

SIBYL'S GIFT:
CREATING A
MUSIC TOWN

Clarity of hindsight can often give us a fix on the roots of a town's cultural complexion. In sport, for example, a pitcher or goalie or quarterback rises to fame, a role model inspiring the community's youth to hurl unbattable curves, block Gretzky-powered pucks or manage winning plays. Over time, a generation or two or three, the sport weaves itself into the fabric, the 'feel' of the hero's home town.

Not so obvious are places where seeds are sown, lie unseen for years, but slowly grow and spread until blooms appear, their effects spreading widely. First a coach builds a successful team, then subsequent teams, all the while drawing in other coaches and trainers until the sport interweaves with the community.

Even less obvious are those patches where seeds, sown one by one, grow imperceptibly, each plant unrelated, uncoordinated, emerging without overall design but still, over time, giving the community a distinct 'feel'.

Who would have noticed, in the early 1940s, a tan sedan driven by a fiftyish woman, shuttling back and forth on the dusty, sometimes snowy, gravel road between Sanish and Stanley? There, once a week, she would stop for a half-hour or so at several homes, homes with the customary upright pianos of the era. My sister Corinne, a first-grader at the time, remembers Sibyl MacDonald beside her, drilling her with the basics — 50 cents per lesson. Stanley was the fertile garden. Sibyl was sowing the first seeds.

Sibyl moved to Stanley in 1945 and, for the next quarter century, introduced the piano — and the love of music — to students both in her own home and in the Stanley school's 'dungeon', a cramped classroom in the grim underground passage that joined the grade and high school buildings, long since demolished.

I was perhaps ten years old when I first began piano lessons with Miss MacDonald. The walk was short, just three blocks to her house, for my late-afternoon session with her grand piano, an imposing instrument occupying the better part of her living room and supporting, in addition to sheets of music, but one object, the metronome with its demanding ТК-ТК-ТК. Sometimes a student was finishing a lesson, repeating an assigned piece for Sibyl's approval, leaving me to survey her accumulated books and doilies and bric-a-brac and her Magic 8 Ball, my favorite diversion while awaiting my turn.



Then, as always, Sibyl dressed smartly but, to me, quite dated, almost Victorian. Through the prism of time, I now see her clothes and jewelry and bearing as avant-garde, artistic, 'bohemian', her appearance another reflection of her profession.

Early on she led me to become friends with Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Gershwin, their works demanding that I execute scales precisely, motivated by her gentle, encouraging manner. Sometimes she would step away to her kitchen, beyond sight but coaching from the sidelines: "Faster, Sharon, presto."

The finale of each year's lessons and practicing was a Sunday afternoon recital in early May, a public event for about three dozen budding pianists eager to display their progress and talents. In that pre-television time, parents and family and the curious filled the chairs set up on the floor of the high school

gym, watching and listening and generously applauding each of the young performers on stage.

Recitals were formal affairs, girls wearing their choice dresses and boys outfitted in white shirts and ties. Rather than having musical scores before us, we memorized our selections. Sometimes my memory lapsed: I recall once where, halfway through, absolutely nothing connected between my memory and my fingers. I remember starting over, playing until I once again recalled no more, ended the piece with an improvised flourish, bowed quickly, and scurried from the stage. Perhaps Sibyl had also been teaching us the art of stage presence?

Stanley's youngsters, introduced to the piano by Sibyl MacDonald, formed a solid 'farm team' for many of the school's musical programs that followed. Later, when her students picked up a trumpet or clarinet or rose to sing, they could read music, understood the need for extensive rehearsals, were familiar with directors and direction, and comfortable with performing.

Sibyl set Stanley on its course to becoming a 'music' town. Her heritage continues. Did she know the gift she gave us?

Sharon Eidem Goodman, with Jerry Eidem



Sibyl MacDonald with recital students, c.1957