

# *Music from the Fil*

## By Judith Wink

Fair warning: this article has nothing to do with early music, recorders or the Guild. It's about the 16th Annual Performathon put on by the FMDG Music School on March 26, 2022 at the 92nd Street Y. For three hours, students and faculty sang and played. Big deal, you're thinking, a student recital. Yes, but with a difference: the students are blind.

So was Filomen M. D'Agostino Greenberg, a generous donor when FMDG was still the Lighthouse Music School. Like the blind music students, Greenberg knew about overcoming obstacles. She wanted to be a doctor, but because no medical school in New York would accept women, she switched careers and enrolled at NYU Law School. While there, she married Max Greenberg over her father's dead body. Her family was poor, so she set out to make her fortune; a self-taught stock trader, by the time of her death she had donated \$6 million to her alma mater. When her vision failed, late in life, she studied piano at the Lighthouse Music School. Soon, large donations began arriving there, too. The D'Agostino Foundation helped endow the school. Thanks in part to Greenberg's generosity, the Lighthouse Music School, when it parted company with its parent organization, had money of its own to begin its new life. In gratitude, the school took her name.

But "the Filomen M. D'Agostino Greenberg Music School" is a little unwieldy, so the place is "FMDG Music School" in its publicity and "the Fil" to its friends. Its students range from first-graders to retirees. They have in common a belief that blindness is a fact, not a barrier. They study jazz, rock, pop, classical and folk. They sing, solo and in chorus. They play piano, drums, recorder, guitar and (new this year) violin. At this year's Performathon we saw a good sampling of their range and their talents.

This school isn't Juilliard. Some alumnae are good enough to make music their career. There's Matthew Whitaker, for instance. On Saturday mornings his piano teacher would hear elevator doors opening and feet racing down the corridor, thudthudthudthud. And the teacher would smile: here comes Matthew. These days Matthew plays jazz keyboard and drums here and overseas. He's released two albums with more to come.

Matthew, though, is an exception. Most students are at the Fil just to learn music and enjoy playing it. And so the Performathon was uneven. One boy, a yard tall and no more than 60 pounds, played a Beethoven sonata like a master. He was followed by a teenage girl who played a Bartok Bulgarian dance with the skill and confidence of a professional. One of the singers, who brought the house down with "Castle on a Cloud" from *Les Misérables*, looked about 10 and sounded like a 25-year-old in her third or fourth Broadway show. A boy soprano sang

Sondheim's "Not While I'm Around." In Handel's day he would have been made a castrato to preserve that voice.

But these few are unusual. Most of the young performers were average kids with motivation and guts. And they were as rewarding to listen to as their more talented classmates. How much courage does it take to sit down before a live audience, your hands shaking, at a keyboard that you can't see? There's no music in front of you, of course; only memory will get you through. You strike a few notes to make sure your hands are in the right place, and you're off.

Every one of this less-gifted group blundered; their memories failed for an instant, or their fingers landed wrong. Not one of them quit. Each one found the way back and kept going. One pianist, a few bars into a Chopin nocturne, got hopelessly tangled. Without missing a beat, he started again. A singer tackled "Surface Pressure" from Lin Manuel Miranda's *Encanto*. She gulped nervously, after every phrase, but she got through the song. As she walked off, somebody laughed: "No pressure, right?" And she laughed back: "Lots of pressure!" But she'll get up and perform again and again. Just like the others.

At a dude ranch, years ago, a rider in my group fell off her horse and climbed right back on. Another rider said, "That's the gutsiest thing I've ever seen." That's nothing. The gutsiest things I've ever seen happened at the 92nd Street Y on March 26.

"Whatever enlarges hope, will exalt courage," says Dr. Johnson. That's what the Fil does. It teaches blind people of all ages that music is open to them, too. It shows them how to learn and how to play. It shows them how much they can do and how well they can do it. It shows them that whatever they're doing now, they can do even more. Most important — and this isn't just about music — it teaches them to get right back on that horse and keep going.

—Judith A. Wink