Her mother's concerts have always been a source of tension. But now, at the last one—with three generations in tow—will things be different?

Concert

BY CAROL PAIK

MY MOTHER ANNOUNCED that she was about to give her last solo recital, at Lutkin Hall at Northwestern University. "I'm sixty-six," she said. "I don't feel like doing this any more." She told me this months in advance, to make sure that I—and perhaps more importantly, my two children, her grandchildren—would be able to attend. Meredith and Jonathan were four and six years old, and I thought about what it would be like for them to fly all the way to Chicago and then sit through a full-length piano concert at night. It didn't sound promising. But if this was in fact going to be their grandmother's last recital, I wanted them to see it.

So we traveled from New York City to Evanston, Illinois, on an unseasonably warm November Friday. Evanston is a place of significance in my family's history, but an unfamiliar place for me. My father and mother met at Northwestern as undergraduates, my mother on a full piano scholarship, my father studying engineering. Not far from the hotel where we were staying were the practice rooms where my father used to study lying underneath the grand piano while my mother worked the keyboard above his head.

We arrived at the hotel around four o'clock, the children were hungry and tired, and I was beginning to think it had been a bad idea to come. Then I spotted my father across the lobby, just as he spotted us. He and my mother had flown in from Boston the day before. He grinned and hurried over, taking Meredith up in his arms.

"I thought you'd be getting in about now," he said, squeezing Meredith until she protested. "I came down to look for you." ("Ants in his pants," I could just about hear my mother mutter.) He sat down and the children draped themselves over him.

"Where's Mom?" I asked.

"Resting upstairs," he said. "She wants me to bring her a hamburger at five o'clock and then the rest of us can go out for dinner."

I had almost forgotten these pre-concert rituals. Before a concert, my mother likes to eat, but just a little bit of something to keep her energy up. ("Something high in protein, nothing with milk or onions.")

"We should probably go soon, if Mom wants her hamburger at five," I said.

"There's plenty of time. There's a Burger King around the corner. It'll take two minutes to get there, two minutes to get back."

"It'll take more than two minutes, Dad."

"Alrightalright," he said. "Five minutes to get there, five minutes to get back." (I could picture my mother, eyes rolled to heaven. "Have you ever seen such a stubborn man?")

On our way back from Burger King, Meredith asked if she could bring Grandma her hamburger, so just outside my parents' room my father placed the small cardboard boxes in her hands. He quietly unlocked the door for her and sent her into the dark. He and I waited outside, listening.

"Hi, sweetheart," I heard my mother say. I realized she thought it was my father who had entered, and that I was hearing the way she speaks to my father when no one else is around. I was surprised by the softness of her tone.

"Sweetheart?" she repeated when no one answered. Then, "Oh, Meredith! Come here my darling! What a wonderful surprise!"

My father and I went in and opened the heavy hotel drapes. My mother was sitting on the edge of the bed with Meredith on her lap, looking happy and calm. Not tense with energy the way I expected her to be. She reached around Meredith to give me a hug.

"Hi, darling," she said. "I like your hair that way."

I hadn't combed my hair since that morning, but I knew why she'd said that. There was a story behind it. When I was in college, in an all-out effort to please her I once told her that for her next concert I would wear whatever she wanted. She bought me a high-waisted, blue and pink flowered dress with a hemline below the knee—the sort of dress no one older than ten or younger than sixty should ever wear. I wore it, fairly confident I wouldn't see anyone I knew at the concert. I also permitted her to curl my hair. I felt ridiculous, but I was proud of myself for being mature enough to bend a little for my mother's pleasure. Then, as we were about to enter the auditorium, she turned to inspect me and her face fell.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CAROL PAIK

"I guess your hair really doesn't hold a curl," she said.

I had turned to my father then and demanded the car keys. He fished around in his pocket and handed them to me, and I turned and walked out of the hall. I spent the recital in the car, amid the shreds of my newfound maturity.

After the concert, she said she had no idea I would be so hurt by such a comment. She hadn't meant to be critical, she said. Since then she has

only bought me black clothing and routinely compliments my hair. She herself often wears the blue and pink dress and it looks quite nice on her.

I thanked her for the hair comment with a kiss. "How are you feeling?" I asked.

She shook her head and groaned theatrically. "The Rorem is my nemesis—twentieth-century music really isn't my bag. I'm so glad this is my last solo recital. It's just too much work! I want to spend that time with my grandchildren! Come, Meredith, would you like to see my gown?"

