

# MUSIC IS MY BAG

Confessions of a lapsed oboist  
By Meghan Daum

**P**icture a fifteen-year-old boy with the early traces of a mustache who hangs out in the band room after school playing the opening bars of a Billy Joel song on the piano, and who, in an unsuccessful attempt at a personal style, wears a fedora hat and a scarf decorated with a black-and-white design of a piano keyboard. He is the boy who, in addition to having taught himself some tunes from the *Songs in the Attic* sheet music he bought at the local Sam Ash, probably plays the trombone in the marching band, and also no doubt experienced a seminal moment one afternoon as he vaguely flirted with a not-yet-kissed clarinet-playing girl, a girl who is none too popular but whose propensity for leaning on the piano as he plays the opening chords of "Captain Jack" clued him in to the hitherto unimagined social possibilities of the marching band.

If the clarinet-playing girl is an average student musician, she carries her plastic Selmer in the standard-issue black plastic case. If she has demonstrated any kind of proficiency, she carries her Selmer in a tote bag that reads MUSIC IS MY BAG. The boy in the piano-key scarf definitely has music as his bag. He may not yet have the tote bag, but the hat, the Billy Joel, and the euphoria brought on by a sexual awakening centered entirely around band is all he needs to be delivered into the unmissable world of Music Is My Bag.

I grew up in that world. The walls of my parents' house were covered with framed art posters from musical events:

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the San Francisco Symphony's 1982 production of *St. Matthew Passion*, the Metropolitan Opera's 1976 production of *Aida*, the original Broadway production of *Sweeney Todd*. Ninety percent of the books on the shelves were about music, if not actual musical scores. Childhood ceramics projects made by

my brother and me were painted with eighth notes and treble clef signs. We owned a deck of cards with portraits of the great composers on the back. A baby grand piano overtook the room that would have been the dining room if my parents hadn't forgone a table and renamed it "the music room."

This room also contained an imposing hi-fi system and a \$300 wooden music stand.

Music played at all times: Brahms, Mendelssohn, cast recordings of Sondheim musicals, a cappella Christmas albums. When my father sat down with a book he read musical scores, humming quietly and tapping his foot. When I

was ten my mother decided we needed to implement a before-dinner ritual akin to saying grace, so she composed a short song, asking us all to contribute a lyric, and we held hands and sang it before eating. My lyric was, "There's a smile on our face and it seems to say all the wonderful things we've all done today." My mother insisted on harmonizing at the end. She also did this when singing "Happy Birthday."

Harmonizing on songs like "Happy Birthday" is a clear indication of the Music Is My Bag personality. If one does not have an actual bag that reads MUSIC IS MY BAG—as did the violist in the chamber music trio my mother set up with some women from the Unitarian Church—a \$300 music stand will more than suffice. To avoid confusion, let me also say that there are many different Bags in life. Some friends of my parents have a \$300 dictionary stand, a collection of silver

bookmarks, and once threw a dinner party wherein the guests had to dress up as members of the Bloomsbury group. These people are Literature Is My Bag. I also know people who belong to Movies Are My Bag; they are easily detectable by key chains shaped like projectors, outdated copies of *Halliwel's Film Guide*, and one too many T-shirts from obscure venues like the San Jose Film Festival. Cats Are My Bag people are too well-known to require explanation, and the gaudiness of their paraphernalia—the figurines, coffee-table books, and refrigerator magnets—tends to give the category dominance over the slightly more subtle Dogs Are My Bag. Perhaps the most annoying Bag is Where I Went to College Is My Bag: Yale running shorts, plastic Yale tumblers, Yale Platinum Visa cards, and, yes, even Yale screen savers—all in someone pushing forty, the perennial contributor to the class notes.

Having a Bag connotes the state of being overly interested in something yet, in a certain way, not interested enough. It has a hobbyish quality to it, a sense that the enthusiasm developed at a time when the person was lacking in some significant area of social or intellectual life. Music Is My Bag is the mother of all Bags, not just because in the early 1980s some consumer force of the public-radio-fund-drive variety distributed a line of tote bags displaying that slogan but because its adherents—or “music lovers,” as they tend to call themselves—give off an aura that distinguishes them from the rest of the population. It’s an aura that has to do with a sort of benign cluelessness, a condition that even in middle age smacks of that phase between prepubescence and real adolescence.

