

# My Hands Remembered

By Elyas Al-Amri

*Despite becoming a computer engineer, I still hold a deep passion for music, especially the piano. And after this incident, I became determined to continue learning to play the piano. Every week, I come to practice it. I print new music sheets and bring them to the Cinematic Arts room to play. I want to master the classics: Liszt, Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin. And then come up with my own. And who knows, maybe one day I will have my own piano, playing it in a silent room with no one but me to witness the magic of this instrument.*

Back when my family was in Malaysia, they put my sister and me in a school called *Vital Years* to increase our English skills. I was eight then and was already a second grader in an Arabic school. Yes, I attended two schools a day! I would attend one in the morning and then follow the other in the evening. And I never had a weekend because each school had a different weekend system.

Nevertheless, I am glad about that. Not only did that school help significantly improve my English in the long term, but it also established some core to my musical sense. We played so many musicals and songs at that school, unlike when I was in Yemen. I still remember dancing in groups to *Jingle Bells*, *Old McDonald Had a Farm*, and many, many more.

We did many things in the class: chanted, sang, read stories, wrote, and watched cartoons. But the thing that intrigued me the most was the digital keyboard in the corner of the class. Teachers open it and press a button for premade melodies so that we sing along. I wanted to touch it and see how it felt, but whenever I went near it, the teachers shouted at me and dragged me back to my seat. My desire to find out eventually taught me to be sneaky. One time I ran to it quickly and quietly as soon as no teacher was watching. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to me, the piano was unplugged, so nothing happened when I pressed the keys. Then a teacher noticed me, pulled me back to my seat, and gave me a giant book to read. She sat directly in front of me for the rest of the class. The next day I came, I found that they had placed the keyboard on a higher stand, making it impossible for me to reach it. I couldn't do anything at this point, so I just looked at the piano from afar, wondering what it sounded like to play.

The first time I played the piano, however, came much later after we returned to Yemen, and I became twelve. My family and I were on a regular visit to my grandmother's house. Upon arrival, however, I saw my aunts holding a gift with my name. I do not recall the occasion or believe there was one. I was delighted to open it. It was a toy piano (a.k.a. keyboard). It wasn't like the silly toys you would give a 3-year-old; no, this one was much better and well-designed. The keys were labeled with colored sets of stickers; each had a letter from A to G written. I had no idea how to play it or what to play. But then I remembered the songs from *Vital Years*, so I attempted to play them on it. The easiest I could remember was *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. The

labels made navigating the keyboard easy, but imitating my recollection of the song was difficult.

Everyone got busy and went to do their work elsewhere, while I sat in the living room for hours, attempt after attempt, and I could never get the right tone. I was determined to learn how to play it. I brought a paper and pen and jotted down the order in which I played notes. Each time I figure out the next key to hit (or wait to) and for how long, I write it down, thus inventing my mediocre notation. By the end of the day, I finally had it laid out in three detailed papers. I replayed it once, then twice, then many times after that, both slow and fast. Even though it was just a nursery musical on a toy piano, something fascinating kept me playing it.

Once I became confident with the piece, I called everyone to the living room, including my mother, sister, three aunts, and grandmother, to show them what I had learned. Once everybody sat down, I began playing the melody. I played it flawlessly. My aunts were amazed, and my grandmother poured into tears. They told me that they also had this notion of wanting to play the piano, but, like me, they had a rough time on their first attempt. My performance revived their interest in playing. What happened next was amazing: I gave Shima, my youngest aunt, the keyboard to try it. A few minutes later, everyone was taking turns in trying it. I showed each one the notes and the timings to hit them. Even though I was considered a genius, I was no teacher and couldn't teach them to play it right. They would hit the wrong note, press for a long time, or press the same note multiple times, and I couldn't correct those errors. Everyone eventually took a break and forgot about the whole thing. Maybe it was a flash of interest for them, but for me, it was more than that.

Days later, I continued learning to play different pieces. I tried searching online, but it only gave me the audio of songs with no clear way of playing them. I continued using the same trial-and-error process I used to learn my first song. I learned *Ode to Joy* and the first four bars of *Fur Elise*, one note at a time. It was not easy and time-consuming, yet that desire to learn kept pushing me. I spent my savings on music books from the library to help me achieve at the piano. I even traveled with my keyboard on my family's vacation to Egypt. Indeed, the keyboard became a pivotal point in my learning to play music.

Unfortunately, it did not last very long: My aunt and her children came to our house while I was at school. One of my cousins came into my room. He must have seen the piano and was eager to try and accidentally dropped my keyboard from the drawer on which it was standing; the drawer must have been too tall for him. When I returned, I found the keyboard broken: the keys were bent, and the buttons were jammed in. I tried to fix it. I asked my parents to fix it. I tried everything with no prevail, and that dream of mine playing the piano faded away. It was very frustrating, to let go of this journey after I had only just started it. But ultimately, I had to. What else can a twelve-year-old kid do?

