

"Our David"

by
Rosa Rio

Why "our David?" Because some day, you too, will know David Scrimenti, as a wonderful and unusual musician and he will bring joy to your hearts with his great sensitivity of music which overflows as a God-given

talent... our David was born sightless.

Over a year ago, David Scrimenti, age seven, was brought to my studio to study organ. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Mario Scrimenti of Ansonia, Con-

necticut had called me to ask if I would teach a blind child. (It seems that the Scrimenti's after having three children born in perfect health, David was born blind). The pupils in his eyes just never developed... a relatively rare medical occurrence. My first reaction to their telephone call was in the affirmative and I said, "yes, of course I would teach David!" But after the phone call I began to wonder... this experience I'd never had before and how would I go about teaching a sightless boy of seven years?

So I met young David and immediately fell in love with him. His audition proved he had perfect pitch, and furthermore, he could identify any chord by its pitch name. It was very evident that the boy's first love was music, and with his keen ears, he could play most any music he heard on radio or television. However, at the first lesson, I realized my musical terminology had to be changed. The black notes were now *raised notes* and the white notes were now *flat notes*. I found correct fingering was a must, and a knowledge of intervals very important. All this would give David a security of finding or locating the correct notes at the right time.

Inasmuch as David had been playing by ear, a few bad habits had been formed such as flat fingers, not spreading the hands, the non use of the thumb, etc. So first came the scales and then all the major, minor, chromatic, triad, modern chords and their inversions. His memory proved fantastic for I only had to show him once and he never forgot!

During the lesson, I play the new song slowly and then I analyze each step for him while his mother records all conversation and music on a cassette tape recorder. David places his

Rosa Rio instructs David Scrimenti in her Shelton, Connecticut studio (Fred Thomas Photo)



hand on my shoulder while I am playing, and if I receive a sharp tap it means "stop, show me that chord". "What is it and how did you get it?" I then place his tiny hand over my hand, slide my fingers out gently and he now feels the position of the new chord. All that's left to do is explain the chord, inversions, etc., . . . and he has it! It's all so amazing, this inner talent which he possesses, along with his sense of rhythm and sensitivity of music.

I attended a Connecticut State Convention of Piano Teachers at the Bridgeport University a short time ago and was told of a wonderful course in organ for the blind by Bill Irwin. A long distance telephone call to Bill Irwin in California revealed that I should contact the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. for some high fidelity sound recording tape. The tapes promptly arrived and the quality was excellent, but upon hearing the tapes complete, I realized that David was already too advanced for this method of learning music.

At our students' recital, I only lead David to the bench, and thereafter he is on his own. He sets up his own registration and gets the feel of the instrument. (David plays a B 3 Hammond organ at home which is quite different from the R 100 organ that he plays at the Rosa Rio Studio). Well, I can assure you when he gets up from the organ bench, not one person in the room has a dry eye. Everybody is overcome by the strong emotional playing of this wisp of a boy and the God-given talent that he displays.

David never needs much encouragement to play the organ, and be prepared to hear more than one selection . . . maybe an hour of playing is more like it! Not long ago, I took him to hear a theatre pipe organ at the Thomaston Opera House in Thomaston, Connecticut. The affair was sponsored by the Connecticut Chapter of ATOS. This chapter has installed a 3/10 Marr & Colton in the opera house and the sound was sensational! David could hardly wait until the artist finished playing so that he could sit at the great-sounding instrument. Without fear, he asked to be lifted to the bench and by barely sitting on the edge of the bench, he reached the pedals and the manuals, playing the first melody that came to his head (with help on the registrations by yours truly). He astounded all those people

gathered around the console with his uncanny ability. Well, the pipe organ bug bit him . . . he loved the sound! . . . he loved the applause! . . . and promptly told his parents that he would like one of those instruments in his home. Mr. Scrimenti informed his son that their home was not large enough to accommodate such an organ, to which young David said, "Okay then put it in my room!" (Meaning his bedroom).

David has now turned eight and I hope to have him playing piano and classical music soon. Classical music is available on braille but I must approach this whole matter tactfully and will probably have to study some braille myself in order to interest him in the art of playing braille. David does receive normal schooling with his other school friends and at the same time gets a special teacher for braille reading.

Young David Scrimenti reminds me in so many ways of the great Alec Templeton, whom I met at the National Broadcasting Company Studios. All the musicians loved and adored this man and they would delight in testing Alec's talent of perfect pitch. Each musician would play his instrument through a difficult passage of music or something original and then ask Alec to duplicate it note for note, phrase, and correct rhythm. Well the boys in Local 802 Musicians Union soon learned you couldn't stump this man and they had one word for him . . . "Genius".

Recently David played a new song for me and naturally I was curious where he had heard it. It seems that he always goes to bed with his radio playing and this particular night, he fell asleep and forgot to turn it off.

About 5:45 A.M., the radio started playing the *Star Spangled Banner*, awoke him, and then the next tune played really captured his imagination, whereupon he went directly to the organ and played it, note for note.

At the end of each lesson, his tiny hands are extended, which is my cue that he wants some of his favorite milk chocolates as his reward, and I in turn, receive a kiss.

This article is to introduce "our David" to you and as he evolves in his music and physical appearance, your newspaper, record player, or television set, will tell you of his progress for he is destined for "Greatness!"

I, as his friend and teacher, do welcome any suggestions or help from any of you who have or are sharing this experience with a sightless child. Sorry . . . David gets all the chocolates!

Mail your suggestions to: Rosa Rio, 130 Mill Street, Shelton, Connecticut 06484.

SOMETHING ABOUT "DAVID'S" MUSIC TEACHER

Rosa Rio received her musical education at Oberlin Conservatory and Eastman School of Music. She also studied with Joseph Schillinger and Jesse Crawford, Teachers of Mathematical Music, and with Earl Wild, concert pianist.

Those of you who tuned your attention to radio and television a few years back, will remember the background music Miss Rio provided for such programs as "Lorenzo Jones", "The Shadow", "When A Girl Marries", "Brighter Day", "Bob & Ray", "The Gospel Singer", "Between The Bookends", and "My True Story" . . . to mention a few.

Being a dedicated musician, Rosa Rio not only engages in concert work, but records, arranges, composes, and teaches organ and piano in two Connecticut studios. Her concert schedules have carried her around the world, and she has the honor of a command performance before the United Nations General Assembly at the request of the former Secretary General U'Thant.

Rosa Rio is a talented and gracious performer and she truly has won the love, respect and admiration of all those students who have been privileged to study with her. □

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