Music Is My Bag people have a sexlessness to them, a pastiness. They can never seem to find a good pair of jeans. You can easily spot them on the street: the female French horn player in concert dress hailing a cab to Lincoln Center at around seven in the evening, her earrings too big, her hairstyle unchanged since 1986. The fifty-something recording engineer with the running shoes and the shoulder bag. The Indiana marching band kids in town for the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, snapping photos of one another in front of the Hard Rock Cafe, hav-

ing sung their parts from the band arrangement of *Hello, Dolly!* the whole way on the bus, thinking, *knowing*, that it won’t get any better than this. Like all Music Is My Bag people, they are too much in love with trappings and memorabilia, saving the certificates of participation from regional festivals, the composer-a-month calendars, the Mostly Mozart posters. Their sincerity trumps all attempts at snideness. The boys’ sarcasm falls short of irony; the girls will never be great seducers. They will all grow up to look like high school band directors no matter what profession they choose, with pets named Wolfgang and Gershwin and hemlines that are never quite right.

I played the oboe, which is not an instrument to be taken lightly. The oboist runs a high risk of veering deeply into Music Is My Bag, mostly because getting beyond the entry level requires an absorption with technique that can render a person vulnerable to certain vagaries of the wind ensemble subculture, which inevitably concerns itself with the sociopolitical superstructure of the woodwind section. Within this subtype, the oboist faces the twin temptations of narcissism, in contemplating the disproportionate number of solo passages written for the oboe, and pride, because it is she who sounds the A that tunes the orchestra.

The oboe is a difficult instrument, beautiful when played well, horrible when played poorly. Yet even when it produces a lovely sound, it is not an instrument for the vain. The embouchure puckers the face into an unnatural grimace, an expression well documented in the countless photographs from my childhood that suggest some sort of facial deformity: the lipless girl. Then there is the question of moisture. Oboe playing revolves almost entirely around saliva. Spit gets caught in the keys and the joints and must be blown out using cigarette rolling paper as a blotter (a scandalous drugstore purchase for a twelve-year-old girl). Spit accumulates on the floor if you play for too long. Spit must be constantly sucked out from both sides of the reed. Fragile and temperamental, the reed is the oboe player’s chronic medical condition. It must be tend-

ed to constantly. It must be wet but never too wet, hard enough to emit a decent sound but soft enough to blow air through. The oboist must never stray far from liquid; the reed is forever in her mouth or in a paper cup of water that teeters on the music stand or being doused at a drinking fountain in Parsippany High School at the North Jersey Regional Band and Orchestra audition. After a certain age, the student oboist must learn to make her own reeds, building them from bamboo using knives and shavers—a seemingly eighteenth-century exercise that ought to require an apprenticeship. But oboists, occupying a firm, albeit wet, patch of ground under the tattered umbrella of Music Is My Bag, never quite live in the same era as everyone else.

Although I did, at one point, hold the title of second-best high school player in the state of New Jersey, I was a mediocre oboist. My discipline was lacking, my enthusiasm virtually nil, and my comprehension of rhythm (in keeping with a lifelong math phobia) held me back considerably. But being without an aptitude for music was, in my family, tantamount to being a Kennedy who knows nothing of politics. Aptitude was something, perhaps even the only thing, I possessed. As indifferent to the oboe as I was—and I once began an orchestra rehearsal without noticing that I had neglected to screw the bell, the entire bottom portion, onto the rest of my instrument—I managed to be good enough to play in the New Jersey All-State High School Orchestra as well as in a local adult symphony. I even gained acceptance to a music conservatory. These aren’t staggering accomplishments unless you consider the fact that I rarely practiced. If I had practiced with any regularity and determination I could have been, as my parents would have liked me to be, one of those kids who was schlepped to Juilliard on Saturdays. If I had practiced slightly more than that I could have gone to Juilliard for college. If I had practiced a lot I could have ended up in the New York Philharmonic.

