

The Young Virgil Fox That I Knew by Louise Clary

In 1933, since I was unable to return to college due to the Depression, I started taking organ lessons from my former piano teacher, Etta Miller, who wanted to prepare me for entrance into the Peabody Conservatory. I got a church job immediately, and was invited to join the AGO by a fellow organist. One of the perks of joining AGO was receiving the *Diapason* magazine every month. Almost every month there was a picture of a petulant looking young man named V. Fox and a glowing write-up about his genius. It got to be tiresome!

The following year, I entered Peabody hoping to complete a 3-year course in one year by taking pre-exams in subjects that I studied privately. The officials gave me a hard time, saying “No one has done that but Virgil Fox, and he’s a genius.” I heard it so often that I was really upset. But they let me try anyway.

One night, I was eating in a restaurant when a man asked if he could share my table. As we were eating, he asked if I was a pianist – from the way I used my hands. When I said I was an organist, he asked if I knew Virgil Fox! That did it! I told him I was fed up with hearing about Virgil Fox and told him why. Soon after, the people at the next table, two young men and an older woman, got up to leave. As they passed our table, the gentleman at my table said, “There goes Virgil Fox now with Richard Weagly and Richard’s Mother.”

One of my classmates was Don Willing, a drop-dead handsome young man who was a brilliant organist and a good friend of Virgil’s. He kept insisting I would like Virgil, but I was skeptical.

One day, Don and I were headed for the drug store after our last class when he said, “Here comes Virgil now.” Up strode this smiling gentleman – happy to see Don and wondering who I was. Don, who had a crazy nickname for everyone, introduced me as “Snodgrass”. We stood for a while chatting pleasantly. Virgil was interested in what we were doing. He excused himself soon because he was preparing for a concert at the Conservatory the next week, and had practice time on the concert organ. Since Don made no effort to tell Virgil my real name, I spoke up and told him my real name was Louise Black.

The following week I was returning to school for choral rehearsal after dinner when I heard someone at the concert organ. Being nosy, I stuck my head in the door to see who it was. It was Virgil. When he saw me he said, “Come on down to the organ,” which I did. He seemed genuinely glad to see me. Still skeptical, I asked if he remembered who I was. His immediate response was “Blackie, Snodgrass or Louise.” That did it for me – I was hooked!

After that, we three spent every evening together. After supper we'd go to Don's church and take turns playing for each other, or to my room where I had a small pump organ (for keyboard work). Virgil could make that organ sound like a real one. He would play and sing the high school fight song that he had written for Princeton, Illinois. Other nights we went to his church, Brown Memorial, and he would play for us. He was working on his arrangement of Bach's "Come Sweet Death" at the time, and I would sit on the bench with him as he worked out the notes – sometimes with tears running down his cheeks because the music was so beautiful. He said he wanted to go to heaven with that tune. He taught us so much about expression and interpretation – what wonderful training!

He loved Fannie Brice, so when a movie of hers came to town, a group of us would go. You could hear his laugh all over the theater.

If Virgil didn't show up for dinner, Don and I would order "take-out" for him and walk to the church and pound on the door. I'd sit with Virgil while he ate, and Don would play the big organ.

When Virgil went on a concert tour that year, he gave us his itinerary with dates and addresses of every place he was to play. Every evening Don and I would write him a letter telling him all the news; and Don, who was a marvelous caricaturist, would decorate it with drawings. We had a letter waiting for him every place he played. We became his "family." When he returned and joined us for lunch at a restaurant, he would come in saying, "You guys are angels." You could hear him all over the restaurant!

I always went back to Harrisburg on Friday afternoons by train for choir rehearsal, and to church on Sunday. Then Sunday afternoon or early Monday, I'd head back for Baltimore. Sometimes Dick Weagly had a group of 15 to 20 people to their home on Sunday afternoons to sight-read Bach Cantatas or other music of that type. On those Sundays I'd go back early so I could be part of that.

My schedule was so full, 15 subjects, that I didn't have time to memorize the required music for my final exam. I began to have health problems – fainting spells – so it was decided to ease up on the organ and concentrate on the other subjects. The next year I could come back for organ alone one day a week.

On Virgil's birthday, May 3, he wanted to go for a ride so he, Don, Frances, and I drove out to Sherwood Gardens where we wandered all through the place enjoying the flowers. Frances had to be back for a class, so we dropped her back at the Conservatory. Virgil wanted to take some flowers to an elderly lady from his church who was in the hospital, so Don and I sat in the car while he visited her. When he came back, we stopped at an ice cream store where he bought each of us two big ice cream cones. It was a hot day and we had to eat like crazy so we wouldn't drip in his car. I remarked that since it was

his birthday, we should be doing things for him. He said on his birthday he wanted to be happy, and nothing made him happier than being with “you kids.”

