The Joy of Music

A Lifetime of Teaching

Sonia Michelson

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For all my students past and present
whose enthusiasm and dedication
have helped shape this book.

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And heartfelt good wishes to all the music teachers everywhere who help to bring the joy of music into the lives of their students.

Preface

A teacher affects eternity.
He can never tell where
his influence stops.
Henry Adams

It has been over fifty years of teaching classical guitar. What an incredible journey this has been. The following stories are presented with the hope that other music teachers will find some fresh ideas and that parents and the general reader will find the stories interesting.

In addition, I have also included many ideas about teaching children and adults effectively as well as ideas about practicing.

Students have come to me from all walks of life: the very young with their parents, the pre-teens and eager teen agers, busy adults, attorneys and doctors as well as young mothers and even a few elderly.

I had the privilege of teaching a class of blind students and had the experience of teaching an autistic child.

Whether I was teaching in Los Angeles, Chicago, Gerardmer, France or Ofra, Israel I have been happy to welcome every new student. Each one wanted to learn more about guitar and music.

It is worth noting that all the names of students and parents mentioned in ***The Joy of Music*** have been changed in order to protect their individual privacy.

Each student came with a different background and life story and each one helped me to become a better teacher. They say we learn more from our children than our parents. I think this is also true in teaching music. We learn more from our students than from our own teachers.

Students present all sorts of problems; technical difficulties, lack of practice time, emotional problems, too much or too little home support, big egos, or lack of self esteem. Yes, they reflect the human condition.

My job as teacher has always been to listen carefully, to try to understand the problems and try to solve them. Through such challenges each student has helped me to grow as a teacher and as a person.

An adult student once said to me "You are really a problem solver." That's a good way of looking at teaching. And since each student has a unique personality I've never found a perfect method that fits all.

Really listening and trying to understand each student has been one of my foremost goals. What did each one want and expect from music lessons?

Many students had no idea why they wanted lessons. Some of course, came to my studio because their parents decided that this was a good thing for a child to do. Maybe an older sibling was taking lessons and was a role model?

Others came to me because their friends were taking music lessons. Some because they had heard a certain performer on TV or YouTube and wanted to play the same way. And still others came to my studio because they were drawn to music and wanted to know more. My challenge was to try and create as we went along, an individual teaching program for each one.

Of course this had taken lots of patience and understanding. But that's what good teaching is all about. Giving whole hearted attention to each student with a caring smile and a listening heart.

Sonia Michelson
Ofra, Israel
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State College, Pennsylvania

My teaching began in the late 50s in State College, Pennsylvania. At the time I was playing folk guitar and began teaching a few college students.

One student in the back of the class caught my eye because he always played folk songs so easily and then would begin practicing classical music. I was intrigued.

I had heard Segovia and Julian Bream perform over the radio and knew that what they were playing was called classical guitar. So when I heard my student John Marlow performing some simple classical pieces I knew then that this was the musical direction that I wanted to go.

Teaching folk guitar was lots of fun. However classical music played on the guitar seemed more interesting and certainly more of a musical challenge.

Chicago, Illinois

Teaching Adult Beginning Students

On moving to Chicago a few years later, I started music study with composer- classical guitarist Richard Pick. He suggested I take on a few classical guitar students and teach them what I was learning. So in addition to teaching folk guitar students, I began teaching classical guitar in my own home studio and at the local Community Center.

I realized that there must be other young mothers at the Community Center who might want to learn to play guitar. So I offered a ***Guitar Class for Mothers*** thinking that they might be interested in classical guitar. What they really wanted was to learn to play folk music which was much easier and required much less discipline.

Janet was one of my more serious students and she elected to study with me privately in my studio. After we had worked together for a couple of years she started teaching a few students of her own.

I found that teaching the adult beginner presented its own special challenges. Of course most of my adult students led very busy lives and had little time to practice.

I found it essential in the beginning not only to show them how to practice and make the most of the practice time at home that they did have, but also to present easy pieces that were musically sound and at the same time enjoyable to play.

