

Quiet (from Grand Street literary journal)

by Rick Rofihe

Best, I like to play things by Ysaÿe, the Belgian violinist and composer. Ysaÿe liked Bach the best. I like Ysaÿe, then Bach.

Bach didn't play violin, but the sonatas he wrote for it are the most beautiful. They say Bach was the bridge between the old and new music; listening to Ysaÿe's music, you know he knew that about Bach.

Even before I touch the bow to the strings, I know that Ysaÿe's music is a bridge between Bach and my violin, and, that when I start to play, the music will be a bridge between my violin and me.

So I play in my funny way—letting my shoulder go as much as I can and tilting my head more than other violinists do. In order to hold the violin as far back as possible, to get its sound as close as I can to my ear.

It's a wonder I don't have an off-center, sideways kind of look—not only from the way I play the violin, but also from moving my head around so much, trying to see what people say. Trying to hear.

But I don't look any the worse for it; I'm good-looking. And blond hair. And blue eyes. And breasts that rest nicely on the rib cage. No, I look good. And I talk O.K. And I play the violin well. I play it very well.

Never in bed, but always when I play the violin, I wear a rubber band in my hair, to hold it behind me, so it doesn't get in the way. And I take off my earrings when I go to bed, and when I play violin, but the rest of the time I leave them in. My mother had my ears pierced when I was just one or two.

I know it's nobody's fault, and that one thing had nothing to do with the other, because it was this way for me since I was born; they

just didn't figure it out for a while that with one of my ears I could hardly hear, and with the other, I couldn't, not at all, hear.

Ysaÿe had an unusual way of holding the bow—I don't think anyone really knows why he held it that way, just three fingers and a thumb, the little finger off by itself, angled into the air. He could hear O.K.; he didn't hold the violin like I do, way far back. But that's how I started using just three fingers holding the bow, because with my right forearm reaching around so far, keeping my little finger also pressed down seemed to make my wrist tired.

When you play Ysaÿe, you get to play Bach too, because Ysaÿe liked Bach's music so much he'd put little recognizable bits of it into his own.

When I play violin, because I play solo violin, I never play Vivaldi. Vivaldi could play violin, but he wrote for so many instruments in so many ways, he didn't spend much time writing things for just one violin at a time. And Paganini—Paganini was such a good player that it's hard for anyone who's not a virtuoso to really do justice to the greatest things that he wrote. But Ysaÿe wrote his best things specifically with individual violinists in mind; Ysaÿe's things, I could play all night.

Solo violin. Really, solo only. Having someone accompany me on the piano—maybe. But solo violin with no piano is easier for me.

Me in a string quarter? It wouldn't work. Almost as unlikely as me in an orchestra—without a hearing aid, I couldn't really hear the others playing, but with one, it would be a mess. Because a hearing aid isn't very useful to me when there are a lot of sounds around—it brings them all up at me, each with nearly the same loudness; I wouldn't be able to listen to all those sounds and hear myself play.

But at least I've always had the latest in hearing aids, ever since my parents found out I couldn't hear well. I still have the first one in a drawer, the one I started wearing when I was two and a half. So

I've always been hearing something, either that way or through special earphones hooked up to tape recorders and record players, things like that. Out in the world though, whether my hearing aid's in or out, if I'm talking to people, the way it's best for me is one person at a time. And it's the same with dancing—I couldn't really enjoy going out to a dance because, with a hearing aid, there are too many sounds, and without one, it's really not possible to hear the music and talk and have fun.

I started a long time ago with boys. Just talking. Maybe kissing. "I'll ask you a question in your ear and you answer in my ear," I'd start. Then, "Do you think I'm prettier than...?" And I'd say the name of a girl I thought was the fifth-prettiest in my class at school. And the boy would always give the same answer: "Yes."

And then I'd ask the question again but with the fourth-prettiest girl's name.

"Yes."

And it would go like that until I said, "So I must be the prettiest."

"Yes." And then he'd get a kiss.