And yet I didn’t practice. I haven’t picked up the oboe since my junior year in college, where, incidentally, I sat first chair in the orchestra even

though I did not practice once the entire time.

I never practiced and yet I always practiced. My memory is of always being unprepared, yet I was forced to sit in the chair for so many hours that I suspect something else must have been at work, a lack of consciousness, a failure of concentration, an inability to practice on my own. "Practice" was among the top five words spoken in our family, the other four being Meghan, Mom, Dad, and Evan. Today, almost ten years since I last practiced, the word has finally lost the resonance of our usage. I now think of practice in terms of law or medicine. There is a television show called *The Practice*, and it seems odd to me that I never associate the word sprawled across the screen with the word that was woven relentlessly through our family discourse. For my entire childhood and adolescence, practicing was both a given and a punishment. When we were bad, we practiced. When we were idle, we practiced. Before dinner and TV and friends coming over and bedtime and a thousand other things that beckoned with possibility, we practiced. "You have practicing and homework," my mother said every day. In that order. My father said the same thing without the part about homework.

Much of the reason I could never quite get with the oboe-playing program was that I developed, at a very young age, a deep contempt for the Music Is My Bag world. Instead of religion, my family had music, and it was the church against which I rebelled. I had clergy for parents: my father was a professional composer and arranger, a keyboard player and trombonist, who scored the Gulf War for ABC; my mother was a pianist and music educator of the high-school-production-of-*Carousel* genre. My own brother was a reluctant Christ figure. A typically restless second child in youth (he quit piano lessons but later discovered he could play entirely by ear), my brother recently completed the final mix of a demo CD of songs he wrote and performed in the style of mid-Eighties pop, late Doobie Brothers groove. His Los Angeles house is littered with Billy Joel and Bruce Hornsby sheet music, back issues of *Stereo Review*, the liner

notes to the digital remastering of John Williams's score for *Star Wars*. Music is the bag.

I compose songs in my sleep. I can't do it awake. I'll dream of songwriters singing onstage. I'll hear them perform new songs, songs I've never heard, songs I therefore must have written. In childhood I never put one thought toward composing a song. It would have been like composing air, creating more of something of which there was already quite enough. Wind players such as flutists and saxophonists need as much air as they can get. Oboists are always trying to get rid of air. They calibrate what they need to get the reed to vibrate, end up using even less, and dispense with the rest out of the corners of their mouths. It's all about exhaling. On an eighth rest, they're as likely to blow air out as they are to steal a breath. There's always too much of everything for oboists: too much air, too many bars when they're not playing and too many bars when there's hardly anyone playing but them, too many percussion players dropping triangles on the floor, too many violinists playing "Eleanor Rigby" before the rehearsal starts.

Most orchestras have only two oboists, first chair and second chair, pilot and copilot. The second oboist is the perpetual back-up system, the one on call, the one who jumps in and saves the other when his reed dries up in the middle of a solo, when he misses his cue, when he freezes in panic before trying to hit a high D. I've been first oboist and I've been second oboist, and first is better, though not by much. It's still the oboe. Unlike the gregarious violinist or the congenial cellist, the oboist is a lone wolf. To play the oboe in an orchestra is to complete an obstacle course of solos and duets with the first flutist, who if she is hardcore Music Is My Bag will refer to herself as a "flautist." Oboe solos dot the great symphonies like land mines, the pizzicati that precede them are drum rolls, the conductor's pointing finger is an arrow for the whole audience to see: here comes the oboe, two bars until the oboe, now, *now*. It's got to be nailed, one flubbed arpeggio, one flat half note, one misplaced pinky in the middle of a run of sixteenth notes,

and everyone will hear. Everyone.