He told me once that he was kept so busy with school and music that he had no time for friends; and when he got the scholarship to Peabody he was there from 7 AM to 11 PM every day. He said he never allowed himself the luxury of friends. He was now enjoying the pleasure of spending time with friends.

That summer, he went back to France and I received frequent postcards from him. In the fall, I returned to Peabody to work mainly on the organ, but since I was there, I signed up for extra courses. The same group of students was there plus some new ones, so our group was expanded. Some weren't organ students, but they enjoyed being around us since we had such a good time.

Virgil had an appointment in New York and suggested that we go along. One of our friends from the year before was now going to Juilliard and wanted us to visit her, so Nell and I went along to stay overnight with her while Virgil and Don did their business.

Three times we were stopped by the police for minor infractions and each time Virgil talked his way out of a ticket. One line we heard was, “Officer, I have my best friends in this car. I would never do anything to endanger them.”

When we got to New York, Virgil stopped in heavy traffic and took us girls down the subway entrance in Times Square and told us which train to take and where to get off - at Riverside and 116th St., and we'd be near Juilliard. He said he'd pick us up the next afternoon at a certain corner. Then, off he dashed to get back to his car.

Of course, we waited an hour on the corner the next day to be picked up. I said, “I bet he ran into an old friend and got to talking.” When he finally came he said, “I'm sorry girls, I ran into an old friend and got to talking.”

It was around that time when I started sitting in the front seat with Virgil. He was the world's worst driver, and I would frequently have to grab the wheel when he let go to turn and talk to someone in the back seat. It never fazed him. When he'd turn around and take the steering wheel back, he'd say, “Thanks, Little One.” He seldom used my name. I was either “Little One” or “Sweetie.”

The organ teacher at Peabody was Louis Robert, a big, dour Dutchman with phenomenal pedal technique. That's where Virgil learned his mastery of the pedalboard. But the dear man was terribly jealous of Virgil because when Virgil played a concert, he got rave reviews; but when Mr. Robert played, he got barely a mention in the local paper. He was so grim and unfriendly that he had no friends, but he had technique! He knew Virgil and I were good friends and he gave me a hard time about it.

One of my assignments was to write an original piece to play in a recital. I developed a flute piece with organ accompaniment. I showed it to Virgil at lunch one day and he sat there and registered the whole piece for the concert organ just by looking at it. It was a big hit. I had an advanced flute student play with me.

Sometime later, I had a similar assignment and started the theme as a joke for Miss Lucke [another teacher at Peabody), who liked my idea and had me enlarge on it. When it was done, Virgil again registered the piece for me. He caught my idea and it worked. I called it "Dance of the Robots." He had a sense of analyzing music without even hearing it.

About that time, Mr. Robert became more difficult and cranky. I was working on the slow movement of the Widor 4th Symphony and had to play melody on the 4th manual, accompaniment on the 3rd, and staccato pedaling with both feet. Since I was 5' 2", it was almost impossible to maintain my balance on the bench. He refused to let me couple the melody down to the lowest manual. So I tried to do as he wanted. During my lesson, when I started to lose my balance and fall forward on the pedalboard, I grabbed the music rack to keep on the bench. Mr. Robert screamed and ranted that I was doing "Fox tricks!" It seems when Virgil was younger and had a spectacular pedal passage with no manuals, he would hold the music rack with both hands so everyone knew he was using only feet - he was a "show-off." I became so upset at Mr. Robert that I closed my book and walked out on him. We never knew he was very ill - and several days later he died of a heart attack. I have felt bad about it ever since. I learned a great deal from him, and wish I could have told him so.

All the organ students were at loose ends, so Virgil suggested that Don and I go with him to Bridgewater College in Virginia where he was to play a concert the next night. He called ahead to make overnight arrangements for me since he and Don would stay in the Boy's Dorm. Don drove and Virgil sat in back with his dummy keyboard. We had to guess what he was playing from the clicking of the keys. We stopped in Washington at the National Cathedral so we could meet the organist and see the organ.

When we reached Bridgewater in the evening, I stayed with a woman professor who studied with Virgil now and then. In the morning, Don and I took the car and explored the area while Virgil practiced. The concert was great and interesting. On his last number, "The Widor Toccata," he blew a fuse and the organ "died." He walked out for a few minutes while the place was in absolute silence. When he returned, he said to the audience, "Well, let's see if it works now." So he started the Toccata again and it went great. At the end, the audience went wild; mainly young people.

