



# Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

At age 39 my

My 39-year-old wife has started taking piano lessons. Up until three weeks ago she had never put her fingers on the keyboard except to dust it off with an old rag that smelled of lemon oil. Now, every morning, after she gets the children off to school, she goes into the living room, sits awkwardly at the piano, gets out her big red and white Thompson book, and starts playing with one finger. Up and down the scale. Yesterday she learned her first tune: "The Volga Boatman." Do you remember that one? "Dee, dee, daa, DUHM. Dee, dee, daa, DUHM. Dee, daa, dee, doo; Dee, dee, daa, DUHM!"

It's fascinating, sitting upstairs in my studio, listening to her pick out the notes. I had my first lesson more than 30 years ago. Miss Rebecca Rodenberg, a sweet-faced second grade teacher, was my tutor. Every week I climbed the stairs in the old First Methodist Church, sat down at a battered white upright, and picked out, "Dee, dee, daa, DUHM!"

Actually Jackie's way ahead of where I was when I started, for Miss Rodenberg not only had to teach me music, she had to teach me my left hand from my right. Up until then it didn't make any difference which was my left and which was my right. But in music you have to know, for the bottom notes are lefties and the top ones righties. And even today, when someone calls attention to my left hand, I instinctively recall that my left hand is the one nearest the door of that old Sunday school class room.

Fortunately, my wife already knows her left hand from her right. (Her left is the one near the flowered sofa.) But she does have the same problem I had in finding the notes. In my case, Middle C was directly under a big keyhole. Our piano doesn't have a keyhole, so Middle C is two notes down from the note with the chipped ivory.

I hope she sticks it out. I didn't. I took an additional three years from Mrs. Charles Jewett, but then piano began to get in the way of football and girls. I became a piano dropout. For years my repertoire was limited to "The Marine Hymn," "Silent Night" and something called "The Happy Farmer."

While in graduate school we bought an old upright clunker and I started taking piano again. But it was too late. I had picked up too many bad habits — primarily, that of playing only on the white notes. So I dropped out again and settled for letting my children pick up where I left off.

And now my wife, as she races toward the Big 40, has started piano. I hope she makes it, not just so she can play for me in my old age, but because I know that good things never come through magic formulas, but only through discipline and sacrifice.

I remember, years ago, sitting in the Washington Opera House and hearing the master violinist, Fritz Kreisler. As an encore, he put the bow to the strings and played "Humoresque" as only he could. As the last notes faded there was not a dry eye among the evening dress crowd. Then, as one, that massive crowd stood to their feet. Not a whisper. Not a sound. Total silence. From the far back I could see the master musician on stage, his silver hair glittering under the spots, his violin under his arm, his head bowed. And I remembered something he had written many years before, "Narrow is the road that leads to the life of a violinist." But at that moment there was no doubt it was worth every minute of it.

I doubt if Jackie ever makes it to the stage of the Washington Opera House. But I'm pulling for her all the way. So few people are willing to pay the price of discipline — in anything.