

Violin Lessons

including
3 Pieces for the Young Violinist

Cynthia Troup

Violin Lessons

It was jealousy. I was given my first violin lessons because of a sudden, furious jealousy—the Green-Eyed Monster, my mother called it. Hours before my sister was taken to *her* lesson I'd begin sulking, stamping and pleading, and so the Green-Eyed Monster persuaded my parents to relent. At last, against the felt lining of *my* violin case *my* instrument glowed too. I was seven years old, my sister was nine and we'd just given up ballet.

We shared a bedroom wallpapered in white with blue flowers. One night our mother found us both crying by the light of our bed lamps. Hiccuping into our pillows we confessed that we didn't *want* to go to ballet the next day; worse, we ... we, we *hated* the ballet teachers. The ballet school was a cream brick hall in North Balwyn. When Amelia and I tiptoed across the gravelled carpark and into our separate classes, I could feel all those sharp grey stones through the soles of my ballet shoes.

Even though Amelia had just learnt the Birdcage Dance with the polka and received a Credit for her exam, the ballet lessons promptly ceased. Tights and leotards were consigned to the dress-ups. Soon Saturdays were for violin instead.

Scene:
The dancing class

Mrs Simons' front room.

An afternoon Autumn sun shines, but the garden outside the bay window is in shadow. Inside, the overhead lights are switched on. They reflect bright yellow in the mirror above the mantelpiece.

The window seat is occupied by two boys: fidgeting, swinging their legs.

[SUSAN DIBBS sits at the Good piano. Her hands are folded neatly in her lap. MRS SIMONS stands at the keyboard to check the tuning of Amelia's violin, and murmurs to SUSAN DIBBS.

AMELIA is hovering. She looks at her shoes. These are her best shoes and her hair is done with a shiny ribbon, tied fast.]

MRS SIMONS [to the Parents and Friends]: Amelia will perform her piece from memory.

[With a nod to AMELIA she moves aside. The boys stop fidgeting and consider. Someone's baby brother begins to whine.]

From the AUDIENCE [softly]: Sssh. [A shifting in upholstered chairs.]

AMELIA [right hand flutters around her glasses]: Good afternoon, I'm— I would like to play dancing class. 'The ... dancing class' by E. Murray.

[A small cough from the AUDIENCE. AMELIA prepares to play.

The first chord sounds from the piano. Straight away SUSAN DIBBS repeats the first chord because AMELIA is late with her quavers.

AMELIA performs the piece rather slowly, but carefully, evenly, notes and bowings all correct. SUSAN DIBBS on the piano sounds triumphant at every bar. The violin is a very polite accompaniment.]

[half-sized violin]:

The dancing class

E. MURRAY

Gracioso ♩ : 120

mf

Our violin teacher smelt of expensive face cream and milky coffee. She pinned up her hair nearly invisibly in a French roll, wore her blouses open at the collar. Whenever she smiled or gave praise her eyes shone and her long, pale neck flushed pink.

At that time Mrs Simons taught in a low rectangular building like a miniature portable classroom, built by her husband to one side of their Edwardian home. The studio, as it was called, was surrounded by leafy plants, and had its own uneven stretch of path. Approached from the tall front gate, there was just a moment when it had the aura of a Wendy house. In the summer it was rather hot inside, the air close with the smell of carpet squares and rosin dust. There was a narrow seat fixed along one wall, where one of us was to sit amongst the violin cases and piles of music books: teaching sets, piano parts, photocopies and sheets of manuscript paper. Stray pencils and pencil stubs, sharpeners and rubber bands.

Years later, when the front room of the family home became Mrs Simons' teaching studio, the same piles of music books teetered on the window seat there. (At first, the front room was just for Sunday concert-parties. Performers would wait their turn lined up on the window seat. It had a flat velvet cushion. Susan Dibbs accompanied on the Good piano. With the tea or coffee afterwards there were Scotch Finger biscuits and Monte Carlos.)

Dad ferried us to our lessons. Every week my sister and I rode in the back of the Mazda while he drove listening to the ABC radio news and *The Goon Show* turned up loud in the front. We held our violin cases across our knees and muttered our argument about which of us would go first. You're older, I'd remind her, suddenly deferential. Fiercely, she'd reply, You'll get tired waiting.

Mrs Simons would settle the argument by moving swiftly to make a start. Usually she hustled Amelia's music onto the stand and rosin onto *her* bow. Amelia, let's make a start. Usually she smiled at me and she said Amelia's lesson is good for you too, and I would feel Obedient and arrange myself prettily amongst the music books. Then Mrs Simons would tweak the strings into tune and tuck the instrument firmly under Amelia's chin. Interrupting any chit-chat. The Lesson began when Mrs Simons sighed a small sigh and reached for her coffee, her lips slightly pursed as she listened.