Later, I would get them to hum into my ear while dancing. I would hum in a boy's ear while he hummed in mine. Because it was really the only way that I felt sure of myself when I was moving with somebody else to music. For me, it was the only good way, but for anyone it's a good way to dance. So without any other music than that, the boy and I would be dancing; the older I got, the more places that led.

My parents weren't hearing-impaired. I'm glad they helped me in the ways that they did, with the doctors and the hearing aids and the special classes and the music lessons, but even though my parents helped me, after a while I didn't much feel like listening to them. As I got older, their voices got fainter and fainter to me, until, like today, I'm as good as deaf to anything they say.

When I got married, they thought I was finally starting to listen to them again, because I was doing something they wanted.

Afterward, I would sometimes think that's the way it was, too—but no, really no, it wasn't that way. Anything I'd ever done, I wanted to do. And sometimes the things I was doing—I guess I got pretty wild. But I just wanted to know, to let myself know, I was alive.

So for a while I didn't care about talking, not more than anything else. Then I narrowed my life down and narrowed it down. And, as I did, I guess I calmed down. Because I decided what I needed was a man who would talk into my ear. Not just the slow words and short sentences that he might say to me at night, but all kinds of things, before, and after, and the rest of the day, whenever he was around me. Someone who'd bring the world in a little closer. So everything wouldn't seem so remote.

When you can't hear very well, you often miss fine points. The trailing-off of some things, the leading-into of others: their directions, where they are going or come from. You hear something said, and later you may say exactly the same thing, but you say it too directly, or not directly enough. Because when you heard it you were concentrating so hard on just getting the words you may not have been able to also pick up on just how it was said. I think this might take away from what you say. From what you do.

But even if I'd had perfect hearing, when it came to those things I might have said or done to avoid being alone, I don't know if I would have said or done anything very different.

Besides the violin lessons, I took classes in lip-reading, hand-spelling, and sign. Hand and sign, I don't use them too much, since being able to hear a little has kept me mostly in the hearing world. Still, they're good to know. Other ways to talk. And I would feel silly if I came across a deaf person and we couldn't communicate. Lip-reading I do all the time. I really have to. To fill in what I don't hear.

So the violin, lip-reading, hand, and sign—but what wasn't easy to learn was the Helen Keller thing. You know, being deaf and blind, at first she could only do the manual alphabet, letter by letter on the hand, but then she learned how to speak to people by touching their

lips and faces and feeling the vibrating of sounds in their throats as they spoke; then putting her fingers on her own face, lips, and throat until she got everything right.

It wasn't really something that made sense for me to do, because even if I close my eyes so I won't see someone's lips, if I'm near enough to reach out and feel the sounds in that person's throat, I can hear them anyway. Hear them with one ear, even with my hearing aid out. I could cover that ear with my other hand so I wouldn't hear anything, and concentrate on the vibrating, but I know from trying that if I do that, it's like being all the way deaf, and I get frightened. Very frightened.

Of course, Helen Keller was using her fingertips to learn how to speak, and I already know how to speak. But she was first learning how, with her fingertips, to listen, and I knew I wouldn't be happy with myself unless I started doing at least that.

I had a few violin teachers. None that were so special and none for too long. I was kind of a wary student; I didn't know if I really wanted to learn or really wanted to not learn. To deliberately not learn, as if there were some responsibility in learning to play. And I was unsure as to why I chose the violin, except that there aren't many instruments where the sound is so close to your ear. As I got more self-confident, though, I could sometimes relax—if you relax and move your feet as you play, it's almost as if you were dancing with someone humming into your ear.

If I play what would sound loud to other people, it sounds just medium-loud to me. Because I'm not used to hearing sounds even that loud. So I play what would be medium-loud to other people, and, for me, that's just what I need. I can hear it; the sound goes right into my ear but to me it doesn't sound medium-loud. To me it sounds quiet.

