

# Martin Learns What It Takes

Martin Holmes and Declan Murphy were next door neighbours and could enter each other's back gardens through a gate that Declan's dad had made. He was a keen gardener and had become fed up with the two boys constantly climbing over the fence and landing in his vegetable patch when they wanted to play together. Before school, they would play in Declan's garden, seeing how high they dared to go on the swing before jumping from the seat at its highest point. After school, they would play football in Martin's garden, where there was more grass and considerably fewer vegetables.



The boys' parents were good friends and both families would spend most holidays together camping in Cornwall, Wales and even France. Declan and Martin spent most of their waking hours together, so it was just as well that they were best friends.

At school they were rarely apart and their teachers had long since given up trying to get them to do things separately. So it was no surprise to anyone when, following a demonstration by Mrs Darby, the piano teacher, the boys arrived home with the same request; 'I want to learn how to play the piano.'

Mrs Murphy, Declan's mum, decided not to answer her son until she had spoken to Mrs Holmes next door.

'Has your Martin said he wants to learn how to play the piano?' she asked, pushing open her neighbour's kitchen door.

'Yes. Just. Declan too I take it?' replied Martin's mum. 'Apparently it's cheaper to learn if two learn together. What do you think?'

'I'll be surprised if they stick at it,' replied Declan's mum. 'But it won't do them any harm to try I suppose.'

The mums agreed, weekly lessons were paid for and keyboards were bought, allowing the boys to practise at home. At the beginning of their first lesson, Mrs Darby made it very clear to them that unless they were prepared to practise regularly (at least every day, were her exact words), which meant they would have to play football less, they might as well not even start.

Declan nodded along as Mrs Darby spoke. Martin nodded too, but in his head he was thinking, 'Less football? I don't think so. How hard can learning the piano actually be?'

For the first few weeks both boys practised what Mrs Darby had taught them. Instead of playing football together as soon as they arrived home from school, they went to their own bedrooms to practise on their keyboards. To their parents' surprise they began to get rather good and were soon able to play a few lines of music. Mrs Darby told them that they were picking up the basics quickly and that if they continued to practise daily they might be good enough to play at the Summer Serenade, the school's annual musical evening which was two terms away.

The thought of playing the piano in front of hundreds of people affected the two boys in completely different ways.

Declan loved the idea and could think of little else since the moment Mrs Darby had mentioned it. He made up his mind right there and then that not only would he be playing the piano at the Summer Serenade, but that he would be playing the piano well at the Summer Serenade and everyone in the audience would be mightily impressed by his musical prowess.

Martin hated the idea and had done everything he could not to think about it ever since Mrs Darby had mentioned it. The thought of playing the piano at the Summer Serenade filled him with feelings of dread and fear and he made up his mind right there and then that although he might be going to the Summer Serenade he certainly would not be playing the piano.

Mrs Darby was clever. She had deliberately put the idea of playing at the concert into the minds of the two boys to see how they would react. She didn't want them to waste their time if they weren't serious and she knew that learning to play any musical instrument required practice and perseverance.

From that moment on the two boys went about their piano playing in very different ways. Each day when Declan arrived home from school he would go straight to his bedroom to play his keyboard for half an hour, sometimes longer. He was really beginning to get the hang of it now and was enjoying being able to play tunes rather than just lines of music. There was no doubt about it; he was improving every day.

Each day when Martin arrived home from school he would go straight to his bedroom to play his keyboard for half an hour, sometimes longer. But although he went to his bedroom to play his keyboard, he didn't actually play it; in fact, he did anything he could find to do in his bedroom to avoid playing his keyboard. He watched TV, played on his games console, lay on his bed listening to Declan practising next door, read some of his many football books or did his homework.

Once, when he became bored of doing all the things in his bedroom to avoid playing his keyboard he even tidied his room, such was his desperation to avoid practising. So unlike his best friend, Martin's ability to play the piano did not improve. He had had enough of it and that is when the excuses began. Mrs Darby wanted to know why he wasn't improving at all and, if anything, he was getting worse as the weeks went by. Martin told her that his keyboard at home was broken, that he had lost his music book and (his most far fetched excuse of all) was that he'd hurt the fingers on both hands falling from Declan's swing. Declan certainly couldn't remember this happening and simply looked blankly when Mrs Darby stared at him with a raised eyebrow. Martin carried on giving his excuses week after week, thinking that he was getting away with it. However, unknown to him, Mrs Darby had had her suspicions for quite some time and after giving her yet another ridiculous excuse about having earache, she simply shook her head, smiled knowingly and said, 'You've given up haven't you?'

It was time for him to face up to the truth. He nodded uncomfortably.

'It's fine,' she said. 'It's not for everyone and it's obviously not for you, but there's no point in denying it; make sure you tell your mum and dad when you get home.'

And that was that. Martin's parents were disappointed but not completely surprised – they had wondered for some time why Martin's practice sessions hadn't actually produced a musical sound of any kind. But whilst Martin was dreaming up his excuses, Declan was practising and practising and getting better and better. On the night of the Summer Serenade, Martin was sat in the second row of the audience, and was looking forward to hearing his best friend play.

The school hall had an impressive stage which was raised to give the audience a clear view of

the performers. Declan stood at the side of the stage behind the curtain. This was the moment he had practised so much for. Six months ago Mrs Darby had mentioned that if he practised hard and didn't give up, he might be able to play at the summer concert. She didn't really believe it would be possible and was probably more surprised than anyone that Declan was about to perform. So far, the evening had gone really well; children from Years 3 and 4 had made their way to the stage, to play the trumpet, the oboe, the violin, the piano and a whole host of other instruments. All had performed well and had received deserved applause from the audience. Musical evenings could be a little tense, with parents desperate for their child not to make a mistake but Mrs Darby always did a great job of making everybody relax. Finally, it was Declan's turn to perform and as he walked to the very edge of the stage, waiting to be introduced, he could see the many faces of the audience, waiting to be entertained. His mum and dad sat nervously on the front row, clutching the programme which listed the performance order so they knew that Declan was next. They had heard him at home obviously but weren't sure how he would perform in front of a huge audience.

Mrs Darby introduced him and her words made Declan feel confident about himself. She described Declan as the hardest working pupil she had ever taught and told the audience that although he had only been playing for six months it was as if he had been playing for years. And then she called his name and beckoned him towards her. The eyes of the audience focused on him as he appeared and, although he walked tentatively across the stage, his nerves seemed to disappear completely when he sat down at the piano. He placed the sheet of music on the stand above the keys and took a deep breath. The hall, with nearly two hundred people in it, fell completely silent. Six

months ago Declan had never touched a piano key before. Now he was about to perform in front of a large audience. He looked up at Mrs Darby who smiled and mouthed the words, 'You can do it.'

He played superbly, never once looking up at the music. A few seconds into the piece there was an audible gasp from the audience. Declan's mum and dad watched on, beaming with pride. He had learned the piece by heart and was enjoying playing so much that he even had the confidence to look up at the audience and smile at them. He finished with a flourish and received thunderous applause, Martin joining in, clapping as hard as he could. He knew that the applause could have been for him, but he also knew that Declan had tried hard, had shown greater determination and he thoroughly deserved this moment. Declan made his way from the piano to the centre of the stage; this was the greatest achievement of his life so far and it was time to perform his first ever bow.