It was on the way to violin that I took to biting my fingernails. The shrill, incomprehensible noise of the Goons heightened my dread, and the awful truth that really I HAD NOT PRACTISED. Or otherwise HAD NOT DONE ENOUGH PRACTICE.

I couldn't begin to pretend that I might have DONE ENOUGH PRACTICE if I'd let the nails on my left hand grow. Long fingernails would instantly betray my LACK OF APPLICATION. According to Mrs Simons, A Violinist always has short fingernails. A Violinist keeps fingernails neat. Mrs Simons kept a travel manicure set on top of the upright piano. She should not have to use it during the Lesson.

Sometimes Mrs Simons gave us orange cordial from a jug that clinked with ice cubes. She was not unkind. She distinguished between the Violinist and the violin player. She was unpredictable. Suddenly she could seem affronted by Amelia's efforts, or my efforts, and on occasion she seemed to blame us for much more than LACK OF APPLICATION. She seemed to blame us for being there to be taught violin at all. In the terrible hush that followed her reproaches, we'd both fix our eyes on the carpet squares while Mrs Simons took up a pencil. Outdoors there would be birds and near us the spiky rhythm of the pencil; the crackle of the paper where she was pressing hard, spelling out extra instructions for PRACTICE. Amelia could stay calm and standing nicely, just blinking her eyes behind her glasses, but when Mrs Simons expressed disappointment in me, I thought I should already know about music and

violin and I'd be in danger of crying, stamping even, so I WOULDN'T be a pretty Violinist. EVER.

As a rule, Mrs Simons wrote a great deal on our music and in our notebooks, and busily, in running writing that could be difficult to read. To her headings she would add a diagonal line, like the line flourished under a signature. The headings were given a capital letter, and were mostly dull words such as Intonation, and solemn words such as Tone. Posture. Progressive Exercises. Bowing Technique. At least they became solemn, even stern, scrawled flat and underlined in the notebook. But Mrs Simons pronounced the 't' in 'often': 'of-ten', she said. She used the word 'melody', and spoke with rich, rounded vowels. When she discussed Intonation and Tone; when she demonstrated Exercises and Technique, playing her violin above us, then the same words meant something so sure, vivid, exciting— Something that sparkled.

Something that might be possible. With PRACTICE and APPLICATION.

Only after our lessons, Amelia and I didn't need to APPLY ourselves for the rest of the day. After our lessons we were not just relieved but exultant, and we would race to Mrs Simons' front gate; fling our cases ahead of us into the Mazda. The afternoon was ours now, unencumbered, for bikes and books and maybe a trip to the Milk Bar.

Dad made Saturday lunch. Listening to the ABC radio news and *The Science Show* and the news again turned up in the kitchen, he made us toasted tomato sandwiches with the butter soaked in. I could leave the crusts. We knew that Dad would eat them with anchovy paste.

Amelia didn't take to biting her fingernails on the way to violin. She left her glasses at home and couldn't read the music very well. Also she forgot her notebook. Mrs Simons' cup of coffee went untouched. Amelia, she said, Amelia you forget your notebook too of-ten. The 't' in 'often' was tight. A Violinist should be well organised and much better prepared for the Lesson. I didn't need glasses. Even in the corners I could see the outlines of the carpet squares and tried to count them all.

The night before our next lesson my sister cried in bed. I was supposed to be asleep but Amelia was overwrought. She was hiccuping noisily into her pillow and couldn't stop, so she was overwrought. Lights went on, and slippers. Our mother escorted Amelia to the kitchen for a drink.

Amelia hiccuped that she *loathed* Mrs Simons.

Now, now. It was late. Amelia had to calm down. Would she like hot Milo? This was interesting: my sister hardly ever made a fuss. I took Amelia her dressing-gown, and we both had hot Milo. While we watched the milk on the stove, the house creaked in the dark. I forgot to ask what *loathe* was.

Scene:
Berceuse

Mrs Simons' teaching studio.

Amelia's Lesson. The Lesson is not quite over.

[I am sitting amongst the violin cases, directly opposite the open door. Through the door; through the studio window with its four square panes, the afternoon glares grey, humid, inert. My clothes are sticking, damp under my thighs and arms. I lean back on the narrow seat.

