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Dramatic Publishing

THE MUSIC LESSON

By
TAMMY RYAN



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(THE MUSIC LESSON)

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For Augustin and Durdica Martinovic. For your friendship
and inspiration, I thank you. And to the memories of Senad
and all the children of Sarajevo.

“...impressive...[an] impassioned new play...a tale of teachers and students educating each other, reaching across a gulf of cultures and generations for a common understand through music.”
Palm Beach Post

“*The Music Lesson* will prove to be one of the year’s most important, thought-provoking and heartfelt new plays...[an] impressive drama.”
Sun-Sentinel, South Florida

“Sensational... Don’t miss this music lesson. You’ll be the richer for it.”
Daily News, Palm Beach

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IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

All producers of the play *must* give credit to the author(s) of the play in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and in all instances in which the title of the play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the play and/or a production. The name of the author(s) *must* also appear on a separate line, on which no other name appears, immediately following the title, and *must* appear in size of type not less than fifty percent the size of the title type. Biographical information on the author(s), if included in the playbook, may be used in all programs. *In all programs this notice must appear:*

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All producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“First commissioned and produced by Prime Stage,
Theatre for Youth and Families.”

The Music Lesson was originally commissioned and produced by Prime Stage, Theater for Youth and Families, Pittsburgh, Pa., in the spring of 1998, directed by Wayne Brinda, artistic director.

It was subsequently developed at the 1999 Waldo M. and Grace C. Bonderman National Playwriting for Youth Symposium at IUPUI and Indiana Rep, Indianapolis, directed by J. Daniel Herring with Jane Ann Crum as dramaturg and Dorothy Webb, director of the symposium.

It was further developed at the University of Texas at Austin's New Play Development Project 2000, produced by Suzan Zeder, in collaboration with Stage One Children's Theater in Louisville, directed by J. Daniel Herring with musical consultants Deanne Hardy and Ludek Drizhal.

The first professional production of *The Music Lesson* was presented at Florida Stage, Manalapan, Fla., in the fall of 2000, Louis Tyrrell, producing director, Nancy Barnett, managing director, directed by Louis Tyrrell and Mark Lynch, with musical direction by Craig D. Ames, set design by Klara Zieglerova, lighting by Jim Fulton and costumes by Lynda Peto. The production stage manager was Suzanne Clement Jones. The cast was as follows:

Maja MAGGI ST. CLAIR MELIN
Irena JESSICA K. PETERSON
Ivan JORIS STUYCK
Mrs. Johnson ELIZABETH DIMON
Kat AMY LOVE
Eddie ASHTON LEE

NOTE REGARDING THE MUSIC

The actors should not actually play instruments. In the production at Florida Stage, live musicians were upstage in a “blue room” playing piano and violin as the actors mimed playing. Once the convention was established, it worked beautifully. If you don’t have access to musicians, taped music can be used.

The music functions in three ways: as actual music “played” by the character(s) in the scene, as transitions between scenes, and as a character itself pushing the action forward. Avoid underscoring the dialogue, which has a musicality of its own which is enough.

Below is a list of the music used in the Florida Stage production, but I recommend the musical director/sound designer make his/her own choices, centering around Bach. *The only necessary pieces are the Prelude #1 in C Major and the Bach/Gounod Ave Maria.

MUSIC (in order of occurrence)

Invention No. 1 in C Major Johann Sebastian Bach
Minuet in G Major No. 7 Bach
Minuet in G No. 10 Bach
“The Little Horses” adapted by Aaron Copland
*Prelude #1 in C Major Bach
*Ave Maria Bach/Gounod
Musette in D Major Bach
Minuet in G Minor Bach
Le roi Babar et la reine Celeste Francis Poulenc
Adagio from Concerto for Oboe Bach/Marcello
Praeludium No. 14, Well-tempered Clavier Bach
Saraband in C Minor, Piano Partita No. 1 Bach
Gigue in A Minor, Piano Partita No. 3 Bach

Note on musical arrangement: To obtain the rights to the Florida Stage piano-violin arrangements you may contact Craig Ames through Florida Stage at (561) 585-3404 or e-mail Mr. Ames directly at: pacocito@gate.net.

THE MUSIC LESSON

A Play in Two Acts
For 2 Men and 4 Women

CHARACTERS

MAJA . . . A young girl from Sarajevo, 12-13. Plays piano.

IRENA. . . A woman of 49. Once very beautiful, with dark,
haunted eyes. Teaches piano.

IVAN . . . A man of 50. Tall, thin, very elegant, yet there is
something childlike about him. He also has haunted
eyes, and nervous hands which are never quite at rest.

MRS. JOHNSON A woman of 44. Mother of two,
divorced. Real estate agent.

KAT A young girl of 14, going on 31.
Slightly grungy, perpetually annoyed.
Tries not to play the piano.

