The Audition

by Daniel Harris

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My music teacher, Luigi Biagi, told me that he was done with me. He said it was time I moved on to more specialized teachers. Since my passion was composing and arranging, he recommended Al Fine. Al Fine (pronounced fee-nay) proved to be the exact opposite of the gregarious and voluble Luigi Biagi.

Biagi was an 80-year-old, life-long vegetarian with a lion's mane of white hair. He was a contemporary and friend of Arturo Toscanini. He owned a clothing store in Chicago that catered to servicemen leaving the military. He taught music in the back of his store and instructed the kids in my neighborhood. Everyone loved Luigi. He could, and would, repair your musical instrument or your bicycle with equal aplomb. He was a terrific musician, but he was no composer.

Al Fine was one of those rare American musical mavericks: a genuine musical original. A World War II vet, he returned from the war a drug addict, for which he served seven years at Stateville prison in Joilet, Illinois. He supported himself as a composer and arranger for big-name bands. He was especially adept at writing arrangements for singers. He arranged songs for the cream of American pop and jazz singers. The most avant-garde musicians from around the world visited him when they were in Chicago.

But Al's was a sad case. Yes, he was a genius, a master teacher, and legendary among a small coterie of musical cognoscenti. Yes, his opera, *A Day In The Life of Miss Teasdale*, was considered a masterpiece. But, alas, he had few students, was under police surveillance, and jobs were scarce. Fine's stock was at rock bottom. That's when I knocked his door for the first time on a bone chilling March Monday in 1956.

It was not easy to get to that door. He inhabited a former machine shop bordering the north branch of the Chicago River. The Diversey Avenue bus was the nearest public transportation. For me, it was two trains, a bus, and a walk through a largely abandoned industrial neighborhood to arrive at his studio/abode. The area was a little scary for a 16-year-old kid. The only people one saw around his studio were hobos and bums. They were threatening and wary of strangers. I had the cockiness of youth, but even so, I always walked rapidly to Al Fine's studio.

The first time I visited, I stood shivering outside his studio door waiting for him. There was a sign next to the door that read: DO NOT DISTURB, THAT MEANS YOU. There was no answer to my repeated knocks. I turned to leave when I saw a tall thin man limping toward me. He wore a black cape, stovepipe pants, and patent leather shoes. Under the cape was a purple shirt with ruffles. He had green socks. I couldn't tell whether it was Mr. Fine, whom I had never met, or a local pimp.

Since he was headed in my direction, I decided to wait for him to come to me. As he approached, I noticed that his gait was a bizarre, syncopated cadence: slow, quick, quick; slow, quick, quick. He would drag his left foot and then make two quick skipping motions on his right foot. As he approached, I saw that he had an orthopedic left shoe with a raised heel, and his left knee did not articulate normally. The hoboes and school kids called him dragleg or doublehop. He wore glasses. One of the lenses was very dark, the other clear and thick. The skin on his face was taut and had a copper sheen. His sunken cheeks outlined a missing upper molar.

—Hey, man, are you Clarone? His voice had a raspy edge that cut through the cold air.

—Yes, sir, I replied. I spoke to you on the telephone last week. Mr. Biagi recommended I study with you.

—Ah, Luigi Biagi, Fine said, pronouncing all the vowels in the Italian manner. Do you know he was the finest oboist that Italy ever produced? He and Toscanini use to fight all the time. Biagi played at La Scala in Milano. When Toscanini would conduct from memory,

Biagi would give his part to Toscanini and play his part from memory. It was a legendary love/hate relationship. Mussolini and Hitler ended all that.

Fine produced a big key ring from his cape. He unlocked three locks, leaving a fourth untouched. He pushed open the heavy door. It was dark inside. It was then that I realized that there were no windows in the building. Fine flipped a light switch. This antechamber was his musical instrument storage room. There were all kinds of instruments in the room: keyboards, percussion instruments, woodwinds, brasses and strings from all over the world.

