweed suit with vest and watch chain, precisely knotted tie with a collar pin. He spoke in a soft and cultivated voice, useful for the poets he loved: Keats, Shelley and Tennyson. He lived alone in a rooming house. Rumor had it that his family, in The Cities, had suffered some great tragedy. He seemed old to me then, perhaps in his mid-fifties. His English students inflicted unspeakable cruelty on this shy mild man who exhaled clouds of loneliness. We pelted him with spitballs, giggled when he recited Keats, chatted noisily while he diagrammed sentences. As the class nerd, my heart went out to him. One afternoon after school I went to his classroom to show him some of my poems. I stopped in the

hallway. I heard the sound of a violin practicing music of sublime beauty, playing (I thought) with great skill and feeling. I didn’t disturb him, only stood in the hall, listening, transfixed.

Whenever I could I eavesdropped on his afternoon practice. Finally he discovered me, and invited me to sit and listen. He seemed pleased that someone liked this music. It was the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, that noble E-minor tune. Eventually Mr. Peabody disappeared back to the city, back presumably to his private loneliness. But something had awakened in me. I pestered my parents to buy the LP of that concerto, though after 45 years it is now lost or worn out.

I’ve heard the Mendelssohn many times since with many orchestras and many soloists, good and mediocre. But as Walt Whitman assured us, the power of the violin still reminds me of the interior orchestra that, once awakened, plays whenever you need it. It requires no electricity, only desire. There are still not many violins or visits by fine orchestras in western Minnesota, but one is enough. That’s why it is necessary for the great orchestras with their great players to come to unlikely, even woebegone places to offer their gifts. Maybe one human being waits to be awakened who, at the sound of that violin, will be stabbed at the core of his heart and reminded of his true humanity.

This was the first of several essays written for Showcase by the late Bill Holm, a poet, essayist, professor and music lover extraordinaire. A native of Minneota, Minnesota, he lived there until his death in 2009, except for a year he spent in China, which yielded the essay collection Coming Home Crazy, and summers he spent in north Iceland. Two of his books in particular reflect his love for music: Boxelder Bug Variations and Playing the Black Piano. His final book, published posthumously, is The Chain Letter of the Soul: New and Selected Poems.