This is the author’s radio script of this article.


Anna Goldsworthy’s fine memoir, *Piano Lessons*, traces the development of a musician from geeky overachiever to mature ensemble performer, told through the history of her lessons with Adelaide piano teacher Eleonora Sivan, a Russian emigree.

Anyone who has seriously studied music will find this book engrossing. In her first lesson, the nine-year-old Anna announces to Mrs Sivan that she’s already learnt a particular Bach prelude: ‘I finished it with my old teacher,’ she says, provoking the response, ‘Bach is never finished. Life in this music endless. … What Bach gives? Peace, of course, and bells.’ Her dialogue is full of these charming idiosyncrasies which are not quite correct idiomatic English but are nevertheless so very expressive. And one is struck by the patience of a great teacher: Goldsworthy remarks, ‘It is never enough to tell a student something once: teaching is constant repetition, constant correction.’

Goldsworthy is rather severe on her young self. Overhearing her parents discussing the opinion of a neighbour that Anna was missing out on her childhood because she was practising so hard, she felt ‘the most exquisite self-pity’ which she seems to have known was bogus. Mrs Sivan, however, has no time for such modern liberal nonsense. She proclaims that ‘Mozart was born with happy of everything. … People say his father was a despot, awful, but is really enormous luck to have such supportive father.’ ‘My father,’ Anna adds wryly, ‘transcribed this diligently into his notebook.’

One cannot help being struck by the parallels between Anna’s experiences with Eleonora Sivan and Paul Crabbe’s with Edouard Keller in Peter Goldsworthy’s
Maestro. Peter Goldsworthy, like Paul Crabbe’s father, attended Anna’s lessons and took notes (which no doubt were a great help to her in recalling events and conversations for this memoir). When Anna was thirteen her father showed her the beginnings of a book about a piano teacher and his young student. Anna was shocked at first: ‘In the early drafts of this book, there was much that I recognised, and it was like looking at my own life in a mirror. … But with each revision, the mirror became more opaque, until I realised it was no longer my story at all, but a work of fiction.’

And indeed, although both were uncompromising teachers, there is a huge difference between the rather acerbic, alcoholic Keller in Maestro, and the endlessly patient and deeply affectionate Sivan portrayed in Piano Lessons. Maestro was published in 1989, when Anna was in her early teens: she therefore grew up familiar with Paul’s story of an undistinguished career dogged by disappointment. However, perhaps this inoculated her against a similar fate: ‘I have won some competitions and not others: I decided no longer to enter them well before I reached thirty. Like Paul, in Maestro, I teach piano at a university in Melbourne; unlike Paul, I do not feel disappointed by my life.’ She has made a life in music as a performer and teacher, and this book is an eloquent homage to the teacher who prodded and exhorted and ever so lovingly formed her into a consummate musician rather than a showy prodigy.