

## ".....Play On"

The Sod Jobber

(In this second part of his article, "If music be the food of love..." the author continues his tone deaf review of the making of a musical pygmy.)

**I**T WAS ALL TOM'S FAULT. I could sing — what if Eric Morecombe once defined as "all the right notes but not necessarily in the right order", and I had proved that playing the piano was not for the person who had the application of an England cricketer. Then came along Tom.

We were part of a Christian working party learning the rudiments of estate management in deepest Sussex. Half the week was spent clutching the Bible, the other half a machete; "incongruity" was not in our vocabulary. Then late one afternoon, from a distant part of the grounds came the unmistakable sound of bagpipes. It had to be Tom, that quietly spoken Scot. Once again I was hooked. Here was the chance I'd been waiting for, indeed all destiny had been pointing to this moment. The pint sized wimp was about to make a big noise.

Back in college, Tom's patience with his new student was touching. I bought a chanter, the sort of business end of a set of bagpipes, and music book, before practising my grace notes for penetrating hours. Rather surprised I had any friends left afterwards. Tom assured me that practice with the real thing needed to be in a wide open space like Port Meadow. But have you ever tried cycling up The High with a set of bagpipes thrown nonchalantly over your shoulders?

No, I practised in my lodgings, a rather grand term for a ten by ten bedsit high above the Iffley Road. I should have listened to Tom.

All went well for several weeks, well, that is, except for fellow lodgers. Then my friend below was grating his ears over yet another rendition of "Macpherson's Lament" when suddenly all went silent followed by an almighty thump on his ceiling and the sad wail of deflating pipes. Rushing upstairs he found me spark out on my back, straddling by a limp set of deceased bagpipes.

What Tom Pierce had called my "skirlings and groans" had suffered a terminal lack of wind. Perhaps I was destined never to play an instrument. Yet when the break-through came, years later, it was all so easy. Teaching up in cloth cap and pigeon country I went on a course at Chesterfield Teacher's Centre (anyone with a long memory might remember such centres of excellence) to learn to play the folk guitar. Talk about a piece of cake! Within a couple of weeks, "Drunken Sailor" was mastered: I could sing it and almost play it.

Over the following months and years I went from strength to strength. It's difficult to describe the satisfaction of finally succeeding with an instrument. With a pair of lusty lungs and a highly strung instrument I learnt to tackle everything from "Hey Jude" to "Silent Night".

The wife claims my rendition of the latter with a handkerchief over my mouth and no guitar in sight is particularly moving.

And so to the latest challenge: could I ever turn my hand, or preferably both hands, back to the piano which I'd learned for a single year while still at school?

Thirty years of stiff-fingered inactivity had passed since then. Occasionally during this time I'd had spurts of interest but each one lasted no more than a fortnight. It pains me to remember one further occasion when, as a new teacher, fresh from college and wet behind the everywhere, I was asked by a dear old music teacher if I played the piano. I couldn't lie although my playing standard hurt more than the truth. Well then, how would I like to play in assembly one day?

To refuse would have been out of place - she was too sweet and I was too stupid. I had three weeks to practice "We shall overcome". To cut a long story short, we did eventually, though it wouldn't have been more surprising if gentlemen with drawn faces and black coats hadn't wheeled out a coffin afterwards. I wasn't asked to play again.

Then at forty-something, when a shrapnel wound stopped my writer's training, I found myself with time on my hands and a piano at my fingertips. Opening up "To Music" by Schubert there were suddenly fingers and thumbs everywhere. But this time I was determined. In a moment of rash judgement I told the children at school that once I'd played the piano and, before the end of 1993, I'd play to them. Two hundred faces smirked in anticipation; my fate was sealed.

Slowly the repertoire widened. Over confidence allied itself to misplaced confidence. I started to play my way through Schumann's "Scenes of Childhood" and, after much clattering and cursing, I could make a recognizable attempt at "Teddybears Picnic".

Enjoyment returned but year-end loomed. Playing it safe, I decided to stick with "To Music" for the dreaded day.

After twenty years of facing children and twenty years of preaching to congregations, I was overcome by fear. Sweat literally dripped off me. Not one of the children believed I really could play (no comments, please). Putting off the evil moment, I wiped my brow theatrically before wringing out my previously wetted hanky over the front row of squealing infants. Then with the piano firmly between me and the smirkers, I sat down — the moment of truth had arrived. "To Music" rang out perfectly and it took all of ten seconds before the kids twigged they were listening to a tape from the recorder I'd concealed behind the piano.

Further delay was then out of the question: England Expects. And this time what they heard was me, except I've never played it so badly before or ever since. I was consumed by nerves. Eric Morecombe was right after all. Two minutes later I emerged from my seat of confusion to gleeful faces and rapturous applause from the harmonically challenged. They were clearly impressed by this expression of adult incompetence.

Home again, I play on.

Should you be passing through Shipton and hear "To Music" drifting across the air, but not recognize it---- it's me!