—You will learn to love this room, Fine predicted in a serious reverent voice.

There was nothing to say. I couldn't believe the variety. Two vennas and a sitar sat on a grand piano. Bongos, congas, mridangams, djembes, doumbecs, Morrocan tam-tams and stacks of drums with no names filled a corner. Harpsichords, pianos, organs, xylophones, vibraphones, marimbas and all their cousins lined one wall. There was a pile of industrial waste with marks of being beaten, bowed or dropped for their sound: brake drums, flywheels, hubcaps and every imaginable type and shape of metal. Bows of all varieties and sizes were piled in a wooden box. There was a fiber barrel filled with every imaginable beater and mallet. There were dozens of plucked instruments, from harps and guitars to instruments totally unfamiliar to me. It was a repository of potential music.

—The only sound missing, said Fine, are animal sounds. There is no light, so I can't keep a bird. Birds are nature's singers. If I accept you, we will study bird song. I have a dozen music notebooks filled with bird songs and calls.

I could hardly contain my excitement. This was a world I had in my dreams, a place of unlimited sound potential. All the sounds of the world's music were before me.

—But, first I must test you, he said, flinging off his cape and rubbing his hands together. Come into the studio.

The studio was stark in comparison to the anteroom. There was a Hamburg Steinway grand piano and six chairs with a music stand in front of each chair. In the corner, a sink with a drippy faucet emitted a plop almost exactly once a minute. I was later to learn that it was the timer for all of Al's exercises. One minute, one plop. Too many wrong answers, or worse no answer, and he showered you with colorful invective and sarcasm. Musical barnacle and deaf toad were two of his favorites. You would have to beg a second chance. Penance was transcribing his improvisations at the piano, a difficult task even for the most gifted and experienced. But if you came close to correct, he would forgive you. Within the stern taskmaster was a heart of gold. He was fiercely dedicated to his few students and did everything he could to further their careers. Though, given his status as an ex-con and active drug addict, this was slim help. Except among the elite professional musicians who knew him, no one would hire a student of his. We were all guilty by association in the uptight 1950s Cold War world. We were proud to be his students, but we kept it among ourselves.

Long after I stopped studying with him regularly and soon after he tragically died in a fire, I went through the ruins of his studio. I found two framed photographs praising Al, one signed by the famous Russian conductor and bass virtuoso, Serge Koussevitzky, dated 1939, and the other by the legendary French music teacher Nadia Boulanger, dated 1935. Al had never displayed them or shown them to us.

—Sit in a chair. There is a pencil and music paper on the table over there, he said pointing to a three-legged table leaning against the wall near the door from the anteroom.

—What note is this? he asked playing a note on the piano.

—I don't have perfect pitch, I replied. I think the last note I played on my clarinet was a concert D, so I think it is a F-Sharp.

Fine grimaced. It's a G-natural, he barked. The eye behind the clear lens of his rimless spectacles was magnified five-fold from my perspective. It was terrifying.

—And this?

—An E-flat.

—Name the notes in this chord, he demanded, playing a four-note chord and then arpeggiated it.

—D-flat, G-flat, A-flat, C-flat, I answered.

—Are you sure that is not a B?

—No. I call it a C-flat. That would be the correct spelling for that chord.

—Biagi was a good teacher, Al said with a smile.

He rose from the piano and did his syncopated walk into the anteroom. He returned with a mallet and some pieces of metal.

—What do you hear? he asked.

He banged an old auto brake drum. I didn't know what to answer. I could hear many pitches.

—What do you HEAR? he demanded, striking the brake drum several times.

—The most prominent is a treble clef middle space C-sharp. Then I hear an A-natural below, and an E-flat above. Other overtones are A, D, F, and at the very top some D-sharp, B-natural, and a very sharp C.

—Ah, very good, Clarone.

He left the room and returned with a double drum.

—This tunes like a timpani, he explained. Tune it by twisting these ropes. Tune the lower drum to an F below middle C and the upper drum to a B-natural above the F.

