

## Impromptu

Stephen D. Nightingale, MD

Once the salesman realized I wasn't going to buy the piano, his mood abruptly changed, but not in the direction I had anticipated. "Doc," he looked at me and said, "I need a doctor. I really do."

The music store was closing for good. A few years ago, when the stock market crashed, it had sent out a fire sale notice, and there I had found the best piano I have ever been privileged to touch. It was a Bösendorfer. You could play Bach on it. You could play jazz on it. You could play Chopin on it and birds would crash through the store's front window to hear it. And the price, once that of an exotic sports car, was now that of a loaded Chevy. I had come back to see if it was still there, and still at the same price.

The woman who approached me in the showroom was a local music teacher, of whom I had favorably heard, but never met. She may have been working the store to make ends meet, as artists sometimes must. This possibility had influenced my own career choice.

She smiled at my inquiry about the Bösendorfer, and showed me the best she had left, a Shigeru Kawai, a piano with a touch, and sound, as delicate as a cherry blossom. For Debussy, an intriguing possibility. For Shostakovich, my current obsession, no. She excused herself, and disappeared. The salesman arrived a short minute later.

"I got a lump on my chest."  
"How long?"  
"I don't know."  
"Where?"

He pointed to his left nipple. Through his shirt it was mobile, but hard as a rock. There are still things that surprise me, but breast cancer in a male isn't one of them. Nor was his answer to my next question, about health insurance.

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I turned back to the Kawai. For the piece I now had to play, I would have preferred a Yamaha, with its crystalline treble and rumbling bass that can pierce the chatter and haze of a club on Saturday night. But then, I thought, maybe the gentler voice of the Kawai will ease the blow.

The notes were familiar enough. *This/could be something/nasty and you/need to have it/taken care of/RIGHT-A-WAY. The/good news is that/it's not stuck to/your chest wall so/please don't wait un/TIL-IT-IS.*

Ten measures, the first four leading up to the fifth and the next four leading up to the tenth. One more in each lead-up than I like, and the unremitting DUM-dum, DUM-dum meter is awful, but 4/1, 4/1 is doable. It should be played quickly, but not so fast that the listener misses a single note. *Allegro, ma non troppo.*

Showtime. *Subito!* 1, 2, 3 ...

It seemed to have worked. When it does, it takes the listener on a journey from fear through anger and depression to plea bargaining. After a brief encore, he agreed to go on the web and look for health insurance that covered pre-existing conditions, or for the cheapest and highest deductible alternative. Either would get him in the door; and, if not out, bankruptcy is not a leading cause of death in the United States.

I had not noticed the woman's return. "Thank you for taking care of my friend," she said, and, after a pause, "I want you to have this." It was a boxed set of three CDs of music played on a Bösendorfer, produced by the manufacturer to demonstrate its magnificence.

She seemed to have a firm grip on her emotions when she said good bye. So did I, until I got back to my car. Sometimes, you play the piece. Sometimes the piece plays you.

At the local school where they permit me to take lessons, there are juries every year. You get a three if you hit the notes, a four if you play well, and a five if you knock their socks off. My first year I got a three, and my second a four, but so far never a five. At my age, it is becoming less likely that I ever will.

If so, the teacher's gift will suffice. I hope her friend does well.