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On The First Day of Light

By Benjamin Pomerance

"In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer."
 — Albert Camus, "Return to Tipasa" (1954)

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SOMEDAY, in a time that feels infinitely distant from this one, Felix Haskins might grasp the wonder of what is happening now. If that day ever dawns, he could sit with his father, Taylor, and hear the stories: how the tender-aged Felix would bear-crawl around the family home humming melodies; how his father, just for kicks, would pick up his trumpet, hand his son a percussion instrument and improvise with him; and how the instant arrived, beautiful and a little bit terrifying, when the father sensed just how intuitive his son's musical genes really were.

But the time for such analysis is not immediate. Today, the odds are strong that 12-year-old Felix had his cello in his arms by 7 a.m., delightedly playing whatever music he felt like playing. He follows this routine consistently, encouraged — but not prodded — by his dad, a Manhattan School of Music graduate who won a Grammy Award with the Dave Holland Big Band in 2005, plays with Guillermo Klein's otherworldly group Los Gauchos and remains a pioneer in the music software sphere. For the moment, the world simply feels fun.

A window into that world will peek open on Dec. 21, where the son and the father will come to the parlor of the Hand House and play the same game that they play at home when no one is watching: toss out a title, grab their instruments and begin to freely play without a scrap of sheet music in front of them or in their minds. The on-the-spot music will continue until somehow both of them grasp that it is time to end. "It's the most mysterious thing of improvisation: knowing when to end," Taylor states. "It just sort of happens. You just know."

He pauses. "I'm not sure if he fully appreciates how advanced of a musician you have to be for it to happen," he says, referring to his son. "It doesn't happen with just anyone. But it happens with Felix."

He stops again. "And I'm not just bragging as a dad," he clarifies. "I'm talking as a fellow musician."

The story isn't supposed to go this way. The tale that

buys political capital and sells on social media creeps closer to doomsday, laced with horrors from the past two years and arriving at the same dismal conclusions; a global pandemic has stilted America's youths and ruptured America's families, perhaps irreparably so. Evils swirl in these narratives, ominous images of quarantine, online learning and other byproducts of COVID-19 producing disaffected kids who are disjointed from their parents and detached from activities that society deems healthy.

An antidote to this plotline lives here. At the Waldorf School that Felix attends in Vermont, his teacher found Felix so ebullient that they recommended an instrument with a sound to counterbalance that trait. "Felix is a very positive, cheerful person," Taylor explains. "The school's philosophy is to introduce a student to an instrument based on something that they feel is missing in the child's experience. [Felix's teacher] explained to me that in the traditional pedagogy, the cello represents melancholy. That was what they felt was missing from his life."

Still, there are no signs of that melancholy when Felix speaks, particularly when the conversation turns to improvising on his instrument. "It's like if you're writing an essay or something, and you put your pencil to paper," he states. "You need the sparks of creativity that are required to do that, but once you start writing, you just try to let the ideas flow and see how far you can go. That's what it's like for me when I'm experimenting on the cello. You have some kind of an idea to start with, but then you just let go and see how creative you can be."

It is this type of process — and at once a lack of process — that has in many ways defined his father's career. Following the end of his studies at the Manhattan School in 1998, the New Hampshire native found a home with tomandandy, the electronic music production house that crafted scores for a dizzying array of horror films and sonic landscapes for Boeing, Nike and Coca-Cola commercials. Immersed in that realm, the trumpeter helped develop and

field-test novel music generation software, using artificial intelligence algorithms to create new works.

"I'm a futurist," Taylor states. "Always have been. I'm an early adopter of everything, and I hope to always be that way."

For more than 20 years, the early adopter thrived in New York City's music hothouse. *Downbeat* magazine anointed him one of the "25 Trumpets of the Future" in the summer of 2007. He released a series of well-received albums, debuting on Fresh Sound Records and then shifting to Sunnyside, the label that introduced listeners to the likes of Harold Danko and Lee Konitz. He subbed in Broadway orchestra pits, gigged with Holland and Klein, recorded jingles for TV commercials and found seemingly every imaginable way to ply his trade.

And then he made the move that required an entirely new array of adaptations, moving with his wife and their young son from the Big Apple into the Champlain Valley. From his new post in the Adirondacks, improvisation in multiple forms became a daily task. "I've always said that being up here is me being a musician in the woods on my own," he laughs. Setting up his own studio in Westport, a sonic playhouse that he anointed Recombination Labs, the same name that he used for an electric-acoustic fusion album in 2019, he began his newest chapter.

In that laboratory, father and son both stretched their wings. While Taylor combined audio samples sent by collaborations from around the country into coherent recordings, Felix explored the variety of instruments located throughout the studio, all of them open to his use and imagination. At some point along the way, the twosome started jamming together, with Taylor's trumpet reinforcing Felix's spirited adventures on a range of percussion offerings. At times, the father would offer a brief lesson in music theory. Mostly, though, they just played.

