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Cautiously Plucking a Chord

The sound: a sonorous string-unless it squeaks. Three years ago, I began violin lessons. The catch: I'm a mature adult with no prior training. Moreover, a violin is an infant's instrument. Every mother thinks their plodding toddler is a prodigy. Little learners are catered and coddled like kittens. They play tiny instruments suitable for diminutive digits. Adults are leviathans in a lilliputian landscape who are never pampered prodigies. Why, then, did I choose to study violin?

Perhaps I imagined myself at Carnegie Hall: house lights dim, the audience is hushed as I stroll onstage, instrument tucked under my arm, trailing behind a beaming Hilary Hahn as we prepare to duet? Nope. I may have a vivid imagination but I'm not that crazy.

A SINGULAR HUMAN TALENT

Professional musicians have phenomenal proficiency. Scientists believe music is a singular, innate human talent. Prodigious performers may have genetic gifts. A virtuoso has fantastic finger dexterity. Consider Nathan Milstein playing "Paganiniana." [Nathan Milstein 'Paganiniana' - YouTube](#) I watch and listen in astonishment, transported.

Yet seldom are neophytes overnight sensations. Most struggle for years, as if flowering talent must be watered by perspiration. I envy such skill and devotion and wonder if I'm capable of such miraculous achievement.

CLARION CALL

Legendary Benny Goodman was a clarinetist, the King of Swing. He made it look so easy. So, I took the subway to a Lincoln Center music school which had an open house and tried a clarinet. Clarinet derives from clarion, Italian for trumpet. The horn's sound comes from a vibrating stalk of cane fiber or reed. Many are made from the [Arundo donax](#) plant. Professionals frequently moisten the reed in their mouths. I suppose this takes a toll on saliva.

Bogie said, "just purse your lips and blow." Not exactly.

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

To play a clarinet, you gnaw and puff. That is, you cover your bottom teeth with your lower lip and chew down on the mouthpiece with your top teeth. Well, I gnawed and puffed but nothing happened except my throat dried up. I aspirated and respiration without respite. Then, I coughed, thanked the instructor and fled.

A "SAXY" TONE

Shaken but not stirred, I tried the saxophone. I love Grace Kelly, a Korean American prodigy who played sax with Jon Batiste on Colbert's Tonight Show. My favorite by Grace is "Blues for Harry Bosch," written for the TV detective drama. Grace even plays sax and dances at the same time. Looks like a lot of fun and she's not even breathing hard.

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Saxes are emotional horns that wail and growl. Besides the common tenor sax, there is also the smaller alto and larger baritone sax. Most brass instruments like the trumpet don't have reeds. You just vibrate your lips against the mouthpiece. Unfortunately, the sax is an exception. Although it's metal, it uses a reed like the clarinet. Arrgh!

A WHEEZE AND A PRAYER

Therefore, my saxophone tooting was as bad as my clarinet wheezing. I only made a hissing noise. It was like a breathing test my doctor gave me when he thought I had pneumonia. I ended up totally winded. Perhaps I just didn't have musical genes.

STRINGING ALONG

Yogi said, "it ain't over 'til it's over." So, gasping for air, I decided to try violin. At least, I wouldn't have to stick it in my mouth. My tongue still had a metallic taste from the sax.

A BOW AND A PRAYER

Trembling, I entered the violin studio.

A violin is sensuous, even seductive. It has a curvy body with a long, slender fingerboard. Four tuning pegs jut out below the top scroll. Like the clarinet, a violin is made of wood, but a special, lovely blend of rosewood and spruce. That's enough to make a grown man shiver.

A CENTENARIAN

Violins are not only virtuoso instruments, but impressive centenarians. Just like wines, violins improve with age. A clarinet or saxophone degrades after a dozen years. A guitar rarely twangs for twenty. A valued violin outlives its owner and can be awfully costly as well. For instance, the 1741 Guarneri del Gesù violin is the most expensive violin in the world, valued at \$16 million. At that price, it should last forever.

Unlike the clarinet and sax, a violin is never alone. Its mate is the bow, a slender stick with a ribbon of synthetic "hair" attached at both ends. Expensive instruments use actual horsehair from deceased animals, which is anathema to any vegan. Rubbing the bow hair against the metal strings produces sound.

If bowing is done elegantly, the hair produces a beautiful tone. If done rashly, it screeches and scratches. I was lucky. The instructor balanced the instrument on my shoulder. Then, she helped me guide the bow across the strings. Presto, I heard a mellifluous note. It was magical.

That afternoon, I signed up for lessons.

MOTIVATION

I'd like to say I quickly mastered the mystery of violin performance. Au contraire. Practice is perilous, demanding inspiration and perseverance. Without frets to mark the notes, you must listen assiduously. Bowing is elaborate and exacting. Precise tuning is a trying task, even with electronic technology. Worse, weather distresses the violin- strings in synchrony go tremulous in rainstorms. So, why do I continue? Perhaps I have a persecution complex.

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A friend assumed it was a goof or that I wanted to forestall Alzheimer's. Neither is true. The violin is a challenge to creativity. If music is a peculiarly human artistry, maybe I want to feel fully human.

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