EDDIE A young boy of 10. Bright, cheerful,
plays the violin.

SETTING: Pittsburgh 1996 and Sarajevo 1992-1995.

The action is continuous. Blackouts should be avoided, especially when going from the present to the past. Also, since it is, in some ways, a memory play, the style should be fluid. Feel free to depart from realism.

NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION OF SERBO-CROATION

c sounds like “ts” as in cats - srce

c sounds like “ch” as in church - muciti

c sounds like “tj” as in future - doci

dj sounds like soft “g” in ginger - gdje

j sounds like “y” as in yes - jako

lj sounds like “ll” in medallion

nj sounds like “ny” in canyon - sanjala

s sounds like “sh” as in ship - Milosevic

z sounds like “zh” as in casual - Kako se kaza

THE MUSIC LESSON

AT RISE: The LIGHTS RISE LOW on a WOMAN sitting at a piano. She tries to play the melody of a Bosnian folk song, but stops after the first few notes. A YOUNG GIRL emerges out of the darkness and approaches the WOMAN from behind. The music continues. The WOMAN doesn't look at the GIRL, just listens. Under the melody, the GIRL speaks from a point in the WOMAN's memory: February 1994, Sarajevo.

MAJA. I don't think of childish things anymore. What were they? My friends, the games we played, my lessons at school. The make-believe thoughts of a stupid girl in a fairytale. This is what I want to know about now: Snow. How does the sky still manage it? Great big soft flakes quietly making Sarajevo beautiful again. Like spring. That was a big surprise, remember? When the leaves began to sprout green on trees that were nothing but stumps, every branch torn away for firewood. I didn't think it was possible, but spring came. Although the birds didn't. Did you notice that? It was spring, but there were no birds.

IRENA (*whispers*). Please, keep playing.

MAJA. Like the snow that keeps falling, and the trees that keep growing, my arms and legs are getting longer and

longer. I'm even getting breasts. I'm becoming a woman in spite of the war.

(MAJA disappears back into the darkness as LIGHTS RISE FULL on IRENA sitting at the piano, playing again, those first few notes. After a few moments, IVAN bursts in with bags of groceries.)

(Speech in italics is in Serbo-Croatian.)

IRENA. *Jako si me uplasio!* [You scared me!]

IVAN. In English, please.

IRENA. *Kako se kaza, srce mi ye stalo?* [How do you say, you stopped my heart?]

IVAN. I almost "give you heart attack."

IRENA. Heart attack, yes. ...*Kako se kaza—*

IVAN. How do you say... *Kako se kaza*, How do you say...

IRENA. How do you say, *muciti?*

IVAN. I am not "tortur-ing" you, I am trying to help you learn. We are in America now; we must to speak English.

IRENA. *Nisam sanjala da cu docu u Pitsburg.* [I never dreamed I would some day come to Pittsburgh.]

IVAN. They speak English in Pittsburgh too.

IRENA. I am tired of English. My mouth hurts going, waaa waaa, waaa, waaa all the time. Can't we speak our language at home only?

IVAN. We must practice at home. As teacher, you know this, Irena.

IRENA *(sitting down at the piano, banging out same note)*. WAA-WAA-WAA-WAA. There, I practice.

IVAN. Okay. One hour of English, then we take break.

IRENA. You are hard master, Ivan. *Kako se kaza—*

IVAN. How do you say...

IRENA. How do you say, *jako mi je zao*.

IVAN (*quickly checks Serbo-Croatian/English dictionary*).

To have “pity.”

IRENA. Pit-tee. Yes, I’ll have some, please.

IVAN. In fifty-eight seconds—no, I am sorry, fifty-seven minutes. Now, I must to put away food.

IRENA (*watching him suspiciously*). Why are you in such hurry?

IVAN. Did I hear you playing, Irena?

IRENA. Listening.

IVAN. I wish you would play more and listen maybe less.

IRENA. I wish you would listen maybe more. (*She plays the same few notes as before.*)

IVAN. It is the same song, Irena, and you know many.

IRENA. I am respecting the notes.

IVAN. Respect is good. But we need practice together like before.

IRENA. This piano is out of tune.

IVAN. It sounds okay to me, but okay, we will tune, and I will tell you why we must, in one second! (*Exits.*)

IRENA (*as she sits, practicing English*). Oh, please, let me help you.

IVAN (*offstage*). No, no, you sit. I prepare coffee—would you like some?

IRENA. Yes, please. Thank you.

IVAN (*running back into room with a plate of cookies*).

You are “well come!” (*He bursts out laughing.*)

IRENA (*obviously perplexed*). Why do you say that?

IVAN. If you say “thank you,” I say, you are “well come.”

IRENA. You may come in?

IVAN. No, after thank you. Say, you are “well come.”