MRS SIMONS has been writing on Amelia's music. She drops the pencil onto the ledge of the music stand, straightens and reaches for her violin.]

MRS SIMONS [declaring]: Amelia, your new piece this week is 'Berceuse'. [She reaches for her bow and briskly adjusts the tension of the bowhair.] 'Berceuse' is a French word; 'bercer' means to rock to sleep. This piece is a lullaby then. In G major. Softly. And andantino: see? [She indicates the word printed over the first bar.] In this case it means, I think, slower than andante. Anyway, not too fast.

[AMELIA cautiously inspects the new piece. After a suitable pause, she turns to MRS SIMONS, who is lifting her violin to play for us. AMELIA takes a step sideways. She removes her glasses.

Berceuse

E. GALLAND
(1893 - 1964)

Andantino

It seems that MRS SIMONS plays for a long time. The music is calm—calm like breathing.

We listen to 'Berceuse' and outside in the humid afternoon it begins to rain. The rain is weightless. It can be heard only as the faintest rustling.

I watch the lawn, the shrubs and trees around Mrs Simons' studio merge into glistening green.

The last note of 'Berceuse' recedes into the sound of the rain.]

Some weeks later I found myself alone in the back of the Mazda. Amelia wasn't even sick. The Goons played their silly trumpets and I chewed my nails. Amelia was mean and so was Mrs Simons. And Dad. 'Gavotte' was too hard.

Behind me Mrs Simons' front gate clicked shut, and hesitating there, I saw and remembered that her studio reminded me of a Wendy house: compact, friendly, nestled in the garden. That day the Lesson went quickly; not a moment to think of Obedient. At the end, Mrs Simons played 'Gavotte' for me. She was certain I could learn it through for next week.

Going home I wondered once more how Mrs Simons pinned up her hair. I told Amelia over lunch that I was nearly finishing 'Gavotte'. She sniffed. Didn't I remember *way back* when *she* played that piece? I said no I didn't, she must be lying. We bickered over the radio voices.

Later, on the telephone, Mrs Simons suggested piano for Amelia, and a teacher, Miss Honey. Miss Honey didn't live too far away. She taught from home in the afternoons ... Of course our mother had had piano lessons and ... Occasionally, now ... Hm ... Question of temperament. Hm ... Yes ... Address ... So on? *Grateful* for ... Oh, the next concert-party was mentioned. Yes ... Every effort to ... Fine.

Amelia beamed. *Miss Honey!* Once we'd heard about Miss Honey and the piano lessons, Amelia said that 'Handel Gavotte' was quite a good piece. Actually she *had* played it a while ago but still it was one of her favourites. I didn't care. I concentrated on not caring.

Miss Honey! The Green-Eyed Monster reared its ugly head again. Yet even I knew that the Green-Eyed Monster WOULD NOT WIN a second time.

Probably, Miss Honey didn't have long hair.

Scene:
Gavotte

Mrs Simons' front room.

It is after 4.00 pm. A subdued atmosphere.

There are hibiscus flowers in bloom at the bay window.

[MRS SIMONS *stands at the Good piano to check the tuning of my violin, and she murmurs to* SUSAN DIBBS.

I am waiting to perform. I have my hands clasped close behind my back; I make my skirt sway a little.]

MRS SIMONS [*lightly, to the Parents and Friends*]: So then, thankyou [*she cues ME*] our last item for today—

[*As she steps across the room, her smart heels tap-tap on the floorboards.*]

Clutching my violin and bow, I face the two loose rows of Parents and Friends. AMELIA crosses and uncrosses her arms. Beside Amelia MY MOTHER, holding her handbag forward on her knees. There are empty chairs; eight people in the audience now. Not including MRS SIMONS or SUSAN DIBBS.

SUSAN DIBBS is looking at ME, arching her eyebrows high.

Whispers can be heard, and from the kitchen, a clatter of cups and saucers.]

ME [*announcing*]: Good. [I swallow. Then louder] Afternoon. I would like to play 'Handel Gavotte'.

[*My fingernails are short and neat. On the string my fingers find their position to begin.*]

At once the piano is ringing out and all the notes, MISS DIBBS' and mine, are pounding fast.]

[*quarter-sized violin*]:

Gavotte

G. F. HANDEL
(1685-1759)

The musical score for 'Gavotte' by G. F. Handel is presented in four staves. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/4. The first staff starts with a forte (f) dynamic. The second staff starts with a piano (p) dynamic. The third staff starts with a forte (f) dynamic. The fourth staff starts with a piano (p) dynamic and ends with a forte (f) dynamic. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with various slurs and accents.