

UNDERCOVER

SALZBURG, AUSTRIA, 1976



ELLEN SOLLINGER WALKER

ELLEN SOLLINGER WALKER

Undercover

(Salzburg, Austria, 1976)

All the piano majors at the academy smoked *Gauloises* cigarettes, including me. We smoked after many hours of practice on a Bach *Fugue*, striving to wrap our minds and fingers around the complexity and organized chaos of the music. We smoked before lessons with our esteemed professors, hoping the inhalation would calm our nerves. We smoked as we sat in warm cafés, watching the snow fall like downy feathers over *Mozartplatz*. Sipping strong coffee *mit schlag*, we mused over our impending fame as great artists. Most importantly though, we smoked because we wanted to appear Bohemian. We wanted to be Chopin without the tuberculosis, Schumann without the madness. We wore long wool capes in winter, we walked with canes, we suffered for our art, we were proud starving musicians living in the glittering musical capital of Salzburg.

In winter, we pianists were hit by the *Föhn* winds. Warm, dry winds from the Mediterranean blew up and over the Austrian Alps, permeating Salzburg like a hot breath from Italy. All of Salzburg suffered from *föhn* diseases; *föhn* restlessness, *föhn* sleep disorders, *föhn* melancholy, *föhn* headaches, *föhn* madness, and even *föhn* suicide. Pressure differences in the air fronts were assumed to be the cause. We pianists felt the melancholy and the restlessness, and we drank copious amounts of apple cider. We were told, “It will ward away the ill effects of the wind.”

On the evening of my 20th birthday in April, we pianists rode bicycles in the dark, down the pea-gravel footpath from our dorm to the Hellbrunn Palace. It was a clear night, and the moon lit our way. Our purpose was to pick (steal, really) twenty waxy tulips, one for each year of my life. From the manicured gardens that graced the palace grounds, we laughed and plucked quickly for fear of a security guard finding us. There were so many rich colors shining in the moonlight—fuchsia,

sunshine yellow, shy peach, blood red, heavenly white, delicious grape. We picked one from each color so my bouquet would be magnificently varied. On the ride home with all twenty flowers in my bicycle basket, I was warmed by the tulip's magical glow.

One morning, Emil, one of the students at the dorm, informed me Maurizio Pollini was coming to town to play a concert. He was my idol, my favorite among the famed pianists. I coveted the clarity of his scales that sounded like strings of pearls, the miraculous voicing of his chords, his melodies, lyrical and pure as birdsong, the buzzing transcendence of his trills. I had only heard him on scratchy recordings, and I longed to see and hear the artist in person.

While in town, I walked to the *Festspielhaus* box office to buy a ticket, but the prices were astronomical, even the student tickets. I returned to the dorm that evening and complained to Emil of my plight.

He looked at me with a crooked smile and, after a few seconds of thought, he said: "*Ich habe einen Plan.*" He had a plan.

We met after dinner in the main hall to talk. Emil was a stocky Austrian with pale skin, thick glasses, and a receding hairline and was prone to wear wool sweaters, even in warm spring sunshine. I knew he had been an usher at the *Festspielhaus* for several years to help pay his living expenses. Sitting across from me, he said, "I'm ushering next Saturday night, the night of the Pollini concert."

"Really?" I asked. "Can you filch me a ticket?"

"No," he laughed, "but I can get you into the concert." I paused, not understanding what he meant.

In a whisper, like we were planning a bank robbery, he explained, "I can get you in the back door," and then he added, "but you can't tell anyone else about this."

"Won't the stagehands see me and kick me out?" I asked.

He replied, looking straight at me, "Not where you're going to be sitting!"

I whispered, "Where am I going to be sitting?" Emil's face was flushed and beaming. We continued discussing our plan and we both agreed it

would work.



The night of the concert arrived and I dressed up, wearing a knee-length black velvet skirt and a silky white blouse. Some of the pianists saw me in the main hall of our dorm and wondered how I obtained a ticket to the Pollini concert.

