

## ARTS CORNER

# The Piano

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When my teacher and friend Aurora Guerra asked me to write about my artistic side, my first feeling of surprised gratitude and pride rapidly gave way to a degree of concern. Who will be interested in my playing the piano? I quickly ran off to reread some of the articles published in Arts Corner, building my discomfort to a crescendo: the authors were not only dermatologists of renowned prestige, but also in possession of undeniable artistic talent. Then, gradually, I encouraged myself, thinking that perhaps my story is similar to that of many others in this field who, just like me, started to play music very young, even though their professional life has since taken them down other paths. Perhaps this alone could justify a space for my story in this section. From my humble position of hospital dermatologist and keen amateur pianist, I took a deep breath, dried the cold sweat running down my back, and set out to write these lines.

## The Piano: A Short History

The piano is the outcome of a lengthy evolution down the centuries. The first known precursor, the sitar, was originally found in Southeast Asia and Africa, and dates back to the Bronze Age. This consisted of a wooden board with several strings sitting above it that vibrated to produce sounds. Later, the monochord—literally the “single cord”—was invented. This was an instrument with 1 long string that vibrated in a wooden sound box. It was followed by the psaltery, similar to the sitar but with a trapezoidal sound box shaped according to the length of the strings, and then the dulcimer. The latter represented a great evolutionary step forward, as its strings were designed to be struck, instead of being plucked with the fingernails or with pointed instruments. The novel idea of placing keys between the strings and the fingers or other objects dates back to the 12th and 13th centuries, and was improved in the clavichord and harpsichord.

Around 1695, the Italian Bartolomeo Cristofori forged a qualitative leap forward in the development of these instruments, a true revolution, when he designed a device that hit the strings in such a manner that both the tone and the volume of the notes could be modulated, magnifying the capacity for musical expression. The piano-forte (soft and quiet-loud and strong) had been invented.

## Doctor Pianists

Medicine is a frustrating profession. No matter how much knowledge you pack away, or how many successful treatments you achieve, sooner or later you will fail. That is how it goes. Science and our own intelligence both have their limits, and, unfortunately, we are not infallible, in spite of the enormous efforts we make every day. I think that is why there are so many doctors with artistic interests, so that when failure falls upon us (sometimes implying the death of a patient) we have something to hold on to, something sublime, beyond the reach of human misery and that can console us in these hard times, something that compensates



Figure 1. Treble clef



Figure 2. Musical score

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Figure 3. Piano keys

us for our limitations and allows us to dream of perfection and cling on tighter to life. That is the way of music, and that is how we can feel when we play an instrument. Perhaps it is a form of prayer, or maybe a way of tricking ourselves by trying to show that we are better than we appear to be, I don't know. I only know that after a hard day, when I am tired or things have not gone well, I sit in front of the piano and start to stroke its keys, and I am comforted.

## My Story

I was a pianist long before I was a doctor. At the age of 5 I asked my parents if I could study music. And trying to play the flute in Mother Dina's class was no mean feat, I can tell you. Not only did you have to drag sounds out of the instrument in unison with all the others, but the tune had to be recognizable and also sound good, something that was little short of a miracle. So the one remaining choice was to take vocal music theory lessons so that I could move on to a musical instrument later. When the time finally came, perhaps fascinated by the way my teacher played to accompany our scales, or maybe impressed by those immense and majestic grand pianos that adorned the seating and reception areas of hotels, astonishing everyone who came across them, I chose the piano like a shot.

I have played the piano for 20 years and I am still surprised every day when I discover new nuances in scores, listening to the same notes and silences with fresh ears, because every time I stroke the keys, the old melody changes, it transforms to reflect what we are in that instant, making it something so intimate, so brilliant, so special...and as a result, once you get used to feeling that symbiosis between the musical instrument and yourself, you can not break the intimate bond created. You and the piano are one.

I never fail to be surprised how the mixture of 12 semitones and silence can provide the opening for so many and such varied melodies. It is mathematical. As Albert Einstein said: "Music is the pleasure the human soul experiences from counting without being aware that it is counting."

I will probably never earn my living as a pianist, nor do I need to do so. The piano for me is much more than that: it allows me to escape and express myself, to communicate

without needing to think or to articulate phonemes. Perhaps because for music—as with nearly all the important things in this world—there are just too many words.

## The Stuff of Dreams

*"Without music, life would be a mistake"*

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

I had no right to be surprised. And yet it happened. I had no right to be surprised when Beatriz, this young woman who looks like the subject of a romantic painting—tall, slim, with deep, dreamy eyes—told me she played the piano. Nor when she proved astonishingly that on top of her intellectual, professional, and human worth, she was able to transmit her emotions, or similarly, part of her most private identity through writing.

I should have known, because I knew her during her years in specialist training, that, as well as outstanding intelligence, she has extraordinary sensitivity. That her composure and integrity as a doctor and specialist in dermatology were supported by a crystal structure, the soul of a rose, the stuff of dreams.

Beatriz Pérez—*Beayomisma* as she calls herself in Internet groups—is an example of an impossible, inconsequential, incomprehensible, desirable, and desired personality. Because she knows how to be at the same time firm and tender, sensitive and strong, expert and confidante, dreamy and humorous, unperturbed by difficulties, inflexible before the enemy but sweet and giving with her friends. Is she a renaissance woman? More than that. Because not only is she able to cultivate any art or science, she is also a woman of the world, up-to-date, modern, developed, self-sufficient. And good.

In this difficult world where she unfolds her life with ease, the piano is for her something like the landscape that sustains her. Or like the knight's castle. A place for a break or somewhere to hide. Where she can show her happiness or hide her sadness. Someone to talk to or to hear. It is an extension of her self, the malleable soul she can shape with her own hands. Someone who never says no. Who never hides. Who never fails. Like herself.

I remember times of shared laughter, jokes, secrets, study, work, battles...and she was always equal to it, never failing to show implicitly, like a hologram, this essential air of fairy tale princess. This is Beatriz: the stuff of dreams in an iron world.

I know it looks like I love her, and that is why I speak well of her. As that is the truth. I love her.

But I am sure, furthermore, that she deserves it. Or maybe you wouldn't have liked to have a daughter, a girlfriend, a friend, or a student like her?

Well I have had.

A. GUERRA