After the concert, we went backstage where someone had recorded the program - just experimenting. Virgil had never heard himself recorded before and

got so excited when he heard it, he went over backward into some stage props, and since he had his arm around my shoulder, I went down too!

The next day on the way back to Baltimore as we came out of a restaurant, he asked me, "Little One, how would you like me to be your teacher?" That was how we heard he was to be the new head of the organ department at Peabody.

It was around this time that Virgil began wearing an "opera cape" after each concert, when he would greet his friends and admirers. He got a great deal of criticism for that – some said it was an affectation – that sort of comment. He did get a lot of negative comments about his mannerisms, which he chose to ignore. He explained to me that after a concert he was always soaked with perspiration. One time after a concert in Chicago, it was so cold backstage where he greeted people that he got pneumonia. The doctor told him to put a coat on before greeting people. An overcoat put over a wet suit was very awkward. So a French organist friend suggested the cape. It worked so very well that Virgil ignored all the snide remarks and it eventually became his "trademark".

Brilliant colors were important to Virgil. When we visited Sherwood Gardens, he would sit on the grass by the most colorful flowerbeds and just absorb the brilliance of the flowers. I had two long chiffon scarves that were angle-striped in bright colors, which I frequently wore as a tie around the top, and as a sash. When I played the organ, I would flip the long ends of the sash back of the bench out of the way. Sometimes I would feel a little movement during the lesson and Virgil would be rubbing the material between his fingers absently, not really aware of it but just absorbing the colors into his hands. After more than 65 years, I still have those scarves that he loved!

When his Aunt Etna came from Illinois to visit him, he was tied up with lessons so he gave me his car keys and told me to entertain her – take her anywhere she wanted to go, then meet him for lunch. She told me about his childhood – she and his mother were aware of his special talent when he was very young, but his father and brother were not as accepting that his was a special talent. Aunt Etna was a piano teacher and said when he was 6 years old she realized he was beyond her so she took him to Chicago.

Whenever a big name organist came to play a concert, Virgil made sure that Don and I met them personally. It was especially interesting when André Marchal came – he was blind and spoke no English. His daughter came with him and would write the stop list in Braille while he got the feel of the concert organ. Don and I were privileged to sit quietly in the back while he familiarized himself with the instrument.

Hugh McAmis was another musician who came to join us several times from New York, and we spent wonderful evenings at Don's church. Richard Purvis came from the Curtis Institute to visit Virgil, and we all had lunch together.

One time when Virgil and I had lunch together, he said he envied those who had homes and families, but he was aware that God had given him a special gift and put him in this world for one purpose – to give that gift to the world.

All the things he was criticized for, he had a reason for doing. For instance, he used to play at least one familiar musical number in his concerts such as "The Old Refrain" or "Londonderry Air." He said his mother didn't know or understand the regular organ repertoire, so if there was even one familiar piece in a concert, she could enjoy it. He thought that there were many musically untrained people like his mother who came to the concerts. Another criticism was getting up and talking about the music before he played. Most people are not familiar with the concert organ repertoire so a few words about how to listen or what to listen for helped people enjoy it more.

It seems that Virgil and Don and I were brought up on the same kind of music – opera, operetta, and oratorio, so we sang a lot in the car - Virgil on melody (because he was loud), I sang alto and Don was bass. One evening Virgil and I were to join the group at a restaurant and were a little late. As we went along, he started singing "Because You're You" from a Victor Herbert operetta. It is a duet so I sang along. We were still singing as we got out of the car and walked arm-in-arm up the sidewalk and into the restaurant until we finished the song. It was as if no one else was around.

Another time after coming out from lunch, Virgil was being silly and walking like an ape. I put my hand on his head and pushed, so he sat down on the sidewalk, pulled a book out from under his arm and opened it up to read. People were walking past and staring so I said, "Virgil, get up!" He looked up at me and said, "You put me here".

We had a mixed group; some pianists, some vocal students, and some instrumentalists. No one smoked or drank and everyone slept in his own bed at night. We just had a good time together.

When graduation time came around, Virgil wanted to select the evening dress I would wear for the exhibition concert. I brought three to show him and he selected a rose-colored one with a full skirt. He said I was to wear lipstick of the same color. I didn't have any of that color. Later that day he came to me with a rose-colored lipstick he had bought for me!