Often I would teach an early piece, such as ***Vals*** by Bartolome Calatayud by rote, that is by ear without having to read notes. The piece has a good A-B-A song form so I could explain a little about music theory while teaching the piece.

The Adult Workshop – Recital

Having a formal recital with my adult students seemed out of the question. It would be too demanding. So I created an informal "cheese and wine" get together one evening in my home, called it a workshop rather than a recital and asked each one to perform only two pieces.

Why only ***two*** pieces?

I remembered only too well a previous adult workshop when one of my students, a high-powered attorney had a disastrous performing experience.

Ruth was a charming, brilliant and enthusiastic lawyer. She had played the piano as a child and now wanted to learn to play classical guitar. She made excellent progress with the first beginning lessons.

Then she decided, against my advice to learn a difficult suite of pieces by Robert de Visée an early 17th century composer. I thought this music was technically and musically too difficult for her. She thought otherwise.

"No, Sonia, it's not too difficult for me. After all I played some Bach when I was twelve and I know I can do this de Visée Suite too"

I gave in.

We started learning the suite of four pieces. She was very determined to learn the music and did make remarkable progress. In fact she told me that in her professional life she had presented a case before the Supreme Court of the United States. I was impressed.

So when I told her we were to have an informal adult workshop she immediately said she wanted to play the whole de Visée Suite of four pieces.

I had my doubts. Reluctantly, against my better judgment I agreed to her performing the suite.

And indeed, she already did perform quite well at lesson time.

The night of the workshop arrived. Ruth appeared dressed in a smart looking suit and in high spirits. Since she was a fairly new student I decided to let her begin the evening workshop.

She rose confidently, took her bow and seated herself in the chair I had placed at the far end of the room. She started to play the first piece, a ***Prelude*** and got only at far as the first phrase. Then she stumbled unsure of the notes.

She started again, a bit embarrassed. Again she faltered at the crucial measure. Then her right hand started to shake. Was this the high powered attorney who had such confidence in her ability to perform well under all circumstances?

She tried a third time. At this point I stepped in.

"Ruth, I think it would be a good idea to stop for now. Please play your suite of pieces at the end of the program"

Needless to say she was extremely upset. . It was obvious that this sort of experience had never happened to her before. She stepped down and the workshop continued with the other adults performing quite well.

After the others had finished playing. Ruth started to play the ***Prelude.*** Once again her nerves took over. Her hands started to shake. She faltered. Then she quit playing and tried to make a joke of it. But I knew she felt anxious disappointed and humiliated.

I determined at the close of the evening that I would never again let an adult student play more than one or two pieces at the most. I would be firm in my judgment about what pieces each one would study.

And most important I would rehearse, rehearse and rehearse each student for many weeks before a workshop or recital.

I hoped never again to allow a student of mine to have a meltdown at performance time.

Two pieces. No more.

Ruth called to cancel her lesson that week with some sort of excuse. She cancelled the following week too. I was so sorry to lose her as a student but I well understood that her performance experience had been a disaster.

Her ego and nerves had taken over at the workshop. Perhaps she had forgotten that the music she was trying to play was the most important thing. She needed to forget her own self importance and concentrate on the music.

So before this present workshop, I had rehearsed with each adult student at lesson time for many weeks before hand. We practiced difficult passages over and over again.

We also practiced “Performance”.

That is, I would have my student stand with the guitar, take a bow, sit and be able to perform one or both pieces perfectly, twice in a row. I was the audience and listened carefully and critically.

If my adult student could repeat a piece twice in a row without faltering or making any mistakes, I felt reasonably sure that all would go well with performance at the workshop. I insisted upon all this performance practice in order to ensure that each of my students would be able to perform easily and well.

Two pieces. No more. I wanted the performing experience to be a good and musical one.

The Transfer Student

An adult student came to me from another teacher. Gloria was a straightforward, quiet and attractive woman in her early forties. She had studied classical guitar for about three years.