Meredith nodded, and my mother led her to the closet, where a new shell pink gown was hanging in its plastic bag. During my childhood, in the weeks leading up to a concert, my mother would be focused on her practicing to a point near frenzy, but the concern about what she was going to wear would linger just beneath, occasionally spiking up and sending her to rifle frantically through her closet—and, once I grew to be her size at about age eleven, my closet as well. Sometimes, as a last resort, she'd make a grudging trip to Filene's Basement. She always came up with something that met her criteria: it had to be dressy enough to show respect for the hosting organization; it should sparkle a little for a festive note; its sleeves had to cover the wobbly underside of her upper arms. It also had to cost next to nothing, for she would never willingly spend money on a dress she would get so little use out of. She would decide that the black wraparound skirt I had sewn in Home Ec and sequined top—eight sizes too big—from the church rummage sale fit the bill. I remember, in particular, clunky silver lamé platform sandals that she got for half price because her size, four and a half, had been used as the floor sample. The dignity, bordering on smugness, with which she always carried herself, no matter what her outfit, confirmed my belief that she and I would never agree. But when I saw the lovely fairy-princess-pink gown she had bought for herself, now that she and my father had more means, I wondered if for all those years her smugness had masked disappointment.

The bond between my mother and my daughter surrounds them like a force field. They even look alike: large brown eyes, small noses, and mouths that form thin lines with downturned corners when they are displeased. Occasionally, when Meredith was an infant and I was holding her in my arms, she'd look at me in a certain loving yet measuring way and I'd be struck by the impression that I'd given birth to my mother.

"My dress is pink, too," said Meredith, delighted. In fact, her dress was almost the identical shade. The bond between my mother and my daughter surrounds them like a force field. They even look alike: large brown eyes, small noses, and mouths that form thin lines with downturned corners when they are displeased. Occasionally, when Meredith was an infant and I was holding her in my arms, she'd look at me in a certain loving yet measuring way and I'd be struck by the impression that I'd given birth to my mother. They understand each other at a deep and strange level. "I always know exactly what she needs," my mother often says. "She doesn't have to tell me."

My mother and I never shared that sort of understanding. She seemed, on the contrary, to have a particular knack for dwelling on irrelevant details of the story I was telling, dismissive of things that mattered to me while praising me for things I cared nothing about, offering "constructive criticism" when what I needed was support. For instance, it was my father, not my mother, who took me shopping when I was in high school and quietly bought me Levi's jeans when my mother said the ones from Fashion Barn with elastic waists were perfectly fine. As for Meredith—sometimes I felt uncertain how to approach her, standing there with her little lips turned down at the ends. How do I show her how much I love her without annoying her? Did my mother ever feel that way about me?

"Tonight will be a fitting swan song," said my mother. "Did you know that when I was in college I gave my senior recital in the same hall? Charlotte Gackle and I gave a joint recital. And she's coming tonight, can you imagine? Of course, she has changed her name. No soprano should be called 'Gackle'!" She laughed. "But anyway, it's a nice close to my solo career, I think. Full circle."

I have seen photographs of her senior recital. They are black and white, so I can't tell the color of her gown, but from the way its folds catch the light I can tell the fabric had a

sheen. I know it was handmade, either by her mother or by her sister-in-law, who also sewed her wedding dress. My mother is seated in the photograph, slender, obscured from the waist down by a large bouquet of roses that are darker than the dress. She always took her glasses off for photographs, and she smiles at some point to the left of the camera, glamorous and blind.

My mother's relationship with the piano began when she was a very small girl. She remembers playing the piano in her grandmother's house in Seoul, and she remembers playing the piano on the boat that brought her and her family across the Pacific Ocean to the United States in 1940. When they finally reached Chicago, there was a piano in her new home, or more accurately, in the church that occupied the top floor of the small brownstone where they were to live. On weekdays my mother's father peddled trinkets to factory workers, but on Sundays he was the minister of that church. The top floor was heated only on Sundays, and during the long Chicago winters, when my mother needed to practice, my mother's mother walked in a semi-circle around her holding a small electric heater.

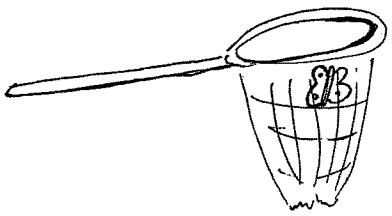
My parents were married in June, 1957. "Everyone got married after graduation," my mother says. "That's just what you did." Within three years they had two sons, and they all lived in student housing in Palo Alto, California, subsisting on my father's fellowship while he earned his Ph.D. There was no room for a piano, even if they could afford one, even if she had had the time to play it. After my father received his doctorate, they moved to Massachusetts, where I was born. We moved to Chicago, and then back to Massachusetts, when I was almost three; my parents decided this would be our permanent home. They were able, finally, to acquire a Baldwin upright and my mother began to play again. I had to go with her to her lessons. Her teacher was an ancient French Canadian lady who spoke accented English and lived in a townhouse filled with fragile items. I sat as still as I possibly could in a corner of the music room, but invariably Miss Giguère would sigh and tell me I had to sit somewhere else.