—That's a tritone. Very difficult to tune.

—I didn't ask *what* it was, or how *difficult* it might be. Do your best.

I tuned the lower drum to F and sang three whole tones and tuned the upper drum to the B-natural. I checked my tuning by humming an E a half step lower than the F, and tuning the upper drum to the perfect fifth above the E.

—Ah, clever boy. Notate this on a single line.

He tapped an increasingly complex rhythm on one of the lower strings of the piano.

I notated it.

—Here's the same rhythm with pitches. He played the same rhythm and played pitches to that rhythm in many registers of the piano.

I sang it back to him and notated the pitches on the music paper.

—Ah, Biagi taught you *solfeggio*.

—Yes, sir, Pasquale Bona *solfeggio* every lesson.

—The old school is the best school. Now, give me your work.

I gave him my sheet of music paper. He looked it over.

—Excellent. You have the basic skills. Now I must teach you how to use them.

With a groan he rose from the piano and donned his cape.

—Put on your coat. Take some music paper and two pencils. We go outside.

We stood outside his studio.

—What do you hear? he asked.

—A lot of noise.

—Notate it!

—What?

—You heard me, notate what you hear. You can hear, can't you?

—Yes, but it is only city noise.

—Are you deaf? I heard a nice minor sixth over toward Diversey Avenue. That power metal saw on the other side of the river is squealing an A-flat. What do YOU hear? He was almost yelling. A cloud of condensation lent an element of fire to his exhortations. That switching engine whistle is a dominant seventh chord. There is a loud low C from those power transformers.

—Okay, okay. I understand.

I began notating what I heard. It was hard to put a time line to it. Some sounds were almost on top of each other, and there were moments with almost no sound.

After 15 minutes, my hands were freezing.

—OK, we go inside, he said, It is too cold to stay out here.

We went back into the studio.

—Tea? he asked.

—Yes, please. Thank you Mr. Fine.

Fine walked into an adjacent room. He returned with a teakettle he filled from the one-minute-plop sink. He held the kettle over a propane bottle with a blue flame jetting out of the nozzle. Soon the kettle whistled.

—I love this kettle. It's a perfect D-natural. You could sing the whole Beethoven Ninth Symphony from hearing this kettle's note. And I have.

I stood there mute.

—Here's your tea. Good Tibetan Green Tea. Cleans the blood. Also warms the fingers.

We drank in silence.

—Hear that? demanded Al.

—What?

—A very quiet high squeal. That's a mouse. Keep your ears open, boy. There's a world of sound out there for those who listen.

A few minutes later, a huge grey cat appeared with a squirming mouse in its jaws.

—That's Smoke; he's a 30-pound Russian Blue. Smoke's the best mouser in the world. Patrols this place like an SS officer.

We drank our tea in silence watching Smoke worry the mouse.

—Okay, Clarone, you can go now. I will take you on as a student. There is a class at ten on Saturday mornings. You are required to attend. There is an ensemble rehearsal in the afternoon. You are required to attend. Your composition lesson will be when you have something for me to see. I'm available every day and most nights. Your first assignment is to write a solo piece for flute based on the cardinal's whistle. Don't forget he's a cardinal in the city of Chicago, not bucolic Wisconsin. Choose a flute from the other room and write for it. You will have to invent your own notation. If you need to, go to the main public library and ask to see Mr. Fine's reserve shelf. There are many examples of different notation systems.

—I think I understand. But you haven't taught me about composition.

—What do you hear? That's what you compose. Now leave. Classes are ten dollars. Private lessons will cost fifteen. Ensemble

practice is free. Cash-in-fist only, no checks. If you pay the month in advance it's 90 dollars. A ten percent discount. Capice?

I opened the outside door and turned to say thank you, but Al had closed the door and was turning the locks.

I stood outside his door listening to the city. I felt as if I had just left a space ship. The Chicago I woke up in at six that morning had changed. I had entered Al Fine's universe. It was the beginning of my professional musical apprenticeship.

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