At our first lesson I asked her to play a piece for me. She seemed reluctant.

"I don’t know any pieces.”

“But Gloria, you told me over the phone that you had studied classical guitar for three years.”

“That’s right. Three years.”

“Well, then please relax and play a simple piece for me. Then I can gauge where we should start our first lesson.”

“I can’t”

“Why not?”

At this point Gloria was quite embarrassed. “I only studied scales. I didn’t play any pieces.”

“For ***three*** years?”

I could not believe what I was hearing.

“Didn’t you want to play a piece? To learn to play music?"

“Of course. But my teacher said to continue working on scales. That I was not yet ready to play a piece.”

I was amazed with Gloria's patience, trust and acceptance of her former teacher's approach to studying music.

So we began our first lesson. Yes, she did play a few scales for me first. She was hesitant and missed a few notes. She could have been pecking away at a typewriter. In all respects Gloria was a real beginner with music lessons.

We started right at the beginning with reading notes. Fortunately she had time to practice each day at home for about an hour so made very quick progress in playing the easiest pieces.

"Sonia, this is great," She said with a warm smile. "I'm actually playing these first three pieces quite easily."

I gave her a CD of John Williams playing compositions from the Spanish repertoire.

"Gloria I want you to listen to this CD and then tell me which pieces you liked. I want you to become familiar with some aspects of classical guitar repertoire. We'll listen to some pieces by Bach at another time."

Gloria became so enthusiastic about guitar, music and her lessons that I introduced her to some simple duets. She had no idea beforehand that playing duets could be so enjoyable. I asked her if by any chance she had a friend who played guitar.

"Yes, Miriam plays classical guitar very well. She's the one who suggested in the beginning that I take lessons."

"Great. Please ask her if she has any time during the week to be part of a trio. I'd like the three of us to enjoy playing ensemble music."

It took us a while to arrange a time when we could all meet at my studio for rehearsals but Gloria was persistent in urging her friend to join us.

Finally we started playing some simple early music trios. Before long with a little coaching, we began to have an ensemble sound. Gloria was learning to listen to us as we played our parts in the music.

Ensemble playing is quite different from the solo experience and equally enjoyable.

Gloria continued her lessons with me until I left Chicago a few years later. By that time she was becoming an accomplished guitarist and was playing advanced concert level pieces.

"Remember, Gloria when you first came to me and could only play scales?" She just laughed.

Teaching The Very Young Child

Kathy was a sweet and active child of two and half years old when her Mom brought her to class. Carol had heard that I used Suzuki ideas and techniques in teaching children and thought I might be a good teacher for Kathy.

At first all Kathy did was run around the room and paid little attention to the musical game I was trying to teach her. I asked Carol to take notes in class and repeat what I was telling Kathy at her home lesson.

Problem: How to get Kathy to pay attention to what I was saying? So I created our very first game.

"Kathy, let's try to see if you can stand still while I count 1-2-3. "

At first she couldn't stand still for even the count of "one". I called it the **Standing Still Game**. Because we called it a game she began to like the idea. After repeated practice with her Mom at home Kathy could finally stand still for the count of 10.

I next invented the **Ready Game**. I asked Kathy to go to her guitar case, take out her guitar, go to her seat, hold the guitar with both hands, stand up tall ready to take her bow. What made it a game? I would count slowly from 1-10. She had to pay attention and move quickly right at the beginning of the lesson. I told her to say "Ready" when she had accomplished the above steps.

Since this was called a guitar lesson (and she now knew the **Ready Game**) I next asked her to hold the small quarter size guitar with both hands. Then I demonstrated how I wanted her to take a bow holding the guitar. One, standing up straight, two-three bending from the waist, 4-5 standing up straight.

Carol, Kathy's mom, was a capable and patient home-teacher. Little Kathy was now beginning to listen to what I wanted her to do while standing and holding the guitar.

Step one was now accomplished: paying attention and following directions. Step two was more fun. We marched around the room together my holding her left hand with my right hand.