“Emil’s getting me in,” I answered.

“But how?” they asked. But I needed to hurry and catch the bus. Walking the long drive to the main road and boarding the Number Three bus into town, I felt excited and jittery.

I arrived at the *Festspielhaus* at the agreed time. The rich, well-to-do Salzburgers, dressed in their flashy gowns and pressed tuxedos were climbing the stairs to enter the hall. I walked around to the back of the auditorium and looked for the “Employees Only” door. Behind the building, it was dark and quiet. Then Emil opened the door and a splash of light streamed out into the darkness.

“Come quickly!” he called out, sporting a huge smile as I ran inside. The hallway was narrow and empty. I followed Emil down the hall and then down a short staircase. He pointed to the door I was to enter. It was half a door, like a child’s door leading to an enchanted garden in a fairy tale. He opened it.

“Go in and sit down! Quickly! I have to get back to my position!” I bent down and careful not to hit my head as I entered, I slid in and sat down on the floor inside the dark compartment. Before Emil shut the door, he reminded me to stay inside until he came for me after the concert. I gave him a thumbs up.

Once shut, I could see nothing except a thin outline of the half-door where light got in. I leaned back as best I could, took a deep breath, and closed my eyes. I was sitting under the stage.



It was a long wait. Stagehands walked around above my head, positioning the piano just so. A restless sotto voce rumble came from the audience as they waited for the pianist to enter. I felt something crawling on my arm and since I couldn't see, I didn't know what bug it was. I quickly swiped the creature off me, trying not to dwell on my fear of certain insects. I felt cobwebs in my hair and on my face and thought there might be family of spiders in the cramped space with me.

Finally, the audience hushed, and I heard Pollini's brisk footfalls over my head accompanied by enthusiastic applause. Salzburg concerto-goers can be fickle and cruelly judgmental. But this applause sounded encouraging. The crowd became silent and I heard him adjusting the bench. The piano was directly above my head.

He waited, he respected the silence, he let the air be calm in the auditorium. Then, he took a fast, audible inhale and began to play the trumpet-like fanfare that begins the *Sonata in D Major* by Mozart. The sound of the piano rang out in the hall and down into the floor of my small compartment. He was rushing through the rests. *Is he nervous?* I asked myself. My heartbeat was increasing. *Breathe, breathe!* I whispered. As he continued into the bridge section, he executed the scales so perfectly, I knew he had exhaled. His technique was precise and virtuosic from then on. The clarity of his sound was absolutely thrilling!

Pollini is the son of a Milanese architect, and he constructed his interpretations of music like a builder, from the ground, up. With a laser-focus on the rhythmic bass line, his harmonies and singing melodies were erected above, layer upon layer. The sound he coaxed from the piano was solid, as firm as a piece of marble.

At the end of the work, the applause was friendly and reassuring. I heard the pianist walk off the stage and about five minutes later, he came back, and waited again for quiet.

I didn't know the program he was to play that night but assumed he would include a masterwork by the Polish composer, Frederic Chopin.

In 1960, at age eighteen, Pollini won the International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, Poland. Arthur Rubenstein, a jury member that year, declared the young man could “play the piano better than any of us.” Following his victory, audiences demanded he play something by the composer. Tonight, the audience wasn’t disappointed.

When he began the first of the Chopin *Etudes, Opus 10*, I became ecstatic, like I had just won the lottery. Chopin wrote each etude to train and refine a specific aspect of a pianist’s technique. They were musical short stories, vignettes, visits to forgotten places, or journeys through intense emotions. Each was a delicate, miniature masterpiece.

The first etude transported me to the glistening snowy peaks of the Austrian Alps. With each ascending and descending arpeggio, I could feel light flakes of snow falling on my head and shoulders, making me shiver.

Then I was suddenly pulled into a stormy, tempestuousness madness like the fury of the warm *Föhn* winds. As Pollini played, the hammers inside the piano struck the strings with such a force, it rattled my rib cage.