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Then Taylor discovered a new challenge of his own: the Steiner-Crumar analog electronic valve instrument, a vintage synthesizer that time had largely forgotten. Designed by trumpeter Nyle Steiner, the product with the ungainly name but limitless potential inspired some interest in the 1980s but waned rapidly thereafter. "I was shocked when I discovered it," Taylor recalls. "It's a synthesizer, but the fact that you, as the player, have so much control over it makes it a true instrument. It felt like something where the potential could be limitless."

In the winter of 2017, he made it a priority to explore that potential. "Because I spent so much time learning the instrument that winter," he explains, "I found that I was connecting that instrument to the winter itself and to the feelings that the winter in the Adirondacks brings." The following December, on the night that came on the shortest day of the year, he let those feelings loose at the Heritage House in Westport, using that electronic valve instrument to present a program that he titled "Solo Solstice." A year later, he did it again.

And then everything stopped. "It was pretty dark, to be honest," he says of the earliest months of COVID-19. "There were a lot of moments when I wondered if live performances were going to happen again, and there were times when I thought that it really might not happen again. It forced me to start learning how to be a musician on my own. I was already on that path just by the fact that I live and work up here. But the pandemic helped me focus on that aspect."

His son faced challenges, too. "I had started playing the cello only a little bit before quarantine," Felix remembers. "So, my private lessons became virtual, which was certainly interesting." Adding to the complexities was the departure of his first cello teacher, who had recently moved into a new job, and the arrival of a new instructor. Their first encounters, and their work together for many weeks after that, took place entirely online.

It was during this period that Felix settled into his routine of first-thing-in-the-morning practice sessions on the cello. "It's not like I feel like I have to," he explains. "But I do have a persistence to keep on getting better." Somewhere in this timeframe, Taylor showed his son the fundamentals of Logic Pro, his software of choice for composing and arranging, and watched Felix find novel possibilities by tinkering with arrangements of his favorite pop songs. "I gave him one lesson [with Logic]," Taylor



recalls. "That was all it took. He's a fast learner."

Eventually, the pandemic-imposed restrictions lessened enough for Felix's cello lessons to shift from the computer screen to the studio. His teacher rapidly noticed things that had not been fully visible remotely, adjusting Felix's posture and even coaching him on the proper way to apply rosin to his bow. "Making those changes led to a pretty dramatic change in Felix's playing," Taylor says. "It showed how detrimental it had been for him not to have had lessons in-person for a while."

Yet in spite of the odds, he had kept the music playing, and even growing, finding his own path in the darkness, just as so many musicians, including his father, had done amid those achingly isolated months. He started to learn Bach's unaccompanied cello suites and Dvorak's *Humoresque* and experimented with Logic Pro in arranging songs by Billie Eilish and Olivia Rodrigo for his own amusement. He improvised music with his dad, becoming even more comfortable with this high-wire act that never really felt to him like a high-wire act at all.

When what once passed as "normal" started to become normalized again, both the son and the father returned to familiar artistic patterns but differently than before. In

a sense, their concert together on Dec. 21 will represent what these past couple of years have wrought. Taylor will perform on his Steiner-Crumar analog electronic valve instrument, playing Bach on a contraption using technologies that Bach never could have envisioned. Felix will perform Arcangelo Corelli's *Christmas Concerto* with his dad, showcasing his skills in a virtuosic work.

Then, in the second half of the evening, they will play whatever enters their combined consciousness, adjusting to each other in the moment. Their preparation for this portion has consisted of listing a series of seasonally influenced titles. Before the audience, they will toss out a title and create music of instantaneous design that sonically represents their chosen theme. "We can sit down together and just play," Taylor says, "and that is something special that I've never taken for granted. At this point, we've done it long enough that we honestly are a seasoned duo."

And as they improvise on this night with more darkness than any other night of the year, a signal of hope will resonate for those who are willing to receive it. Since prehistoric times, people have gathered on this day not to mourn the expansive night but to celebrate the promise of the future, recognizing the winter solstice as the reversal of the sun's ebbing presence in the sky. Surrounded by the formless veil that descends after sundown, cultures have for thousands of years understood this night to be a promise of new beginnings, the first step of a journey upward.

Perhaps humanity still hungers for this call. Maybe it is desired now more than ever. Immeasurable winters have passed since Taylor last played a "Solo Solstice" concert in the region. Now, there will be a solstice concert again but not from him alone. From the next generation comes an innovative voice that mingles with his own. Through the night, the music continued and grew, even when the pages were blank, and improvisation became a necessity. Today, it tugs like an eager kite toward tomorrow, fresh and luminous as the first light of spring.

Taylor and Felix Haskins will perform a concert honoring the Winter Solstice on Dec. 21 at 7 p.m. in the parlor of the Hand House in Elizabethtown. Advance reservations are required. For tickets and more information, call 518-962-8899, email pianobynature@gmail.com or visit pianobynature.org.

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