



Musical Adventures

The Orion Consort members

Turning up to Macquarie University to begin actuarial studies, and being surrounded by a bunch of super enthused teenagers who had finished high school just months earlier, I felt a bit like a fish out of water. I had just returned from a three month whirlwind overseas adventure to clear my head after withdrawing from a Master of Creative Arts. Prior to that I had lived and breathed music full-time for several years, obtaining a Bachelor degree with honours majoring in piano performance and research. 'You've studied music and now you want to become an actuary? – how strange!' was the most common reaction I received. Not strange at all to me, but I can appreciate the novelty of my situation.

Of course, there's nothing new about the connection between actuarial science and music; the most obvious commonality being that both are a study of patterns. Then there is also the discipline involved to become proficient in any maths related field, which is also required in training as a musician. A quick survey of the actuarial team I work with reveals that over two thirds have formal training in music and the vast majority have pursued playing music in some way.

Throughout the large portion of my life that I have spent entirely focused on the study and performance of music there are many valuable lessons and a few which are well worth sharing...

THERE'S MORE THAN ONE WAY TO FIT A MORTALITY CURVE... OR TO CONSTRUCT A PIANO MECHANISM

I was fortunate enough that my studies at the Conservatorium of Music in Newcastle coincided with the emergence of the first Stuart & Sons pianos, designed and built by the brilliant Wayne Stuart whose workshop had recently been established as a research initiative of the University of Newcastle.

For a century and a half, very little has changed in terms of the piano's construction. Ever since Steinway & Sons manufactured its first pianos in Manhattan during the 1850s they have set the benchmark and continue to do so.

However, Wayne Stuart saw the potential for innovations, particularly related to the techniques and expansion of soundscapes which have characterised art music of the last century. A Stuart & Sons concert grand has four pedals rather than the typical three, giving the pianist an additional alternative by which to modify the texture of the sound. It has 97 or even 102 keys rather than the conventional 88, a feature which has been utilised by several leading composers in recent compositions. Perhaps Stuart's most innovative development has been the 'bridge agraffe'; a mechanism which couples each string to the instrument's soundboard so that its vibration is predominantly vertical. Compared with conventional pianos, this leads to greater clarity of



Nicole with fellow pianists and one of the first Stuart & Sons concert grand pianos

each note struck and a unique sustain/decay pattern.

It was a privilege to be able to perform on the first Stuart & Sons pianos – at various concerts I would have played everything from Bach fugues, to Chopin Nocturnes, Prokofiev Sonatas or a new work from one of the Conservatorium’s budding composers. Often Wayne himself would be sitting

in the audience, keenly focused, never completely satisfied and always gathering insights which might be used in the production of his next instrument.

This experience stays with me as evidence that no matter how deeply a convention is embedded, there are always opportunities to use a different approach. There is very rarely only one way to address a complex issue, and it often takes a fresh pair of eyes to recognise that there are other possibilities.

WITH GENUINE UNDERSTANDING, WE ARE CAPABLE OF DOING AMAZING THINGS

During my Honours year I developed a repetitive strain injury in my left hand and took a break from the piano until it improved. As a result, instead of practising intensely at home, I joined my family on an interstate holiday for about 10 days. I had been due to start learning a Rachmaninov etude (the very beautiful and haunting Op. 39 No. 2). Instead I decided to take the sheet music away with me, thinking I could do some analysis on the structure and harmonic language of the piece. This process was always something that was important and necessary for me to do when studying a new work.

At some point on that holiday I thought it would be interesting to see how much of the etude I could memorise away from the instrument. To do this, I would be calling on several types of memory: aural, visual in terms of the notes on the page, but also visual and tactile in terms of what my hands would be doing at the keyboard.

The night I returned home from the trip, I played the etude (which lasts about six to seven minutes at speed) from beginning to end with no written music in front of me. It certainly wasn’t yet fit to be heard in public but I had memorised the piece in its entirety. I put this down to really understanding how the etude was constructed, how the different thematic motives were used throughout and what techniques Rachmaninov was asking of the pianist. It was not about photographic memory, rote learning or following a set of instructions.

When I think about what I was able to do on that holiday, it becomes relevant to all sorts of problems which appear formidable and where I may not even see a path forward, let alone the final solution – dare I say it – the type of problem I come up against regularly as an actuary.

I’ve never been great with formulae or learning things ‘off by heart’, but memorising that etude proved to me that a genuine understanding can enable me to absorb an incredible amount of detail and use it to achieve an extraordinary outcome.

COLLABORATION CAN BE FAR MORE REWARDING THAN GOING ALONE AND IT’S MUCH MORE FUN TOO

It has been many years now since I’ve felt the isolation which comes with preparing for a solo piano recital. This was one of several reasons that I abandoned that career path. Of course it is a wonderful thing to be able to just sit down and play in solitude, if only once in a while. (“Solitude, what’s that Mummy?” I can hear my two pre-schoolers ask.) But my most recent musical pursuits are as part of a group.

The Orion Consort is a chamber ensemble devoted to Medieval and Renaissance music. We play replicas of period instruments such as crumhorns, gemshorns, shawms and dulcimers. The consort members share a passion for the all too often neglected ‘early music’ genre, and take every opportunity to play at festivals, corporate events and private functions around the Sydney area.

Being able to collaborate with friends in this way is an absolute joy. It gives me the freedom to create and perform music in an inspiring and supportive ensemble environment. As each of us have very different backgrounds, we are able to explore a range of styles, instrumentations and arrangements which are incredibly diverse compared with what we could achieve if any of us were absent.

FINALE

Studying and playing music, in all its forms, is empowering and at the same time deeply humbling. In many ways I feel very much like a beginner with so many more musical adventures ahead of me. The learnings I have gained from my experiences have shaped me as a person, including what I might bring to my day job. But above all, patterns and discipline aside, music tugs at my heart strings and puts a smile on my face. I believe that is music’s greatest power and its most valuable gift to all of us. 



The Orion Consort performing on gemshorns at Ironfest in Lithgow