My parents' presence at a high school orchestra concert turned what should have been a routine event into something akin to the finals of the Olympic women's figure skating competition. Even from the blinding, floodlit stage I could practically see them in the audience, clucking at every error, grimacing at anything even slightly out of tune. Afterward, when the other parents—musically illiterate chumps—were patting their kids on the head and loading the tuba into the station wagon, I would receive my critique. "You were hesitating in the second part of the Haydn Variations." "You overanticipated in the Berceuse section of the Stravinsky." "Your tone was excellent in the first movement, but then your chops ran out." My brother, who was forced for a number of years to play the French horn, once was reduced to a screaming fight with our father in the school parking lot, the kind of fight possible only between fathers and sons. He'd bumbled too many notes, played out of tune, committed some treasonous infraction against the family reputation. My father gave him the business on the way to the car, eliciting the alto curses of a fourteen-year-old, pages of music everywhere, an instrument case slammed on the pavement.

This sort of rebellion was not my style. I cried instead. I cried in the seventh grade when the letter telling me I'd been accepted to the North Jersey Regional Band and Orchestra arrived three days late. I cried in the tenth grade when I ended up in the All-State Band instead of the orchestra. I cried when I thought I'd given a poor recital (never mind that the audience thought I was brilliant—all morons), cried before lessons (underprepared), cried after lessons (sentenced to a week of reviewing the loathsome F sharp étude). Mostly, though, I cried during practice drills supervised by my father. These were torture sessions wherein some innocent tooting would send my father racing downstairs from his attic study, screaming, "Count, count, you're not counting! Jesus Christ!" Out would come a pencil, if not an actual conductor's baton, and he would begin hitting the music stand, forcing me to repeat the tricky fingerings again and

again, speeding up the tempo so that I'd be sure to hit each note when we took it back down to real time. These sessions would last for hours, my mouth muscles shaking, tears welling up from fatigue and exasperation. If we had a copy of the piano part, my mother would play the accompaniment, and together my parents would bark commands: "Articulate the eighth notes more. More staccato on the tonguing. Don't tap your foot, tap your toe inside your shoe." The postman heard a lot of this. The neighbors heard all of it. After practicing we'd eat dinner, but not before that song: "There's a smile on our face, and it seems to say all the wonderful things..." "Good practice session today," my mother would say, dishing out the casserole, WQXR's *Symphony Hall* playing over the kitchen speakers. "Yup, sounding pretty good," my father would say. "How about one more go at it before bed?"

**M**y mother called my oboe a "horn." This infuriated me. "Do you have your horn?" she'd ask every single morning. "Do you need your horn for

school today?" She maintained that this terminology was technically correct, that among musicians a "horn" was anything into which air was blown. My oboe was a \$4,000 instrument, high-grade black granadilla with sterling silver keys. It was no horn. But such semantics are a staple of *Music Is My Bag*, the overfamiliar stance that reveals a desperate need for subcultural affiliation, the musical equivalent of people in the magazine business who refer to publications like *Glamour* and *Forbes* as "books." As is indicated by the use of "horn," there's a subtly macho quality to *Music Is My Bag*. The persistent insecurity of musicians, especially classical musicians, fosters a kind of jargon that would be better confined to the military or major league baseball. Cellists talk about rock stops and rosin as though they were comparing canteen belts or brands of glove grease. They have their in-jokes and aphorisms: "The Rock Stops Here," "Eliminate Violins in Our Schools."

I grew up surrounded by phrases like "rattle off that solo," "nail that lick," and "build up your chops." "Chops" is a word that should be invoked on-

ly by rock-and-roll guitarists but is more often uttered with the flailing, badly timed anti-authority of the high school clarinet player. Like the violinist who plays "Eleanor Rigby" before rehearsal, the clarinet player's relationship to rock and roll maintains its distance. Rock music is about sex. It is something unloved by parents and therefore unloved by *Music Is My Bag* people, who make a vocation of pleasing their parents, of studying trig and volunteering at the hospital and making a run for the student government even though they're well aware they have no chance of winning. Rock and roll is careless and unstudied. It might possibly involve drinking. It most certainly involves dancing. It flies in the face of the central identity of *Music Is My Baggers*, who chose as their role models those painfully introverted characters from young adult novels: the klutz, the bookworm, the late bloomer. When given a classroom assignment to write about someone who inspires her, *Music Is My Bag* will write about her grandfather or perhaps Jean-Pierre Rampal. If the bad-attitude kid in the back row writes