I was jerked out of the tumultuous state with a lively and joyful tune, a tulip birthday depicted in music. I heard my friends’ laughter as they covertly picked flowers for my 20th birthday and the pianist seemed to giggle with his fingers.

When he launched into the last of Chopin’s etudes, he executed such finger pyrotechnics, I imagined the neurotransmitters in his brain must have been blazing and crackling like fireworks. When he crashed into the last chord, there was a short pause as the audience, and the performer caught their breaths. Then there was a loud rupture of applause, the crowd was satisfied with the Chopin. Pollini left the stage for intermission.

Everyone in the audience began talking at once. Typically, I would get up and stretch my legs during the intermission. But I stayed behind the door and waited, closing my eyes.

After the break, the hall became quiet again and I heard the artist walk onto the stage. He took his time, waiting for the moment of stillness. As he began to play, the first notes of the beautiful Schumann *Fantasie in C*

Major swirled out of the piano. My heart leap for joy!

The first movement was exquisitely played, the harrowingly difficult second movement was executed with ease. Then, for the finale of the night, he began the last movement, slow and pensive, in the bright key of C Major. The hall seemed quieter now. Two thousand people in the room and me, below the stage, listened acutely.

Pollini's fingers nudged the keys to speak as he played undulating, languorous arpeggios. After the tranquil beginning, the calm modulated into an existential question mark. The melody pleaded for an answer, two beats in the soprano against three beats in the bass---always a subtle conflict, always a dark smudge of clouds on a bright sunny day.

He played uneasy harmonies, continuing to search and question. He held onto a dulcet high note, spent time there amidst the ravishing sound. Then the pianist sunk into the key changes like he inhabited them, like he had lived them. I lived the music with him, and the sound soaked into the floorboards above my head and surrounded me in my cramped space.

A slow restless crescendo built, climbed, scaled the heights. Where was the piece heading? As he played, the silences between the phrases became as important as the notes, just as contemplation was as important as speech.

Then, with tenderness, the music arrived home, returning to the sunny key in which it began. The ending was wiser than the beginning, as if the composition had lived an entire lifetime in those twelve minutes. Pollini came to rest on the last chord. The reverberation lingered like a peaceful death with no regrets. No one wanted that sound to end.

Silence followed. Time stood still. No one moved. Then the roar of applause, then loud conversation in the hall. After some time, I heard a faint knocking on the door. Emil opened it and I squinted at the light. I crawled out of the cramped space and as I brushed the dust off my velvet skirt, there he was, the master himself, strolling past us in the narrow hallway.

Emil turned around quickly and held out his hand exclaiming, "Bravissimo!" Pollini stopped, appearing distracted and shy. He reached

out and shook his hand.

Then the pianist looked at me. I was speechless, a bit fearful, overwhelmed. “Thank you, thank you, maestro,” I managed to say. He accepted my hand and embraced it. Our eyes locked and he smiled at me like a loving parent. He said, *Piacere mio*, (my pleasure) as if he had just opened a door for me to walk through.

Pollini continued down the hall and Emil whispered, “What did you think of the concert?” I took a long breath but I could think of nothing to say.

Ellen Sollinger Walker is a retired classical pianist, teacher, and university music professor. Many of her stories, like the one presented in this anthology, explore the power, passion, and heartache of music and musicians. Ellen's published work can be found in *The Dillydoun Review Daily*, *Change Seven Literary Magazine*, *The Pigeon Review Literary and Art Magazine*, *Vine Leaves Press*, and *Tolsun Books*.

Ms. Walker authored *Just Where They Wanted to Be: The Story of My Amazing Parents (2nd Edition)*, a memoir/travelogue chronicling her parents' ten-year circumnavigation in their own 36-foot sailboat (available on Amazon.)

She lives in Clearwater, Florida with her husband and her spoiled poodle, Stella. Contact: ellenreports@yahoo.com.