Lessons with Virgil were fun – it was mainly interpretation. Also how to smooth out a passage with different fingering. He was very precise about correct pedaling – he developed a series of pedal scales that he used for years in his

Master Classes, and manual scales on the piano! He had me working on the Bach “Dorian Toccata” which I really disliked, but I had to stay with it. He used a different colored pencil each week to mark the music – my music looks like a rainbow fell on it. A piece I did like was the A-Minor Prelude and Fugue of Bach. I did most of the memorizing while riding on the train between Baltimore and Harrisburg, PA. I laid the open book on my lap and fingered it while memorizing the whole page. When I finally played it in a Friday afternoon concert, I missed a toe stud and my mind went completely blank. That page in my brain was blank. I improvised (we were trained never to stop, just improvise till it comes back). It seemed for so long. Then I hit the toe stud and suddenly the whole page flashed back in my mind. I finished the Prelude and tore into the Fugue which went terrifically – the best I had ever done it. I was so upset at myself that I headed for the station and went home. On Monday, when I returned to school, there was a message for me to see Virgil in his office. When I went, I was shocked because he was so pleased with me – he was proud that I had not stopped but kept it going. He always made me feel so good about myself.

Another time he told me to learn a certain piece in a book we both had. I had already sight-read it and thought it was “corny” and said so. But he said, “Learn it”. Later, I was sent to his office where he said, “Forget the piece – you were right. It isn’t worth spending time on”.

Virgil would pace back and forth behind the organ bench and comment, “Come on Babe, thrill me!” or “Sing it to me, girl” or “Come on, flirt with me”. A constant commentary kept me focused on the interpretation he wanted. To me, it was great – he would get so engrossed in what I was doing that he made me feel it. Even now as I play some things, I think of how he would play it. There is more to it than just playing the right notes in the right time.

He told me at that time I would never be a concert organist – I didn’t have the stamina – but that I could be a “damn good” church organist, which I have tried to be now for 66 years.

One visiting organist (whose name I have forgotten) came to play a concert. We were familiar with his compositions. He started with a Bach Trio Sonata. Virgil and I were sitting about 6 rows back, when the soloist got lost, stumbled, then stopped. I could feel Virgil tense up next to me. The gentleman started over and got stuck at the same spot. He turned around and called Virgil’s name. So Virgil got up and walked up to the organ where they conferred. Virgil told him to start the next movement, and had to sit next to him for the rest of the concert.

The Director usually entertained the visiting artist but this time he left early. Virgil and Don and I and several others took the gentleman out for dinner. Virgil made me sit next to him because he said I had a “gift for gab” and our visitor was so upset with himself that I could make him feel better.

During the summer, a former classmate who lived in a town about 50 miles away called on a Saturday to invite me to hear Virgil, who was dedicating a new Möller organ that night at the college in her town of Chambersburg, PA. I should come and hear the concert and stay overnight, she said. I went and we enjoyed the concert. Later, in the receiving line as I got to Virgil he was surprised to see me. He was so surprised that when he turned to introduce me to the next person in the line (who happened to be the wife of the head of the Möller Organ Company) all he could think of was "Snodgrass."

Virgil was very French; after leaving Peabody at a young age as a student, he went to France to study for several years. He spoke the language fluently. One time after a concert he said that in France, after a concert, your friends kissed you on the cheek. So after the next concert, he presented his cheek to be kissed. When he played in Hershey, Pennsylvania on their new big organ, my mother and sisters went with me, and the Harrisburg Chapter of the AGO was also there. I heard a gasp from the AGO members when he wrapped his cape around me and kissed me after the concert. It "raised my stock" in the group.

Virgil was drafted and was in Special Services, mainly in Washington, for the duration of the war. So we lost track of each other for several years. A few years later, we heard that Virgil and Richard Weagly were working together again at Riverside Church in New York. They had concerts every Sunday afternoon, either choral or organ, so my husband and I were able to renew our friendship with Dick and Virgil, which lasted for me until Virgil's death in 1980.

One time I was sitting with Virgil while he was practicing for a concert. One of his pieces was an organ arrangement of Debussy's "Clair de Lune." As I listened to the beautiful playing, I was struck by the C-flat, which comes in the last section. I had heard it often, but this time it really struck me in the heart. When Virgil finished, I told him that when he played the C-flat, it did something to me inside.

Many years later, my husband and I went to one of Virgil's concerts where he played the Debussy. It was not one of the "big" concerts, but we went whenever and wherever we could. Virgil didn't know we were there and was so surprised and pleased to see us. After he greeted me with the hug and kiss he said, "Did you hear the C-flat? I played it just for you." He had never forgotten what I had said so many years before.

The words that describe the dear man I knew and loved are exuberant, loving, caring, and talented.