"Left-Right. Left-Right," we sang together.

At first she had no idea what I was talking about. I asked her if she knew where her heart was? She pointed to her left side over her heart. Great. Now that is your Left side. Carol worked very hard with Kathy on this **Left-Right Game**. Finally we could walk together in a march rhythm and sing a new song together.

"Left-right, left right.

I left the house at quarter past eight.

The bus wasn't there so I knew I was late.

I waited, and waited and waited some more.

And then by golly I LEFT.

Left, left right, left," ....and so forth.

This was a huge accomplishment for a two year old.

Carol had worked in their short practice session each day as part of Kathy's daily routine: "First we brush our teeth, next we get dressed, then have breakfast, and then we practice guitar".

Carol had very good news to report after Kathy's six-month medical check-up.

"What have you been doing with Kathy?" the doctor had asked. "She shows such an improvement in her brain scan. The brain waves are much more regular. What has she been doing at home that is different in the last six months?"

"Kathy is doing at home pretty much the same thing everyday." Carol responded. "Oh yes, I forgot to tell you that Kathy has started taking guitar lessons with Sonia Michelson and loves it."

"The doctor was amazed", said Carol "For a child with ADD this was such a marked improvement"

I had no idea that little Kathy had earlier been diagnosed with ADD. I guessed that her learning how to concentrate and how to pay attention with our game playing had made the big difference in her health.

Our lessons continued. Kathy enjoyed her music lessons and I looked forward to seeing her and her Mom each week for several years. In fact she took lessons with me until I left Chicago when Kathy was eight years old. She was one of my best students.

Unusual and Unlikely Adult Students

Richard, Eric and Greg were a surprise. They were very unlikely students. Richard and Eric were police detectives and Greg was a United Airlines pilot.

When Richard, who was in his early thirties, entered my Michelson Studio early one evening for his first lesson, he strode forward and shook my hand in greeting.

He immediately turned, stopped in front of a small side table besides a large easy chair in the corner. He quickly took out a shiny, black ***revolver*** from a hidden pocket in his jacket. He laid the revolver down carefully on the table and turned to me.

"Shall we start our lesson now?"

I held my breath.

I had no idea before hand from our phone conversation that he was a detective.

"Of course, let's begin"

This was indeed a new kind of student and a bit of a shock.

Richard had some previous classical guitar lessons with another teacher. I asked him to play something for me so I could gauge where we should start our first lesson.

I was very surprised at how good his technique was and how musically he played a twentieth century guitar piece. I could start him off with lessons as an Intermediate student.

After a few months of lessons he was ready to join us for the next informal adult workshop.

Richard came early the evening of the workshop. It was going to be a small gathering of about fifteen of my adult students. I had set the folding chairs out earlier and had my usual buffet of cheese and wine. When Richard came in he immediately took the farthest chair next to the back wall. I asked him if he would like some wine and cheese before the workshop began.

"Oh, no. I'm just fine. Thanks anyway."

A few minutes later the other students arrived. A few had a glass of wine and some cheese. Then we were ready to begin. Everyone performed easily and well. Richard only moved from his back seat in order to perform and immediately returned to his seat. It was a little puzzling but I soon forgot about it.

When Richard came for his next lesson, I asked if he had enjoyed the workshop and had felt at ease in performing?

"Oh, it was great, Sonia. I really liked some of the pieces, especially the last one. I would like to study those pieces myself, especially the Tarrega piece."

"Good. I'm glad you liked the workshop and the music. I have a question for you, Richard. I'm a bit curious about why you sat in the farthest back seat, next to the wall when there were so many empty seats in front when you first arrived?"

He laughed. "Oh, so you noticed. It's just force of habit for a detective to always sit or stand with his back protected by a wall or a pillar." Mystery solved.

Richard continued to study with me for several years. He even recommended me to his fellow detective Eric who also began lessons. It was a pleasure having both of them as students.