IRENA. But you are in already.

IVAN. Not everything translates.

IRENA. This is true. *(She takes cookie, bites.)* Too much sugar.

IVAN. That is all right. *(Picks up bitten cookie, eventually puts it in his pocket.)* I have surprise for you today.

IRENA *(watching him)*. Uh-oh, I am—afraid.

IVAN. It is what we always want!

IRENA. Now I am—horrible.

IVAN. This is good news, Irena! Today I have found two students! One for me and one for you.

IRENA. I do not want student, Ivan.

IVAN. Once we have student we can work, we can start over.

IRENA. Where did you find these students?

IVAN *(smiling)*. Giant Eagle. Woman hit me with shopping cart while I wait to pay for groceries in Giant Eagle. She say she so sorry, she not look where she is going, she have so much on her mind. I say, I understand, this is not a problem. She say, “You are not from here.” Why do Americans always say what is obvious? I say, “No, I am sorry my English is not so good.” She say, “No, no, no, your English is excellent, where are you from?” I tell her, “I am from Bosnia-Herzegovina.” She stare. I say, “I am from Sarajevo.” And her eyes grow so big, like plates. She say, “Noooooo.” I say, “Yes.” She say me, what do I do, I say, “I am musician.” She say, “Noooooo.” I say, “Yes.” She say, “Do you teach music?” I say yes, she say noooo, I say yes, yes. And she ask me, instrument, I say, violin—

IRENA. She say, “Nooooooo.”

IVAN. She say her son study violin and her daughter wants piano.

IRENA. No.

IVAN. I say my wife teach piano!

IRENA. No! Ivan, no!

IVAN. Yes, yes, yes. They be here in ten seconds.

IRENA. But I have no time to prepare! Ivan, what are you thinking?

IVAN. Just to meet. Her name is Mrs. Johnson and her children—

IRENA. Look at me, Ivan. I cannot meet student today. I have no music, I have no program. I am not prepared to meet student. I have piano sound like big *el-e-phant!*

IVAN. Just to say hello. To see talent, if it is big or little, to decide how to prepare for next week.

IRENA. I cannot teach here!

IVAN. It makes no difference if we are in Sarajevo or in Pittsburgh. Three hundred years of musicians in your family have made you what you are. That has not changed.

IRENA. My English is not good.

IVAN. Music is the only language you need.

IRENA. American children—I have nothing to give them.

IVAN. Children are children. You know children.

IRENA. I am empty, Ivan.

IVAN. That is why you must start again, with students, with music—

IRENA. My heart has had HEART ATTACK, it is dead.

IVAN. When we have *work* our hands will have something to do every day. When your hands are busy, your heart will follow. You will see.

IRENA. What I see is they are coming in five minutes and I cannot argue with you now. *(As IRENA starts up the stairs she suddenly doubles over in pain, clutching her side.)*

IVAN *(running to her)*. O, *jeli ti lose?* [Are you sick?]

IRENA. It is nothing, my stomach. I eat something, maybe not so good.

IVAN. What do you eat? Bite of cookie, that's all you eat. *(The DOORBELL rings.)*

IRENA. Our guest arrive.

IVAN. Go upstairs, I fix down here, you fix up there. Please, Irena.

IRENA *(exits, muttering to herself)*. Ja nemogu vjerovati sta mi govoris! Uf opet!

IVAN. In English!

IRENA. I have not learn me these words yet!

(IVAN frantically readies the room. He fills three glass bowls with candies, arranging them on the coffee table, pops candy into his mouth. He takes out several packs of cigarettes, lighter, and places them near ashtray. He brings out tray of Turkish coffee with cups, sugar bowl, spoons, etc. His eyes light on an object [a cibuk, a kind of pipe] which hangs over the mantel. He sighs as he straightens it, lost for a moment in thought. The DOORBELL rings. Hurriedly, he brings out his violin and music, arranges music on stand, and on piano for IRENA.)

IVAN *(running to door, opening it)*. I am coming, coming. Come in, please, please, come in.

(LAURA JOHNSON and her TWO CHILDREN freeze in the doorway. They make a portrait of an American family. MOM is bright, colorful, with an edgy cheerfulness like a mask on her face. Her son, EDDIE is ten years old, a typical kid, going with the flow, aware of his charm. KAT, fourteen, slouches on one hip, pouting. She is slightly grungy and tense; you get the feeling she was screaming or was screamed at moments ago. KAT shoves EDDIE ahead of her as they walk in the door.)

EDDIE. Hey!

MRS. JOHNSON. Hi!

IVAN. Please, please, sit, sit.

MRS. JOHNSON. Thank you.

IVAN. You are well come. *(ALL THREE of them sit on the couch. IVAN smiles down at them. They smile back. KAT rolls her eyes, begins chewing her lip.)*

MRS. JOHNSON *(slapping her, whispering)*. Stop that.

