

Local News

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Making own gifts isn't always as nice as it sounds

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Making one's own presents can be the best part of Christmas, in that one can truly give of oneself, as they say.

But there is always the problem of planning ahead. It is easy to operate under the delusion that there is always plenty of time before the holidays — and then they come around the corner and hit you on the head.

This week, I got this great idea to make a cassette recording of my piano playing for a couple of close friends and relatives — those who have the spirit similar to a parent loving his child's handiwork.

The first problem with this plan was that I've sort of, well, fallen out of practice, and my Chopin can sound like Shostakovich and the

Bach like Frank Zappa.

But I thought the project could be an opportunity to get my delapidated repertoire together. All I had to do was accomplish a year's worth of practice in a couple of hours, then turn on the recorder and tape it.

I set off to work immediately, and just as immediately, my old tape deck literally blew sky high. It made an enormous sound that resembled an airplane taking off, then died. Since I'd paid only \$49 for it 10 years ago, I shelved the idea of having it fixed, and the next day, I ran out to a local stereo shop with a sale ad and searched through stacks of electronic equipment for a brand new tape deck.

So much for my plans to limit my patronage of merchants at Christmas time.

The nice stereo salesman sold me

a tape deck he said was excellent for piano recordings. He also sold me a stack of tapes (on sale), plus a gadget that would clean my heads, whatever that means. As I waited at the cash register to pay for my big pile of merchandise, I could hardly wait to get home and get started.

I'm not mechanically or electronically inclined. I got the new tape deck hooked up right away, but the dials and knobs and input levels were something else. It took all afternoon to adjust them to the piano, meaning that I had to run back and forth yelling "testing, testing" a lot.

Finally, at some hour of the night, I was set to begin. A local sound studio had told me I would need to get my recording to them the next morning, if I wanted to have the copies in time to send off

for Christmas.

Beginning with a Liszt piece I thought I could play backward and forward, I started in on my little concert.

And that's what it felt like. Knowing that every note was going to come across on this tape, it was as if an audience of 1,000 were following every move I made. I even got clammy hands, and the Liszt turned out to be no piece of cake. It took me eight times to get it right.

All the rest — the Chopin, Schumann, Bach and Beethoven — were very far from polished, and I now began to question the wisdom of this Christmas project. Entire pieces half an hour long are easily ruined by one split-second bunch of bad notes, fumbling of pages, memory lapses — and if I were to repeat all these half-hours over and over

again, it would be New Year's Eve before I knew it.

Oh, well, get on with it, I thought — what's a mistake or twelve among friends?

The next piece was a Chopin nocturne, and before I started out on this one, I thought to turn on my phone-answering machine, so that I wouldn't have a phone ringing in my beautiful tape recording.

I forgot to unplug the phone, however.

Therefore, as I was listening to the playback of the Chopin, I heard the phone ringing, ran to answer it, and was greeted by a dial tone at the other end. The ringing had reproduced perfectly on my tape.

Oh, well, I thought — what's a little phone-ringing among friends?

In the next piece, a lovely, romantic Schumann fantasy, a

train went by outside. My house is about 100 feet, if that, from the railroad tracks, and trains sound as if they're going by inside the house. So, the Schumann fantasy sounded on the replay like Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture — with cannon.

Oh, well, I thought — what's a little train among friends?

For the Bach, my dog, Otto, started to bark furiously at something he thought was going on outside.

That was the last straw. Mistakes, phone-ringing and trains were one thing, but the dog barking during my Bach was the end of the trail.

I went to bed, defeated. I never wanted to hear about knobs, dials and false starts again, and furthermore, I had spent so much time

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running back and forth across the living room between piano and tape recorder that I'd knocked into the Christmas tree and broken a bunch of ornaments.

Before I went to sleep, I figured it all out — I'd just march with everyone else to the nearest department store, go down the list, buy the presents and get them mailed the next day. I'd tried my best — but I hadn't started soon enough, and that was that.

The next morning, I was getting dressed for work when I stopped, took the phone off the hook, turned on the tape recorder, sat down at the piano, and played my head off. From Liszt to Bach I played without stopping — not to fiddle with dials or review what I'd done. I had a great time and even threw in a couple of pieces I hadn't thought of

the night before. The results didn't matter all that much, since I was going to keep the tape myself and play it whenever I vacuumed the house.

On the way to work, I listened to my finished product in the car and, wow, it wasn't all that bad. Sure, there were mistakes, but the piano sounded like a magnificent instrument resounding from Carnegie Hall, and the notes were mine.

With that, I made a U-turn and headed for the sound studio, and five minutes before deadline, I made the arrangements for the printing of my tape.

Then, it dawned on me that my piano present to my relatives and friends would have been better with the phone, train and dog Otto as background accompaniments. Christmas is, after all, a time to give of oneself just as one is — and not as what one wants to be.