

# Paul's Piano Lesson

by Jim Gold

"Can't we hurry this Beethoven sonata?" Mrs. Paythos asked at Paul's piano lesson. "He'll be eleven years old soon, and he's goal-oriented boy."

"Absolutely not!" Mrs. Wegracht straightened in her seat. "Slowly is the way to go."

"What?" Paul cried, jumping up from the piano. "You must be mad. I hate slow!"

"Play it slowly," Mrs. Wegracht demanded.

"I will not! Music must have goals. When I play the Beethoven Pathetique, my goal is to finish it! That's why my fingers fly so fast. It's a contest. First pianist to finish wins. I play to win!"

Mrs. Wegracht blew her nose. "That's pretty silly," she sneered. "Luckily your mother pays me good money to tolerate your boorish attitudes. Otherwise, I'd take your piano and stuff it down your ungrateful throat!"

Mrs. Paythos broke in. "You Have no reason to berate my son. Paul's belief about this has brought me many benefits. Last week, for example, when he took up dancing, he waltzed to the store to buy our groceries!"

"Goal-oriented attitudes belong in the sewer!" Mrs. Wegracht hissed. "You are crass, crass. I've never heard such nonsense. Luckily, you pay well. Otherwise my high standards could not be compromised."

"That's easy for you to say, Mrs. Wegracht," said Paul, looking up from the slice of watermelon he was forcing between the piano keys. "Not everyone can attend the Laptop Computer School of Music as you did, or graduate summa cum laude from its fruit department."

"What's your hurry?" Mrs. Wegracht asked, her face a frozen mix of scorn and sympathy. "Hold each note. Smell it. Feel and embrace it in your hand's mind. Do this, and Ludwig will love you."

"I don't care about love, or Beethoven, or any of those creeps. I'd rather crush a note than love it. I play to win, I tell you!"

“You mean you want to beat Billy Mckenzie?”

“Absolutely. I want to banish his Pathetique from this earth, grind his fingers to a pulp with my heel, sink him into last place!”

“Paul, the judges won’t like that attitude. I suppose your next question will be how play the Entrepreneurial Sonata.”

“ . . . Did Beethoven write that?”

“No, I believe it was his son,” Mrs. Wegracht sneered. She paused a long moment to think about her business practices. After deciding to keep her student, she quieted herself and calmly said, “Music isn’t about competition. It’s about expressing your feelings. That’s why you must turn off your mind, dive straight into the heart of each sonata, and rubato your way to the top. There, the crown of glory shines and waits for you at the pinnacle!”

Paul paid no attention. “The hell with feelings!” he shouted as he pushed peanut butter between the keys. “The only musical feelings I like are forte and crescendo. I play them to kill the opposition, I’ll happily hammer a scale on Billy’s disgusting corpus, or explode an arpeggio in his face to blow him to smithereens. It’s no difference to me what happens to that worm. I’d like to dynamite him out of existence.”

“My, you are a violent student. Placing yourself in such a prison of warped goals is an insult to music. Using our beautiful notes as a weapon, my boy, will bring you neither happiness nor satisfaction. Mrs. Wegracht sighed, rose from her seat, and began to pace the room. Holding her index finger high to trace her wise observations in the air, she declared, “Although pathless may be a creative choice and direction, formless is not. Beethoven knew this. That’s why he chose the sonata form. You should consider the feelings of the composer and follow the dynamics of his choice.”

Paul was about to shout again, but something in the tone of the word “sonata” stopped him. He sat still, hands over the keys, pensively drifted inward, and, when his thoughts cleared, bent toward his teacher and whispered, “Mrs. Wegracht, my mother won’t stand for this. Neither will my father, who lives next door. They don’t like feelings. They’re dead set against them. Although they can tolerate rage, even a bit of envy and jealousy, they can’t stand laughter and tears, and they hate joy, especially when expressed in public on the piano. They also keep complaining about being broke.” He lowered his whisper to pianissimo. “My parents are, basically, very

boring, stupid, narrow, closed off people. They like their privacy and only give me piano lessons to get me out of the house.”

Mrs. Wegracht was paying close attention. “I can understand that,” she said. “It’s reasonable and traditional. Beethoven had a similar personality. That’s why it’s so important to play him well. It will help you understand your parents, and you may even learn to like them.”

“You sure know your musicology,” Mrs. Paythos murmured from her seat in the corner.

“Yes, I do. That’s why I know it is best for your son to dive straight into his Pathetique. He should play it slow and juicy, with free form feeling and thus ecstasy, and rubato his way to winning next month’s competition. If he wins, he’ll pocket the five thousand dollars in prize money as well as achieve glory among his peers and elders.”

During the next two weeks Paul practiced his Pathetique three hours a day. On the day of the competition, he played the piano three miles an hour faster than Billy Mckenzie. breaking the New Jersey piano playing speed limit for eleven-year olds. The judge, having been high on speed himself as a youth, was quite impressed. “The kid is the fastest in Bergen County!” he muttered.

But the votes of the four other judges won him first prize. They marveled at Paul’s ability to play with such passion and self-expression. One of them swooned, “I’ve never heard such mature playing from a young person!”

Paul passed hundreds of cheering fans as he walked to the stage to receive his award. He shook the chief judge’s hand, and bowed to the audience. When he descended from the platform, he saw his mother and father sitting next to Mrs. Wegracht, and raced over.

He hugged his parents before handing them his award money.

Then he gave Mrs. Wegracht a big kiss.

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