IVAN. Have candy. Please. Go ahead. Eat. Be pig. *(EDDIE looks at his mother. She gives a slight nod, and EDDIE digs in.)*

KAT. Gross.

IVAN. You too.

KAT. No way.

MRS. JOHNSON. No thank you.

IVAN. You are well come. Coffee?

MRS. JOHNSON. Oh, yes, please, thank you, thank you. Just sugar, thank you, that's good, that's, thank you.

IVAN *(overlapping on "thank yous")*. You're well come, well come. You are well come.

MRS. JOHNSON. Thank you.

IVAN. You are well come.

KAT. Get over it.

MRS. JOHNSON (*with a look to KAT*). —Well! I'm so glad you could meet with us. I've been looking everywhere for a teacher for little Eddie. This is my son, Eddie, Eddie this is Mr. Bata-lo-vin-o-vich?

IVAN. Ivan Batonovic...and my wife... [pronounced Bah-tahn-o-vich]

(IRENA comes down the stairs in a fresh dress, smiling elegantly.)

IVAN. Irena.

IRENA. How do you do?

MRS. JOHNSON. Nice to meet you. (*Exhaling.*) And this is Kathrine.

IRENA. Katarina.

KAT. Kat.

MRS. JOHNSON. As I told you, at the supermarket, Eddie's been studying violin four years now.

IVAN. Eddie.

EDDIE (*mouthful of candy*). Hahya.

MRS. JOHNSON. He was taking lessons privately for a while—

KAT (*overlapping to EDDIE*). You're disgusting.

MRS. JOHNSON (*choosing to ignore her*). —and then his teacher, a lovely woman, moved away, unfortunately, and since then he's been taking lessons through his schools, and as I told you, they're very good, but he doesn't have the individual attention he could benefit from now. He's very talented, I think you'll see that right away. We're very proud of him.

IVAN. As you should be.

KAT. I'm gonna puke.

IVAN. And, Kat, what about you? You have study piano?

MRS. JOHNSON. She has—but—basically right now, I want to “re-expose” her to music.

IRENA. You could buy CD. (*In response to IVAN's look.*)
For musical appreciation.

IVAN. Yes, listening to music is very nice, but that is not the same as learning to play instrument, as you know, “honey.”

MRS. JOHNSON. Whatever you could give her, a little culture wouldn't hurt at this point.

KAT. Culture, yeah right.

MRS. JOHNSON. Kathrine, be quiet.

KAT. I come home five minutes late from school and she's screamin' at me like a madwoman “You're taking piano lessons, NOW.” Right, I can play chopsticks, maybe.

MRS. JOHNSON. She plays more than chopsticks, I paid for lessons from the time she was seven until, well, about a year ago.

KAT. “You're getting some culture, young lady, IF I HAVE TO FORCE IT DOWN YOUR THROAT!”

MRS. JOHNSON. My daughter, the comedian.

KAT. My mom, Culture Nazi.

IVAN (*not sure he heard right*). You are not—Nazi?

MRS. JOHNSON. No, oh my God, no. She's making a joke. Although it's not very funny. She's fourteen. A difficult age.

IVAN. Ah.

KAT. She's forty-four.

IVAN. I am—fifty.

EDDIE (*after a beat*). I'm ten. (*Everyone looks at IRENA like, “your turn.”*)

IRENA. I am also at a difficult age. (*EVERYONE laughs again, except KAT.*)

KAT. How much longer do I have to sit here?

MRS. JOHNSON (*warning*). When we get home...

IVAN. Okay. We begin. Eddie, please, may I see your violin? (*EDDIE brings out his violin. IVAN inspects it, hands it back to EDDIE, adjusts how he is holding his bow, etc., then, EDDIE plays from Bach's First Lessons for Children the first 16 bars of a minuet.*) Very nice. Very talented. I think I can help. Let me show you. (*IVAN adjusts EDDIE's arms, etc.*) Bow please. (*He demonstrates correct hand position.*) Fingers are wrong. See, you hold like this. First we work with position. Practice every day, one hour exercises I give you. He have very bad habits we need correct, so you, Mama, need help him every day. Make sure he hold, like so. Good. And you show Mr. Johnson, if he have time, he help too. This way we break bad habits.

EDDIE. He won't have time.

IVAN. Daddy is busy, yes.

KAT. Divorced.

EDDIE. Shut up!

KAT. No.

IVAN. Oh, excuse me, I am sorry. I did not mean, I only think about practice.

MRS. JOHNSON. It's all right. It's not a dirty little secret. It was recent.

IVAN. Ah.

KAT. And ugly.

MRS. JOHNSON. As most divorces are, sweetheart.

IRENA. More coffee?

MRS. JOHNSON. No. (*Pause.*)