Greg was another student with an unusual story. He was a United Airlines pilot and showed up for his first lesson all dressed up in his smart United uniform, cap and all. He started joking around right away. I was not sure if he would be a serious student. He had lots of stories to tell about being a pilot.

Finally we settled down. Had he ever played the guitar before? "No. I'll tell you why."

He showed me the little finger of his right hand. The tip was missing. "Do you think I could still play the guitar? I've always wanted to play music. "

He had an accident as a teenager with that finger and since then had felt he probably couldn't play an instrument.

This would be a real challenge. The little finger of the right hand is not used very often in classical guitar technique and is only used a great deal in playing Flamenco.

"I think we can devise some special exercises for you. And yes I believe you can learn to play the guitar"

And so we started guitar lessons. He had a very irregular flight schedule so lessons had to be planned with spontaneity and flexibility. However, Greg was determined to succeed and finally he did learn how to play some easy pieces quite well.

Count Down

Teaching young children has always been an enjoyable. experience. When Ron started lessons he seemed to bounce with energy and good spirits.

He was a husky and bright eight year old. He liked coming to his guitar lessons each week and practiced faithfully each day at home. We had made excellent progress with Advanced Beginner pieces.

Then we came to a road block.

It was a difficult chord that occurred midway in a more advanced piece. As much as Ron tried to play the chord easily in correct rhythm, he always stumbled at that point in the piece. How could we remove this roadblock?

I knew that Ron enjoyed looking at videos of space travel. Secretly I think he dreamed of being an astronaut.

I had an idea.

"Ron, we're going to play a new game **Count Down.** As you know, there is always a count down before a rocket is launched into space.

I took the music off his music stand. Then I placed a small inverted "V" before the difficult chord.

Above the V, I wrote 4-3-2-1.

Below that : 3-2-1

Then I wrote: 2-1

And finally just -1.

Then BLAST OFF!!

Ron was interested and excited. "But Mrs. Michelson, I don't understand"

So I demonstrated with my guitar.

"First Ron you count slowly 4, 3, 2, 1 in the rhythm of the phrase. At the same time you place your left hand fingers in exactly the correct position on that difficult chord. OK? "

Ron nodded. " OK. But what are all those other numbers?"

Then I explained. "Next you count slowly out loud 3-2-1 and at the same time you place your left hand fingers again exactly in the correct place with the same fingers as before on the difficult chord. When you finish the count 3, 2, 1 you play the difficult chord correctly.

Ron was beginning to catch on. He leaned forward in his chair and I could see his eyes beginning to shine. I explained the rest of the numbers: 2-1 and then just l. Each time it was easier to place his fingers in the correct position on the difficult chord and play it easily.

"I know, I know," Ron exclaimed. " Then I play without any count down…I BLAST OFF"

He grabbed his guitar with excitement. And started the "**Count Down**". At first the game didn't work as smoothly as he wanted. He tried again. Then a third time.

"Mrs. Michelson, Mrs. Michelson I can do it. I can play that chord without making a mistake!" Ron was one happy little eight year old.

The magic had happened. Success.

I've used this **Count Down** idea with many students including adults. Sometimes it seems that a few notes, whether a chord or just a certain sequence of notes in a piece cannot be played easily and with correct rhythm. The fingers just do not seem to cooperate no matter how hard one practices or repeats the difficult passage.

However, in my teaching experience this **Count Down** game never fails if a student does the count down correctly and repeatedly in sequence.

I once asked a doctor student of mine why he thought this count down game worked? He thought for a moment.

"I have no idea why it works although I'm glad I have **Count Down** as a tool to use whenever I hit a difficult spot in a piece that I'm studying"

I've thought a lot about this count down idea and just why it works and what the magic might be.

My theory is that by counting very, very slowly and in correct rhythm, the student's mind is able to absorb more easily the correct finger placement without anxiety and without nervousness.

By having plenty of time (to play in the correct rhythm) the neural brain patterns are formed more easily. By diminishing the split second count slowly before playing the difficult spot, it seems easier and easier to play.