When I started school, my mother began teaching piano at home. She also began to arrange performances for herself. At the public library fundraiser. At the retirement home. Accompanying the church choir. Soloing with the high school orchestra. Any time she saw an opportunity to give a recital, she snatched it up. Performing gave her exposure, she said, and the exposure brought her more opportunities.

"I had to decide what I was going to do," she told me recently. "And I realized I only knew how to do one thing. I knew how to play the piano. It's not that I love it so much. But it's the thing my parents labored so hard to give me, and it's the only thing I know."

We needed to let her get ready. "I'll see you in just a little while, darling," she said to Meredith, who nodded, took my hand, and came away without any protest. I wasn't so understanding when I was young. I was already older than Meredith when my mother began to give concerts again, but I remember disliking the oddness of dinner being served by Dad, the percussion of high heels on the floor above our heads, the sight of my mother coming down the stairs two to three inches taller than normal with a hairdo like a helmet and lipstick like a warning. She would help me into my tights in a distanced, careful way, and she would inspect us all, her mouth turned down, looking right into our eyes and licking her thumb to stick a stray hair in place. She would inspect my father, too, and question him about the status of the tape recorder and whether he had tested the batteries, making him defensive and impatient.

But now she saw us off cheerily without even asking what I was planning to wear, without admonishing my father to come back in time to take her over to the hall. We left to find my husband and my son, and I found myself looking forward to the evening, looking forward to hearing my mother play.



When I was young, and even when I was not so young, I disliked going to her concerts. I particularly dreaded the aftermath. I would be relieved that it was over, and there were usually some cookies and juice on a table. But there would be a large crowd of well-wishers around my mother—old friends, colleagues from one of her piano associations, as well as complete strangers. She greeted each one with smiles and warm conversation—she never knew when someone who could advance her career might show up. I would want to go to her, but I knew that if I got too close she would introduce me to everyone and I hated that. My father and my brothers and I would stand around at a safe distance. It would be late. We would be tired. Finally, we'd gather up the freshest of

the roses and get into the car.

And then she would ask us:

"What did you think?"

I knew there was something I was supposed to say, that there was a right thing to say, but I didn't know what it was and neither did my father or brothers.

"You did very well," my father might try.

"That doesn't mean anything!" she would snap. "What did you think, Carol?"

"I thought you sounded very good," I might offer tentatively.

"Which piece did you like best?"

"I don't know. I thought they were all nice."

"Oh!" she would groan. "Were you paying any attention at all?"

And we would ride dumbly home, where she would be unable to sleep and would sit up at the kitchen table long into the night.

After a quick dinner we dressed and walked the short distance to Lutkin Hall. As I watched my father striding ahead with the children, I noticed that he was not carrying the tape recorder. He had brought it dutifully to every concert I could remember, a dense black rectangular box that wheezed as it recorded. Because of the tape recorder we always had to sit close to the front, but not so close that my mother might be distracted by some slight misbehavior glimpsed out of the corner of her eye. But there was no tape recorder tonight. I assumed the old thing finally gave up the ghost and they had not been able to bring themselves to replace it, unwilling as they are to read instruction manuals. Once we reached the hall, my father seemed quite free about choosing his seats. In fact he changed seats, with the kids in tow, more than once.

Finally, everyone was seated and the house lights dimmed. After a pause, the stage lights went up dramatically, the side door opened and my mother stepped out in her pink gown. She walked briskly to the piano, placed one hand on its side, smiled graciously and inclined her head. I used to think it was funny, when I was a child, seeing her act that way. My children clapped and clapped. She sat down before the piano, half-rose, adjusted the bench a bit, sat, looked up to a spot on the far wall and began the Beethoven.

When I was a child I never knew the composers or names of the pieces she played, but I knew every note by heart from listening to them so many times. She practiced at night after we had gone to bed, after her long day of teaching recalcitrant students, making dinner, and otherwise providing for the needs of three children and a husband. Night after night I would lie in the dark and listen. Just as I would begin to drift off to a particularly lovely part I would be jerked awake by a wrong note, or a garbled passage, which would be followed by an abrupt stop and then several laborious repetitions of the offending phrase. Each repetition would jerk me awake anew. Because of this nightly conditioning, each mistake she made in a concert was almost physically painful to me. The other result of this conditioning was an unfortunate and much unappreciated tendency to fall asleep during her concerts.

"What did you think?" I knew there was something I was supposed to say, that there was a right thing to say, but I didn't know what it was and neither did my father or brothers.

But I had left home twenty years ago. I didn't know this Beethoven. As usual, she was playing new repertory. Although I discerned a few falters, they caused me no distress. The children, taking their cues from their grandfather, held their applause between movements.

