

A Mixed Ensemble

My sister was a piano. That's what she claimed, back in that sizzling-pavement, scorched-grass summer of '76. Katy didn't hold with classifying body shapes against the regular apple or pear grouping popular at the time - she reckoned she was born with the body of a piano and would *always* be a piano, regardless of any far-reaching diets or exercise regimes which might – no, *would* – be attempted in later life. She'd sigh dramatically, sash-saying up and down in front of the full-length mirror in the hall, before invariably coming to the same conclusion: she was a piano.

I didn't have to look far to unearth the foundations behind Katy's musical comparisons – Mum and Dad, in an effort to broaden our cultural horizons, had taken us to a performance of Peter and the Wolf a couple of weeks before the end of term; despite both of us anticipating extreme boredom, we had, surprisingly, enjoyed it. Immensely. Afterwards, in the back of the car, Katy and I had talked at length about the variety instruments we'd seen and heard; their different shapes, their different tones, their different personalities. It was a subject of fascination to us, for some reason. We didn't get out much.

My sister wasn't far wrong in her speculations, I reflected. Furthermore, she wasn't just a piano in body shape, although she did bear more than a slight resemblance to a baby grand, but more obviously in her temperament; one minute she was all sweetness and light like the top octaves – the fairy music part of the piano – and then the next moment grumpy and dark: the lower keys exactly. Not that I told her that. Obviously. But it got me thinking. I mean, although I was couple of years younger than Katy, being about eleven at the time, I was practically a teenager too, full of angst and doubts (or 'moods' and 'strops' as Mum preferred to call them). And, just like Katy, I was also unhappy with the way my body was

evolving into adulthood. Or *not* evolving in my case, my body shape having been the same since I'd unceremoniously left toddlerhood behind, many years previously. Also, you have to remember we were products of our times; basically, there was absolutely no reassurance to be had by growing up in the seventies. No, heavily influenced by the well-endowed likes of Farrah Fawcett, Debbie Harry and Kate Bush strutting their stuff across TV, I imagine that most females – and particularly easily-impressed pubescents such as my sister and I - found themselves sadly lacking in the body-shape department.

Not that Katy and I were similar in stature. By no means. Unlike her, I didn't possess the curves and volume of a Steinway grand, more's the pity; no, I had the dubious qualities of a long, skinny wind instrument. "An oboe," Katy had said one day, after thoughtfully looking me over, her head on one side. "Weedy and unremarkable." I didn't bother her for any more information. It really wasn't necessary.

Anyway, the upshot was that during that summer, other people's physiques became a bit of an obsession with us. Well, in fairness, we didn't have anything more interesting to do. Faced with the long summer holidays which, for most kids seemed to be something of a relief, we, instead, looked forward to pure and unadulterated boredom. For the whole six weeks. No exotic holidays abroad for us, oh no. We were far from being that sort of family, as was any family that we knew, to be fair. Yes, too old to be 'babysat' by our Nan, yet apparently not of an age to be left unsupervised in our own home – where, at least, we could've watched TV or listened to music – we were forced to 'play out'. (Which, looking back now, was almost certainly more hazardous than staying indoors. But still, what did we, or Mum and Dad for that matter, know of strangers in raincoats or smiling men offering puppies back then?)

Anyway, there we were, resigned to hanging around the streets every week day from nine until four, when Mum returned from working at the local care home to let us back in the house. Day after day, rain or shine. And that particular summer it was most definitely the latter, as I've said before (which I suppose was somewhat of a blessing). That was our summer, outside in the glorious heat with the streets as our oyster - our very own adventure playground. Or not.

So, on the first day of the holidays, sitting on the low front wall of our terraced house, we were, once again, discussing our favourite subject. I think Katy's previous piano and oboe comments were weighing on both of our minds.

"It's a minefield," my sister moaned, swinging her legs gently back and forth in a motion which was both repetitive and annoying. "I mean, you could be the kind of person who does loads of PE and Games, eats hardly any sweets and cakes and you could STILL turn out like... well, like..." She stopped, looking around her, seemingly lost for words.

"A heffalump?" I offered, helpfully.

Katy sighed and shook her head. "No. Not that. You know heffalumps aren't real, Susie. No, I mean like... Mrs Peterson!" She gestured triumphantly to our portly neighbour, who was just coming out of her house across the road, shopping bag in hand and smiling broadly.