Until at last the counting stops. Then the student can play the passage easily and correctly. To be sure this doesn't happen the first, or even the second time as Ron found out. But usually by the third try the magic happens.

At the next practice session at home, Ron had to go through the whole **Count Down** process again. And then once again. Finally after a week's practice with great attention and concentration to this difficult spot, Ron was continually successful in playing the phrase.

With such determination, such skill and such ability to concentrate maybe young Ron would one day fulfill his dream and become an astronaut!

I highly recommend this **Count Down** game to other music teachers and to their students.

M E N C
Music Educators National Conference

In March 1975 when I was still giving presentations at national conferences and guitar symposiums on the importance of teaching children classical guitar, I was invited to give a presentation at MENC (Music Educator's National Conference) in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

MENC is the national umbrella-like organization representing musical organizations in the United States. Its principle objective is the advancement of music education at all levels from pre-school to university.

The MENC Committee on Guitar Instruction was headed by Professor Clare Callahan of the University of Cincinnati's – College Conservatory of Music. Since I was a member of the committee, Clare asked me if I would like to make a presentation on teaching children?

Of course I said yes. What a wonderful opportunity to explain to piano, violin, cello and flute educators as well as guitar teachers the importance of teaching young children classical guitar.

Fortunately I had two talented twelve year old students, Paul and Martin, who were now playing in a trio with me and were very enthusiastic about our weekly ensemble lessons.

Why not bring them with me to the MENC Convention in Atlantic City? This would be a good example of how musically young students can play. And further it would demonstrate the importance of young people having the opportunity to study and play classical guitar.

To Go Back a Bit in Time…

In those days, in the 1970s there was very little interest in classical guitar circles in either teaching young children or in developing a high standard of teaching materials and an adequate pedagogy.

In fact, very little modern music existed that might interest a young classical guitarist. Of course there were the old 18th and 19th century standard composers: Carulli, Carcassi, Guiliani and Sor. And certainly those older composers and their methods were quite adequate for older students and adults, But they were not very good teaching materials for young children. In a word, they were boring.

My idea was to change that bleak classical guitar musical scene. I wanted to encourage others to compose new easy pieces that children would enjoy playing.

So rising to the challenge I composed a folio of ten Easy ***Classic Guitar Solos For Children*** and a new method for teaching children ***New Dimensions in Classical Guitar for Children, a*** text book for teachers and parents, which were both published by Mel Bay Publishers and are still in print today.

In addition I became involved with ASTA (American String Teachers Association) and joined a committee to develop a ***Graded List of Classical Guitar Pieces From Beginner to Advanced.***

All of this activity I hoped would create greater interest in classical guitar circles throughout the world in teaching children with the best possible materials.

My idea of bringing my trio of two twelve years olds and myself to Atlantic City was an effort to demonstrate to other teachers the viability and importance of teaching young children classical guitar.

And it's interesting to note that this conference in 1976 included not only guitar teachers, but piano, violin, cello and flute teachers from across America. Many of these teachers would be a bit skeptical about classical guitar generally and skeptical about teaching children guitar.

Of course all of them knew about folk guitar but very few had any knowledge or interest in classical guitar.

I hoped that my trio and our performance would change some of these teachers' old-fashioned ideas. I hoped we would demonstrate how well children could understand and perform musically with the classical guitar.

I approached Martin's father with the idea of our taking the trio to Atlantic City for the MENC Convention. Would he be available to chaperone the two boys at the hotel and at the convention? I would be quite busy with setting up my presentation and with other matters, so I wouldn't have the free time to look out for Martin and Paul.

Martin's father said he would think it over and get back to me. I waited anxiously for his response. Two days later the phone rang.

"Sonia, this is Martin's father. I think this would be a great opportunity for both boys to attend a music convention and to be able to perform for such a wide audience. Yes, I'll be glad to take a few days off work and chaperone Martin and Paul."

"Wonderful! I'll be in touch with you with more details as things unfold. Thanks so much."

