

The Day the Music Slowed

By Dennis Knight

Paul and I were born in 1943, he on the sixth of September and I on the seventh. Our fifth birthdays fell a week after the cut-off for enrollment in the Laramie Public Schools, so our mothers, each believing their progeny prodigious and ready for the world of kindergarten, went to the school board and got an exception that allowed us to enter that year. It happened that we were both Catholic families, so when the parochial school opened a few years later, Paul and I were joined for the first time as third graders at St. Laurence School.

Paul and I were both already in the short percentile of physical development, so we would likely have been among the smallest boys in our class, even if we hadn't been pressed into school a year before our time. This was clearly double jeopardy, and our mothers and the school board should have known better.

As we entered the sixth grade, the Sister who ran the music program at St. Laurence thought it would be clever and visually cute to recruit little Paul to play the bass drum in the school orchestra, and little Denny to play the same thing in the school band. We were both dwarfed by that instrument.

Paul stayed in the orchestra only through the sixth grade, and I have always suspected it was because he was much the wiser one by virtue of being a day older. He realized he was being exploited for a nun's private gag, and so he quit. I was appointed to keep the joke alive and play in both band and orchestra. By then, my curls peaked just over the top of the drum if I stood up straight, but I couldn't because I had to lean to the side in order to see the director.

In the eighth grade our orchestra had an opportunity to travel to Denver to perform as part of a city wide parochial music concert in the Denver Auditorium. We had rehearsed a group of classical compositions, and as we took the stage, I was pretty convinced we were the best orchestra on the entire program and should likely get a standing ovation.

My friend Kathy had earned the role of student conductor and I looked to the elegant rhythm of her baton to get me through to the end of each piece without missing a beat, as it did for the better part of our evening. Our culminating number and the climax of our performance was Schubert's Symphony No. 8 in B Minor, the famous "Unfinished Symphony". I came very near to making it the St. Laurence School Orchestra's Unfinished Performance of 1957.

As Kathy led the orchestra into the powerful middle of the symphony, a part with lots of bass drum filling the concert hall, my eyes caught, just to the left of the graceful baton, the most beautiful sight in the entire hall. She was in the seventh row, a thirteen year old girl with golden tresses, a button nose and brand new figure. Our eyes met and it was perfect, one of those unforgettable moments in time when the world slows down to let you soak it in. Well, what actually slowed down was the beating of my drum.

The next thing that caught my eyes was a frantic baton, and then panic in the conductor's eyes in the face of a train wreck. Well, Kathy and her magic baton did their job and brought me right back into the rhythm of Schubert's powerful symphony to put the orchestra back on the track.

Our performance ended, the audience applauded and clapped politely again as the orchestra stood for a second bow. I tried to spot the pretty girl in the seventh row. I lost sight of her, but to this day I have never forgotten our brief teenage romance which was entirely contained and remains today locked in the memory of those wonderful eight seconds when the music slowed.