I couldn't help laughing at this, but I tried to turn it into a cough, not wanting to offend the elderly lady - if she could hear me, that is - as she'd always been kind to us. But Katy did have a point, I suppose. I spoke softly. "Ye-ess. Though I'm not sure Mrs Peterson does an awful lot of PE, to be honest. Still..."

I was interrupted by our neighbour's cheery call. "Morning girls - lovely day!" I just smiled at the elderly lady, not wanting to risk laughing again, but Katy grinned back, all dimples

and teeth. “Are you off to the shop, Mrs Peterson; would you like us to come and help you carry your shopping?”

Huh? What was Katy playing at? I raised my eyebrows; this was far from the sort of summer holiday I’d envisaged, helping elderly neighbours lug heavy foodstuffs around and listening to tales of the ‘olden days’. Not at all. I frowned suspiciously at my sister; did she think there was a chance of wrangling some money out of Mrs Peterson, for her efforts? Or sweets? Was that why she was being so unnaturally helpful? Could be... Anyhow, it was too late to have it out with her; Katy was already sliding from the wall and, worse still, tugging me down with her. Marvellous.

Mrs Peterson smiled at us both, passing me the shopping bag and then linking her arm with Katy’s. “That’s very kind of you, girls – it’s always nice to have your company, you know. Makes me feel young again.”

As we walked slowly down our street, presumably heading for the small Co-op about a mile away, Mrs Peterson looked round at me, inquisitively. “So, young Susie – what’s the joke?” I stared back at her, confused. Joke? What joke? Then I suddenly remembered how I’d been laughing as Mrs P was coming out of her house. Blast – she’d obviously realised something was afoot. I felt my cheeks start to redden, and I began to chew my lip. Just as I was about to stammer something, anything – who knows what might have come out - Katy butted in. “Oh yeah, that’s right; we were just talking about how people are like instruments in an orchestra. In their shapes, I mean. Like, I’m a piano.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as Mrs P turned her attention back to my sister. “A piano, eh? Well, you’ve certainly got an important part to play then; you’ll be the one taking the lead in the concertos.”

Feeling my face cooling down now, I nevertheless rolled my eyes. Trust Katy to score a starring role in her fantasy musical parallels! That was just typical of her.

But Mrs P was still talking. “Of course, you wouldn’t be playing all the time though, dear. Not when the orchestra was performing a symphony, say, or a piece of music written before the piano was invented. No, then you’d have to take a back seat.”

Katy shrugged. “No worries, that’s fine. A flash of brilliance – that’s me!” She grinned up at Mrs Peterson. “So, if you were a musical instrument, which one do you think you’d be, Mrs P?”

I held my breath. Would the old lady be upset by the question; could it be thought to be impertinent? After all, you didn’t always know what was considered impolite with the older generation. Would Mrs P think Katy rude?

It seemed not. “Well, I can safely say that’s something I’ve never been asked!” Mrs Peterson thought for a little while as we ambled along companionably. “Um, well, I think I’d have to say a... tuba. Yes, that’s it. A tuba.”

Despite myself, I was interested. “How come, Mrs P? Why a tuba?”

Mrs P laughed and gestured down at herself. “Isn’t it obvious, dear? Well, quite apart from the fact that we both have big tummies, also I’m like the tuba in that when I play, I play triumphantly and loudly. But don’t play all the time; no, only sometimes - in between, I’d be resting, with my feet up and a cup of tea.” She smiled, seemingly happy with her choice.

I nodded. What she said made sense. Old people couldn’t be on the go all the time – everyone knew that – and, likewise, tubas didn’t play throughout the whole of a piece of music, not like violins or cellos, say. Yes, Mrs P was definitely a tuba, without doubt.

We passed the middle of our street, where a pair of semi-detached houses stuck out like shiny-new dentures against the yellowing backdrop of the terraces. Dad had once told me

that a bomb had struck the houses that had previously existed at that spot, in WW2, flattening them right down to the ground. Luckily, the families who lived there had been safe down in their Anderson shelter. Oblivious of their homelessness until they'd emerged hours later, apparently. Then, after the war, the government had commissioned new houses on the same plot. Just the two. I indicated the left one. "What about Mr and Mrs Richards – which instruments would they be?"

Katy's reaction was immediate. "Definitely a pair of double basses; kind of solemn and serious, and..." She paused, frowning over at the house as if for inspiration.

"Upstanding?" suggested Mrs P, her head to one side.

Katy's face uncreased and she nodded vigorously. "That's it! The kind of people you can rely on in an emergency, you know, like when they organised posters and a search party when Number 33's dog went missing."