The minute I get home from work, the very second I get into the apartment, I take my hearing aid out. And I don't put it back in again until I leave the next day. I know, out there in the world, it's a good

thing to have; I accept it. But there is, and always has been, for me, like glasses might be to kids who can't see well, something foreign about it. When I was little, I knew I needed to wear it, so I did, but then I refused to wear anything I thought I didn't need. Like bracelets, or necklaces, or rings. I didn't even want a watch. And I wouldn't wear combs, or clips, just a rubber band sometimes to hold back my hair.

But, before long, I was wearing all of that, and more. A woven thing on my ankle. Fine gold chain around my waist. Rings on six fingers.

Now I just wear the earrings, and just one ring. And a rubber band to hold back my hair.

If I had been born all the way deaf, I wonder how would I have found this feeling I sometimes have now. The first time I heard it, it was as if there was another person in the room, telling me what I was feeling. It was a new feeling for me—so new it was almost a new word.

Not that there's not lots of anger in some violin music: there is, but you usually expect it. It's called for, like sweetness. But one time when I was playing something by Ysaÿe, a sweet part, there it was—something beneath the sound, something trying to come through. And when I came to the angry part, it sounded so full that it was as if my violin was playing to me, playing a word and a feeling.

Lately I've been thinking of getting pregnant. Except then I think, what if it's born like me. She might grow up wanting someone who—but I don't think it's too much to ask of someone, to talk into your ear. When he proposed, I told him that's what I wanted most. To have someone who would always do that. To fill me in on all the things I might have missed hearing. To make up for lost time. And to keep me from missing any more things.

“You bet,” he said. He said it all moist right into my ear. I heard it and felt it. “You bet.” He said it and said it.

So during the ceremony I thought for sure he would say “You bet” instead of “I do.” I really thought he would. And when he didn't and it came time to kiss the bride, I thought for sure that was when he was going to do it, to say “You bet” into my ear. It would have been nice. I don't like to complain, but it would have been nice.

Whenever I play the violin, I take off my earrings. I take off the one from the ear I can hear with, the one closest to the violin, even if it's not a dangly one that might swing against the violin as I play. I don't want anything between me and the violin when I play.

And I take off the other earring, too, even though it's not really in the way. Even if it made any kind of sound, it wouldn't matter. Because it's on the ear that can't hear. But I take it off. To treat it the same as the ear that can hear. To be fair.

Before I get into bed, and before I play the violin, that's when I take off my earrings, but only before I play the violin do I take off my ring. It's not that it would get in the way when I'm playing, and it's not that I take any ring off my other hand, because I wear only one ring now. But I take it off. To be fair. To be fair.

I'm playing two rooms away from him. If there was anything moist about me, it's evaporated into the room, unless maybe there's some sweat trapped between my rib cage and breasts.

Sometimes I edge the bow high up on the fingerboard, like they say Ysaÿe did. And that does give a good sound, a resonating sound.

I hear high-pitched tones better than low-pitched ones. All violinists would agree: you hear and you feel the music you play. But when I say that, it means only the higher notes. The lowest notes, I just feel.

I don't have any earrings on. No earrings, no necklace, no bracelets, no fine gold chain at the waist, and around my ankle, no

woven thing.

And it's quiet. In the middle of the night this apartment can get so quiet it's like what it must be like to be all the way deaf. And I can get frightened. Very frightened.

Even if I'm here in the middle of the day, because of how little I can hear, I forget that it's not really so quiet. In the day, if I want to remind myself how noisy it actually is, I just have to look out the window.

But in the middle of the night I know it's quiet. By looking, by the light of the streetlight. On this street at three in the morning, I'm more likely to find moonlight than car lights. Yes, it's quiet; I can see that it is.

I can see that it is, but if I really wanted to be sure, I'd just stop playing, lay down the bow and do the Helen Keller thing. Put my fingertips against the window. Because, if there's any sound outside, it vibrates into the glass. If there's any sound out there, my fingertips could tell.

So all I'd have to do now to be sure that it's quiet is to stop playing, lay down my bow, and touch my hand to the window. Except I don't want to stop playing.

But it's quiet. You bet. You bet. Violin quiet.

