

Choosing The Wrong Instrument—A Story

My older brother had played clarinet for a year when he was 8 and now I was coming up to 3rd grade, and it was my turn. It was a forgone conclusion that I'd follow in my big brother's footsteps, and besides, he could "mentor me," thought my parents.

Like my brother, I got a used student clarinet in a black and white case with crushed blue velvet on the inside that smelled kind of like old rancid oil. I was so excited! I showed up the first day of "beginning band," proud and ready to go.

Everyone got their instruments out and began to squeak and occasionally play a note. I could not make a sound no matter how hard I blew. I just wound up red-faced, out of breath, and defeated. The teacher had no patience and yelled at me. I cried when I got home. I wanted to quit, but I was required to finish out the semester.

Each week I huffed, puffed, squeaked, and squacked, amidst Mr. J's yelling at me, and the laughter of the other kids. I could not wait until I could quit. First chance I got, I left and was so relieved.

Later that year, I was at my grandma's house where my Aunt Joan had left her old, dusty violin in a closet for quite a few years. I asked about it and she brought it out. We dusted it off and I pulled it out, rosined the bow, and played a few notes that actually sounded musical. I sat cross-legged, leaning on the piano next to the pedals, and experimented with the violin. I was in love! My aunt could tell, and said, "Why don't you go ahead and take it home?" I was in heaven.

The next day I brought it to school and showed it to Mr. J. and even played a few notes for him. By that time, they were allowing strings into the band and calling it "an orchestra."

I was in. I practiced every day after school, being slightly annoying to family members, but gradually, I began to make good music. I played my first "gig," a wedding ceremony, at 10 years old, later joined orchestras, and that was the beginning of over 50 years of joyful violin playing, and I still enjoy playing.

There is a humorous twist to this story. Several years later, we pulled the old "licorice stick," as Mr. J. called it, and decided to sell it. By then, my brother

was taking private lessons, so we brought it to him to give us an appraisal. He pulled it out, assembled it and tried to play a few notes. Not a sound came out, even for the expert. His cheeks turned reddish-purple, and he was soon winded.

He let us know the clarinet was not worth much as it could not be played. He took the barrels apart and shined a small flashlight inside. He exclaimed, "Well, How do you like that?! Someone must have shoved a wad of paper towels in this clarinet, and it must have gotten wet. It is all smashed onto the inside of the clarinet." He began peeling scraping out the crusty old paper towel (laughing hysterically), cleaned out the clarinet and played a nice little tune easily.

We all had a long laugh. I was vindicated from being the world's worst clarinet student, and was grateful I had found my soul instrument. Most important, I couldn't wait to tell Mr. J.

It has been my career-long experience that while sometimes you find the right instrument for you, you can be mistaken, and the right instrument may come to you.