"And they found him too," I put in. "Yes. Ok, but Mr Willoughby wouldn't be a double bass, even though he's right next door to the Richards. He'd be more of one of those instruments that isn't always in the orchestra; one that makes a special appearance every now and again."

"That's because he works in London," added Mrs P. "You know, the reason why he's not around a lot? You only really see him at the weekends. Lovely man, though. So he'd be something like the harp, then, possibly?"

I nodded. "Yep – or maybe even those great big drums that they only put in the really powerful, loud pieces of music."

"Timpani," said Katy smugly.

But Mrs P's thoughts had moved on. As we reached the zebra crossing at the end of our street – with not a car or bike in sight, incidentally – she pulled us both to a sudden and

dramatic standstill on the kerb edge. Paused, peering left then right. Then frowned. “Of course, the really tricky one would be Miss Pennington at Number 16.”

Despite my discomfort in her surprisingly firm old-lady-clamp, I had to agree. “Yes: very tricky.”

“Nah – she’s easy,” shouted back Katy, having managed to wriggly free and now half-way across the road. “Surely she’d just be an ordinary, everyday instrument; there’s nothing special about her, is there?”

Mrs P turned bright red and seemed somehow to increase in size, a little like a balloon inflating at a rapid and nearly-popping speed. “Nothing special!” she spluttered, practically dragging me over to join Katy on the pavement. “Nothing special! The woman’s a saint, I tell you!”

Really? I thought about Miss Pennington, living with her mother and a couple of cats, working part-time in the local newsagents. She was always friendly to us, and I’d never heard her raise her voice to anyone, not even the really cheeky kids in our street, but I really couldn’t see anything unique about her, let alone saintly. “She is?”

Mrs P nodded, causing her many-tiered jelly chins to wobble violently. “Why yes – doesn’t she care for her poor arthritic Mother all by herself, while keeping down a job too? And the work she does for the church; who do you suppose organises all the fetes and jumble sales for charity? Miss Pennington, that’s who! In addition to manning the lines for the Samaritans, though I shouldn’t be telling you that; confidential it’s supposed to be.” She paused for breath, panting loudly.

Katy and I stared at the elderly lady, both of us momentarily speechless. I was impressed, not only by the accomplishments of Miss Pennington, but also by the ferocity of Mrs P’s terrier-like defence of her. I squeezed the old lady’s arm, hoping she wouldn’t stay angry for long. “Sorry – we didn’t know she did all that.”

Mrs P gave a long sigh, the storm evidently over. “Well of course you didn’t, my dear, that’s how saints work, don’t they? It’s like the Good Fairy or, or Santa Claus, for example; you never witness these characters in action, you just see the results of what they achieve. Besides, Miss Pennington isn’t one to blow her own trumpet, after all.”

Katy looked up. “Trumpet? Well, I suppose she *could* be a trumpet, even though she doesn’t blow her own. You don’t get many trumpets in the orchestra, do you? Just a few?”

I considered this. “No, I s’pose not. Two, maybe.” Then I shook my head - I’d made my mind up. “But she isn’t a trumpet – that’s not right for her. No, she’s one of those instruments that’s always there when you need it, not loud and in your face, but steady. Reliable. So... a cello, perhaps, or a flute.”

Both Mrs P and Katy turned to face me and I watched them, waiting for their responses. Mrs P was nodding and Katy’s eyes widened as she seemed to come to some sort of a verdict. “You know what, she’s not a cello or even a flute; I reckon she’s an oboe, like you!”

An oboe. I thought about it. Ok. That was reasonable. Miss Pennington. Me. Both oboes. So... maybe an oboe wasn’t such a non-instrument as I’d previously assumed? Maybe it had more importance than I’d thought? Having taken Katy’s classification of me as an oboe as an insult, I now re-considered my opinion. After all, if Miss Pennington was an oboe, it had to be important. She did so many good things that it would be impossible not to be. Being an oboe was obviously to be desired. It couldn’t not be.

I smiled at my sister; it was a smile that, once it had started, kept growing and growing. “Well, oboes are obviously more important than we all thought they were, then. Much more.” I was going to stick out my tongue at her but then thought it wasn’t something that an oboe would do. Or Miss Pennington, for that matter. So, instead, I contented myself with

skipping ahead to the Co-op, happy that me and Miss Pennington – someone to be admired, someone to be looked up to, someone of worth - were in the same elite category. Oboes together.