So it was set. We were all going to the MENC convention in Atlantic City.

I told Martin and Paul at the next rehearsal that we would need to rehearse vigorously in the next few weeks. That we, as a trio would perform as part of my presentation at MENC ***Teaching Children Classical Guitar.***

The boys were excited. It would be a great adventure for them, since they had never flown in a plane before and had never been outside of Chicago.

I wanted the boys to shine musically and of course hoped they would find the experience exhilarating.

"Boys" I told them "this will be a very special convention. Not only will there be guitar teachers, but there will also be violin, piano, flute and cello teachers. They will be coming to MENC from many towns and cities in America. This will be the first time at MENC that young classical guitarists will be performing. I was told we will be the highlight of the Convention."

I planned our program carefully. It covered a wide range of music from the Baroque to the Contemporary: a Samuel Scheidt Allemande, both a Bach Musette and a Bourrée, Sor's Etude No 1, a Beethoven Minuet in G and finally Leonhard Von Call's Trio in C Major. The boys liked the music and each one practiced well.

The weeks went by quickly and we rehearsed our trio music three times each week. I felt we were ready to perform easily and well.

As it turned out I left for the MENC convention a day earlier than the boys and Martin's father. I had left home with a few personal worries on my mind.

A huge kitchen plumbing problem had arisen on the morning of my departure. Hurriedly I told my youngest son "Please call Mr. Chandler the plumber immediately, and please do not try to fix this yourself. OK?" And off I went to the airport to catch my plane to Atlantic City.

The next day I was in my hotel room going over my presentation about teaching children when the phone rang.

"Yes, this is Sonia Michelson. How was your flight?" It was Martin's Dad on the phone.

"What! They dropped it?"

He explained "They mishandled the guitar when taking it from the plane and dropped it on the tarmac. The neck of Martin's guitar is broken."

Calamity!

"All right. I'll have to think about what to do. Get unpacked and I'll be in touch with you soon."

This was a real crisis. I could still give my presentation without our trio but it would not be nearly as effective or interesting.

What to do?

Then I remembered that one of my guitar colleagues had said he was planning to attend MENC and planned to stay at the same hotel. I hoped against hope that he had brought his guitar with him.

"Hi George, Sonia Michelson here. How was your flight?" You won't believe this." I told him what had happened to Martin's guitar.

"Any chance that you brought your guitar to the convention?"

"Yes" he replied.

"And would we be able to borrow it tomorrow afternoon for my presentation? For just that hour and a half?"

"Wonderful. Thanks so much" and I hung up the phone, greatly relieved.

I quickly called Martin's Dad on the phone with the good news. We could still perform with three guitars for our trio part of my presentation the following afternoon.

My presentation on ***Teaching Children Classical Guitar*** was well received. A real success.

A number of teachers (including a piano and a cello teacher) came up to us afterwards and congratulated Martin and Paul on how well they had performed.

The teachers were quite amazed and impressed with the musicianship that the boys had shown. And apparently they had some new ideas about the importance of classical guitar teaching in music curriculum.

The boys just beamed. So did I.

Teaching the Blind

During the 1960s folk music was all the rage. From Pete Seeger, Peter, Paul and Mary to Bob Dylan everyone wanted to play guitar.

Since I had been teaching folk guitar for some time in Chicago, it occurred to me that there might be blind young adults who might want to play folk guitar.

Before long I was teaching a class for the blind in East Rogers Park, Chicago each Wednesday night.

Never having taught the blind before I was in for a few surprises.

The students were all in their twenties and all eager to learn to play the current folk songs.

I wasn't sure how to teach the first beginning chord, an easy E minor chord. So I explained that I would come around to each student and show them where to place the fingers of their left hand. And further how to strum the chord with the right hand.

Immediately a young man in the back row shouted,

"You don't need to SHOW ME. I can DO IT BY MYSELF!"

Oh dear. I had pulled a real boner on the very first night of teaching.

