

My Musical Mother
By Elizabeth Hall Neil

Many are the fine qualities that mother exhibited throughout her life. She was a believing woman. She lived the Gospel faithfully, performing well many duties and callings. She was a hard worker and efficient, and unafraid to tackle new things. Mother was a life-long learner, interested in many things--from landscaping to investing--and took classes throughout her life, at one time even tackling college chemistry. She had a fine sense of humor and a ready smile and laugh. She could put a dinner on the table faster than any woman I know (leaving the kitchen a disaster in her wake), and baked wonderful cinnamon rolls and whole-wheat bread. She sewed beautifully for her daughters and granddaughters, and beautified her home by painting, wallpapering, tiling, and refinishing cabinets and furniture. The pantry was filled with home-canned fruits, jams, pickles, and juices. She was a faithful and loving wife to Dad, and a loyal and dutiful daughter to her parents. She helped neighbors and friends in need. She grew beautiful flowers, vegetables, and fruits, and generously shared them.

The quality I loved most about Mother, and the one that had the most significant impact on my life, was her love of music and singing. Our home was always filled with music, whether it was Mom or Dad listening (and singing) to the record player, children practicing, Dad at the piano, or Mother singing whatever song, chant, or ditty came into her head—usually inspired by the occasion. She'd set to singing "Oh, the Lady in Red" and "In My Sweet Little Alice Blue Gown" because one of us wore a dress of that color. Blue was a particular favorite color of mine, so I heard that one a lot. "Alice, Where Are you Going? Upstairs to Take a Bath," might accompany a child on the way to the bathtub. (That one was rather frightening, because it ends with "Oh my goodness! Bless my soul! There goes Alice down the hole! Alice, where are you going? 'Glub, glub, glub!'") We'd dance around the living room singing "Dancin' With the Dolly With a Hole in Her Stocking." She knew dozens of jump-rope chants and nursery rhymes. She knew all the scriptural words to "The Messiah" by Handel, and sang along to the records. She sang as she sewed, gardened, or made dinner. Her very name, Ida Rose, is musical to speak.

I don't think Mom ever took formal music lessons, but she often spoke of being in choirs in school, and of learning to read music by the do-re-mi method. She had a strong, resonant alto voice and always sang with ward choirs and in small ensembles for special musical numbers. I remember her being in the "Singing Mothers" choir at church, and wearing a white blouse and black skirt when they performed.

The first child Sherlene loved to sing and dance, and Mom started her early with tap and singing lessons. Later, Sherlene began learning to play the cello, which became her primary instrument. As each of the six other children came of age, Mother found capable music teachers for their musical training. Tracy learned the violin. David, the viola. I studied piano and voice. Virginia took piano, violin, and voice. Charlotte also learned piano and voice, and Nancy, violin and voice. When I was proficient enough on the piano, I became the family accompanist.

I was eight when Mom and Dad bought our first piano. It was a used, large old-fashioned upright, with real ivory keys and lovely carved legs and desk, but the paint had darkened with age, and it wasn't long before Mother, sure that there was strong, beautiful wood under that old finish, took to softening and scraping away the old varnish. She was right—the wood was lovely, and she refinished that old piano into a beautiful instrument. That was the first time. Years later, when it didn't match some cabinets that a carpenter had built around the piano, she took the time to refinish it again.

Turned out that I had acquired a fair amount of Mom and Dad's musical genes and took to the piano quickly. However, if it hadn't been for Mom "cracking the whip" as she used to say, I would not have become a musician. She organized our mornings so we were up at 5:30, dressed, and on our instruments by 6:00 for an hour of practicing. Then she would have our hot breakfast ready for us and we'd be out the door to school.

Ever supportive and confident in my abilities, Mom encouraged me (when called) to be the Primary Accompanist when I was in the sixth grade. When I was 12, and a new dance studio was being formed in Provo, taught by the famous Virginia Christensen of Salt Lake City, Mom got a call about the possibility of me being an improvisational pianist for the classes. She felt sure that I could do it (even though I'd never done anything even remotely like it before) and before I knew it, I was making \$1 an hour improvising little ditties for the dance drills. This was big money compared to \$.25 per hour babysitting fees I'd been making.

When I was in Jr. High and beginning to take choir classes, Mom began dragging me along with her to Ward Choir. She sang confidently and was easy to follow. I loved to sit at the piano and go through Dad's old 30's and 40's songbooks, playing and singing along to the old tunes. That was when Mom decided I needed singing lessons. She later told me, "If I had to listen to you sing all day, it might as well be a trained voice I hear." She signed me up with Mrs. Melville, for three or four years of training and I went on to study vocal performance in college. Mother attended a lot of recitals!

It's remarkable to me that on a Professor's salary, and a tight budget stretched thin by feeding and clothing seven children, that Mom and Dad were able to afford good teachers for so many years of lessons for each of us. It was obviously a high priority for them. I believe that Mom and Dad, who learned a bit of music in school, or who were self-taught, may have wanted to give their children the gift of music in a way that they themselves hadn't been privileged to have.

Mother's music was stilled for this earth on March 7, 2005, but I still fancy I can hear her singing:

*In my sweet little Alice blue gown, When I first wandered down into town,
I felt so proud inside, As I felt every eye,
And in every shop window I primped, passing by.
A new manner of fashion I'd found, And the world seemed to smile all around.
'Til it wilted, I wore it. I'll always adore it--My sweet little Alice blue gown!*