The second piece was a Chopin barcarolle, followed by his Ballade No. 4 in F Minor. Chopin has always been my mother's favorite composer, and she is at her best with him—her affinity for this music obvious from the fluidity of her movements. Gradually I stopped listening for mistakes. I did what I always used to do at her concerts to help me stay awake—squinted at the stage until it became just bright light and two shapes, one large and black, one pink and animate, together producing sound yet disconnected from it.

When I was about six, someone who ran a prestigious piano workshop heard my mother play. He approached her after the recital and encouraged her to apply. My mother was very excited by this man's attention, and she spent days carefully preparing her application and a tape. A few weeks after she sent it in, she received a letter from the workshop organizers. The letter said they were very impressed with her tape, but, unfortunately, one had to be twenty-five years old or younger to participate in this workshop.

"Isn't that hilarious?" she said, holding the letter. "That man must have thought I was younger than

twenty-five!" We all laughed, for it was a very funny idea. We sat down to eat lunch.

I saw it first, a pinkness spreading from the tip of her nose.

"Mom?" I said, just as she began to cry.

"Twenty-five!" she sobbed. "He thought I was twenty-five! Can you imagine?" My father squatted by her chair and put his arms around her, but I knew there was nothing he could do to make her twenty-five.

By the time I left home for college, my mother had made a name for herself in our town and the surrounding area both as a performer and a teacher. She couldn't go to the grocery store or the post office without someone stopping her and asking, "Aren't you Wanda Paik?" She had performed twice with the Boston Pops Orchestra, once under the great Arthur Fiedler himself. After I left home, she continued to expand her repertoire. My oldest brother joined the Foreign Service and she gave concerts at the embassies where he was stationed, adding international performances to her résumé. Her students, who now came to her from all over the state, regularly won contests and prizes. They kept in touch with her into their adulthoods, crediting her with changing their lives.

But: "Never be a musician," she would tell my brothers and me. "It's a life of drudgery. Most musicians have to teach tin-eared children day and night or else play at parties where people can't hear you and put their drinks on the piano top. And for what? After all that drudgery, they're too exhausted to play the music they want to play. So what's the point of that? I'm so lucky, because I can choose my students now, and I can play whatever I want. But I only have those choices because I married Dad, and he's such a good breadwinner."

After the intermission she played the Rorem barcarolle and toccata. She used the sheet music for the Rorem—something she rarely does at a recital. "When you play twentieth-century music," she had said, "it's a good idea to put up the music just so the audience doesn't think you're making it up as you go along." But in this case I knew she needed the music because she didn't entirely trust her memory. I knew these pieces were a reach for her, almost as foreign to her nature as rock and roll. But she has always chosen to play, along with Chopin, pieces that make her reach.

As she began the final piece, a Bartók suite, I wondered about the tape recorder. This was her last solo recital, she had said. I would have liked to have a recording for my children. I would have liked to have something to remind me, something solid I could hold in my hand. We don't have any recordings of her concerts, for the tapes my father so diligently made had never been intended for posterity. They were for her edification. In the days following the concert she would play and replay the tape, biting her lip over the worst parts, holding her breath through the best. Eventually, after she had wrung all the information out of it, she would reuse the tape.

There was one practice tape of hers that we kept for a while. On it, you could hear her practicing, and in the background the little sounds of my father and my brother playing chess. From time to time you could hear my brother, in his nine-year-old treble voice: "Cheap! Super cheap!" Then you heard him say, a little louder, "Oh, that was so cheap!" Then there was a banged chord and a clatter and my mother's voice, shrill: "*Get out of here!*" We called this tape the "Get Out of Here" tape, and we saved it because it never failed to make us all laugh. But even that was gone now.

I was afraid that once she stopped playing I wouldn't be able to remember what it sounded like. With no recording, my memory would have to suffice. I became a little panic-stricken and tried to listen harder. Perhaps if I somehow listened harder now, I would be able to keep it in my mind. I wanted the music to continue, for as long as it continued it could speak for itself and I wouldn't have to try to find a way to describe it.

But eventually the music stopped, and everyone was clapping. My mother bowed, exited, returned, bowed again. Someone ran up the few steps to the stage and handed her a bouquet of red roses. My mother disappeared through the side door.

I took my children by the hand and we hurried up onto the stage and after her so we could get to her before the well-wishers. We rushed through the stage door and found her in a small room with a little square table. When she saw us she dropped the roses onto the table and knelt down to gather the children in her arms.

"I think you were great," I told her.

CAROL PAIK lives with her husband and two children on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Now that I'm a mother who's trying to be a writer, I finally have some appreciation for my own mother's struggle to fulfill both domestic responsibilities and personal aspirations. Her energy, determination, and relentlessly high standards are inspirational to me. Not surprisingly, the concert described in this essay was, in fact, not her last. Five years later she's still going strong.