"Pardon me, I didn't mean to imply that you couldn't play this chord by yourself." I explained to him and to the whole class,

"I'm using the same language that I use for sighted students. And YES, I need to place my hands on yours to show you what to do. It's very hard to explain with just words. "

"Maybe in the future we can create a Braille Folk Song Book. However, for this very first lesson I would like to show you how to play the E minor chord."

That seemed to satisfy the young man and we went on with the first lesson.

We become a very friendly group as I learned to know each one of my twenty blind students. Each had a different history.

I discovered that two of my students were married and were raising a one year old baby by themselves. I couldn't believe it. What a brave couple. What courage!

After a few months of lessons I found out that many of my blind students had been premature babies. In those days they didn't know that keeping a "preemie" in an incubator with oxygen for twenty -four hours would cause the retina in the eye to separate. It would cause blindness!

I was quite taken aback with this information. It was upsetting to learn that many of my blind students had been premature babies.

Why was I so taken aback?

Because I realized at once that my own eldest child had been a premature baby and was now about the same age as my students.

If it had not been for my own mother's quick thinking and decision to have my baby daughter transferred from the hospital where she was born to the Children's Hospital she too would have been blind.

In the Children's Hospital where my own daughter lay in the incubator, the protocol in the Prenatal ward was to have the lid of each incubator lifted every twelve hours. Twelve hours with oxygen and twelve hours without. This saved my own daughter Ann's eyesight!

As I mentioned, my own daughter with perfect vision was about the same age as my blind students. What a blessing that she had been saved from the same fate as some of my blind students!

The year that I taught this Wednesday night class for the blind was exhausting. But succeed we did. I worked with the young blind couple to create a ***Braille Folk Song Book*** incorporating all the songs we had learned together. They were grateful for the Braille Song Book and I appreciated the opportunity to teach them.

The Sound of Music - I

The librarians at our local Northtown Public Library in Chicago invited me to give several programs. The first one involved my family of seven children. They all loved listening to the musical ***The Sound of Music.*** They knew the words to many of the songs.

I thought it would be interesting if I created a program at the Library based on ***The Sound of Music***. With my seven children to take all the parts of ***The Sound of Music*** children, it seemed like a natural program to give at the library.

I asked my family if they would like to be in such a program?

"Sure, Mother," they all answered "it sounds like fun"

So I got busy in creating a program with guitar accompaniment to their singing major songs in the musical based on the Trapp family.

My kids loved it. Each one had a part to play from my youngest six year old boy to my oldest daughter. My children enjoyed the performing experience as did the enthusiastic librarians and the audience.

The Sound of Music - II

Another program at the library involved an advanced student of mine. Alan was a tall unassuming math major at the University of Chicago. He had a keen interest in studying classical guitar music. He always came on time to his lessons and was well-prepared.

We had started playing guitar duets at lesson time and I thought we could put an interesting musical program together for the Northtown Library.

In the first half of the program we performed three duets from the classical repertoire; Renaissance, Romantic and a Modern piece.

Since I had become increasingly interested in Flamenco with its wonderful melodies and wild rhythms, I thought that the audience might like to hear some Flamenco music also. So the second half of the program I played several Flamenco solo pieces. The program was well- received.

The Sound of Music - Winnie the Pooh

As I remember it, the last program at the library I titled ***Poetry and Song with Sonia – The Music and Words of A.A. Milne. Winnie the Pooh*** has always been a favorite with our family so it seemed like a good idea to create a program with that theme.

Arranging music for several of the songs proved easy. I played the guitar and sang the A.A. Milne words. The librarians printed up the program using Winnie-the-Pooh on the cover.

The Northtown Library librarians were imaginative in their careful preparations for this concert. They decorated the library walls and tables with A.A. Milne books and posters. It was one of my favorite programs.

Would you like to read further in the Joy of Music: A Lifetime of Teaching?

Please go to www.smichelson.us where you can purchase the whole book.

Thank you for your interest.

Sonia Michelson