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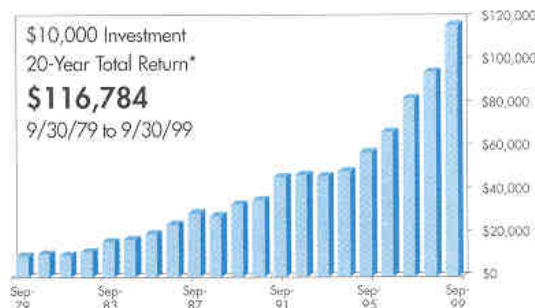
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about AC/DC's Angus Young, Music Is My Bag will believe in her heart that he should receive a failing grade. Rock and roll, as her parents would say when the junior high drama club puts on a production of *Grease*, "is not appropriate for this age group." Even in the throws of adolescence, Music Is My Bag will deny adolescence. Even at age sixteen, she will hold her ears when the rock music gets loud, saying it ruins her sense of overtones, saying she has sensitive ears. Like a retiree, she will classify the whole genre as nothing but a bunch of noise, though it is likely that she is a fan of Yes.

During the years when I was a member of the New Jersey All-State Orchestra, I would carpool to rehearsals with the four or so other kids from my town who made All-State every year. This involved spending as much as two hours each way in station wagons driven by people's parents, and, inevitably, the issue of music would arise: what music would be played in the car? Among the most talented musicians in school was a girl named Elizabeth Ostling, who was eventually hired as the second flutist for the Boston Symphony Orchestra at age twenty-one, and at the age of fifteen was unaccountably possessed by an enthusiasm for the Christian singer Amy Grant. Next to Prokofiev and the Hindemith Flute Sonata, Amy Grant occupied the number-one spot in her studious, late-blooming heart. Since Elizabeth's mother, like many parents of Baggers, was devoted solely to her daughter's musical and academic career, she did most of the driving to such boony spots as Chatham High School, Monmouth Regional, and Long Branch Middle School. Mile after New Jersey Turnpike mile, we were serenaded by the wholesome synthesizers of songs like "Saved By Love" and "Wait for the Healing," only to spill out of the car and take no small relief in the sound of twenty-five of New Jersey's best student violinists playing "Eleanor Rigby" before the six-hour rehearsal.

To participate in a six-hour rehearsal of the New Jersey All-State Orchestra is to see the accessories of Bagdom tumble from purses, knapsacks, and totes; here more than anywhere are the real McCoys, actual Music Is My Bag bags, canvas satchels filled with stereo Walk-

mans and A.P. math homework and Trapper Keeper notebooks featuring the piano-playing Schroeder from the *Peanuts* comic strip. When we paused for dinner I would embark on oboe maintenance, putting the reed in water, swabbing the instrument dry, removing the wads of wax that, during my orthodontic years, I placed over my front teeth to keep the inside of my mouth from bleeding. Just as I had hated the entropy of recess back in grade school, I loathed the dinner breaks at All-State rehearsals. To maximize rehearsal time, the wind section often ate separately from the strings, which left me alone with the band types, the horn players and percussionists who wore shirts with slogans like "Make Time for Halftime." They'd wolf down their sandwiches and commence with their jam session, a cacophonous white noise of scales, finger exercises, and memorized excerpts from their hometown marching numbers. During these dinner breaks, I'd generally hang with the other oboist. For some reason, this was almost always a tall girl who wore sneakers with corduroy pants and a turtleneck with nothing over it. This is fairly typical Music Is My Bag garb, though oboists have a particular spin on it, a spin characterized more than anything by lack of spin. Given the absence in most classical musicians of a style gene, this is probably a good thing. Oboists don't accessorize. They don't wear buttons on their jackets that say "Oboe Power" or "Who Are You Going to Tune To?"