Four years later, I decided to make a comeback and searched for pianos and music. This was when I discovered the world of digital music and how to play music without a physical keyboard. It was not ideal; it was more like composing rather than playing, but I learned the sounds of many different instruments like the drums, which consisted of sounds like kick, hi-hat, snare, and cowbell; synthesizers, which are tools that generate robot-like sounds; orchestra instruments, like the violin, brass, trumpet, choir (yes, this was digitalized as well); and many more. I also made my way to music theory and gained some sense of how music works, with terms like rhythm, tempo, scales, keys, intervals, keys, chords, arpeggios, etc. Nevertheless, the desire to touch a piano remained unfulfilled. And the work I did in digital music only widened that unfulfillment.

Over time, I gathered more than two thousand songs. I have listened to so much music that I consider myself a music critic. I can sense how the song is structured, what parts are the most effective, what is wrong with this part, what genre this song fits into, etc. I focused mainly on songs that contained only music. I refrained from most songs with lyrics because *pure* songs developed a habit in me to imagine stories while listening, and hearing vocals in these songs ruins that imagination. If I were an artist, along with my computer skills, I would have created many animations and cinematic scenes for the things I had in my head.

A year into this realm, my aunt Shima got a digital piano as a wedding gift. She later went to show it to the family, and I got to see it. It was much bigger than mine and had a multitude of sounds to select, from a guitar to an organ pipe. She agreed to lend it to me. For days, I practiced alone in my room until I managed to play those old pieces I used to play when I was a kid. It was a joyful moment. Then I learned to play new pieces like *Scarborough Fair*. Then when I decided to step up the level and play more advanced pieces, like the famous *Moonlight Sonata*, I came to a problem: The piano did not work when I pressed multiple notes, meaning I couldn't play chords with it. This meant I could not play a significant portion of the music, which was disappointing. I tried to play without chords, but the music sounded vague and awkward.

This incident inspired me to resume my piano journey, so after one week, I returned the piano to my aunt and bought a MIDI. It doesn't do anything by itself, but when you connect it to a computer, you can play almost any sound you can imagine. It was great because it integrated seamlessly into my current workflow: I open my laptop, connect the keyboard, open different piano libraries, and play. This enabled me to play several pieces, including *Greensleeves* and *Moonlight Sonata*. This was when I learned to play different separate rhythms with my hands. I watched online courses and learned music notation and how to read music scores, which shifted my taste toward classical piano pieces. I once again rejoiced, and my hopes of becoming a pianist were restored.

The MIDI keyboard actually inspired me to compose my own song. I called it *Life* because that is what I lived through then. I was no composer; I could not write melodies no matter how hard I

tried. But this one felt different because it almost seemed like I was singing this inside myself when I felt sad. Hence, I managed to write it. That was when I learned to hum a lot to gain inspiration.

The MIDI keyboard had a couple of limits, like the few octaves (i.e., the number of keys), weak velocity sensitivity (volume), no pedals for more control, etc. Usually, MIDI keyboards are not meant to play classical piano but more to facilitate composing, so it was hard for me to play what I really wanted: classical pieces. Hence, I could not play more advanced pieces and got stuck with the ones I knew so far. Playing the same tunes repeatedly felt boring and demotivating. Moreover, I was in high school and had to focus on studying, so I stopped playing for a year. And over time, my interest in playing the piano shrank, and so did my interest in music making. Nevertheless, I kept listening to the music I kept on collecting.

Two years later, I got accepted to a university abroad. Such an exciting opportunity I could not miss. After arriving, I got to see the university's campus, facilities, and services. Upon walking next to the Cinematic Arts room, I saw it from afar: an actual grand piano. Black, with cords, pedals, cover, and full keys. I never really thought I would see a real piano; these are typically very expensive and used carefully by professionals, but no one was there to block me from testing it out, which I did. It felt completely different than the one I had. It was silky and smooth. The sound that came from it was surreal, even more so when I used the pedals.

I wanted to play one of the pieces I remember, but after not playing the piano for two years, I forgot how to do so. Additionally, the piano's touch was different, so my muscle memory failed me. Every time I attempted a piece, my hands froze and became clueless as to where to go next. I tried relentlessly, piece after piece. I failed to remember any until finally, I reached *Ode to Joy*. I played it several times until I gained that piano feel. Then I tried the ones I previously couldn't, and, with sudden clarity, my hands remembered! I sat there for hours, replaying pieces. I close my eyes. I let my hands. They were moving freely left and right between the keys; the chains holding them broke. They struck the keys hard; they wanted to hear the sound loud and clear. Some students who were passing by were watching me, but I ignored them; I was only listening to the voice of the keys calling to be played.

I could have easily stopped this path when I lost my first keyboard or at any phase, but no. That desire to play the piano remained within me all this time. And time will only tell what my next story with the piano is, although one thing for sure is that I have decided this time that I will never stop learning to play.