There's high-end Bagdom and low-end Bagdom, with a lot of room in between. Despite my parents' paramilitary practice regimens, I have to give them credit for being fairly high-end Baggers. There were no piano-key scarves in our house, no "World's Greatest Trombonist" figurines, no plastic tumblers left over from my father's days as assistant director of the Stanford University Marching Band. Such accessories are the mandate of the lowest tier of Music Is My Bag, a stratum whose mascot is PDQ Bach, whose theme song is "Piano Man," and whose regional representative is the kid in high school who plays not only the trumpet but the piano, saxophone, flute, string bass, accordion, and wood block. This kid, considered a wun-

derkind by his parents and the rest of the band community, plays none of these instruments well, but the fact that he knows so many different sets of fingerings, the fact that he has the potential to earn some college money by performing as a one-man band at the annual state teachers' conference, makes him a hometown hero. He may not be a football player. He may not even gain access to the Ivy League. But in the realm of Music Is My Bag, the kid who plays every instrument, particularly when he can play Billy Joel songs on every instrument, is the alpha male.

The flip side of the one-man band are those Music Is My Baggers who are not musicians at all. These are the kids who twirl flags or rifles in the marching band, the ones who blast music in their rooms and play not air guitar but air keyboards, their hands fluttering out in front of them, the hand positions not nearly as important as the attendant head motions. This is the essence of Bagdom, which is to take greater pleasure in the reverb than the melody, to love the lunch break more than the rehearsal, the rehearsal more than the performance, the clarinet case more than the clarinet. It is to think nothing of sending away for the deluxe packet of limited-edition memorabilia that is being sold for the low, low price of one's entire personality. It is to let the trinkets do the talking.

I was twenty-one when I stopped playing the oboe. I wish I could come up with a big, dramatic reason why. I wish I could say that I sustained some kind of injury that prevented me from playing (it's hard to imagine what kind of injury could sideline an oboist—lip strain? carpal tunnel syndrome?), or that I was forced to sell my oboe in order to help a family member in crisis, or, better yet, that I suffered a violent attack in which my oboe was used as a weapon against me before being stolen and melted down for artillery. But the truth has more to do with what in college I considered to be an exceptionally long walk from my dormitory to the music building. Without the prodding of my parents or the structure of a state-run music education program, my oboe career had to run on self-motivation alone, and when my senior year start-

ed I neither registered for private lessons nor signed up for the orchestra, dodging countless calls from the director imploring me to reassume my chair.

Since then I haven't set foot in a rehearsal room, put together a folding music stand, fussed with a reed, marked up music, practiced scales, tuned an orchestra, or performed any of the countless activities that previously had dominated my existence. There are moments every now and then when I'll hear an oboe-dominated section of the Bach Mass in B Minor or the Berceuse section of Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* and long to find a workable reed and pick the instrument up again. But then I imagine how terrible I'll sound after eight dormant years, and I just put the whole idea out of my mind before I start to feel sad about it. I can still smell the musty odor of my oboe case, the old-ladyish whiff of the velvet lining and the tubes of cork grease and the damp fabric of the key pads. Unlike the computer on which I now work, my oboe had the sense of being an ancient thing. Brittle and creaky, it was vulnerable when handled by strangers. It needed to be packed up tight, dried out in just the right places, kept away from the heat and the cold and from anyone too stupid to distinguish it from a clarinet.

What I really miss about the oboe is having my hands on it. I could come at that instrument from any angle and know every indentation on every key, every spot that leaked air, every nick on every square inch of wood. I knew precisely how its weight was distributed between my right thumb and left wrist, and I knew, above all, that the weight would feel the same way every time, every day, for every year that I played. But I put my oboe down, and I never picked it back up. I could have been a pretty good oboist if I had practiced, if I had ignored the set design and just played the instrument. But I didn't and I wasn't. When I look back I hardly recognize myself, that person who could play a Mozart sonata by memory, whose fingers could move three times faster than I now type—a person who was given a gift, but who walked away from it because of piano-key scarves and fedora hats and all those secondary melodies that eventually became the only thing I could hear. ■

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