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Two Part Inventions

I recently tried for the umpteenth time to master at least one of Bach's two-part inventions. Despite determination and years of accumulated wisdom, I could not do it. Bach wrote these inventions for his young pupils as practise pieces. For himself, he wrote astoundingly complex preludes and fugues that baffle ordinary mortals.

My inability to master the piano, or reach fluency in even a single piece, makes me question nature and nurture, whether we are born with gifts or can assume them later in life. I don't believe I could ever have run a four minute mile, beaten Bob Beamon at long jump, fought Mike Tyson, solved Fermat's last theorem or played Liszt at the Royal Festival Hall. We are told today that we can achieve anything, that all we need is determination. This is a patently not true. I would never tell anyone not to bother trying, but equally I wouldn't make false promises. The thing is, we don't know until we try. Or do we?

Perhaps we have an intuitive understanding of who we are to save us striving to be what we are not. If it was simply a matter of endeavour to become a master, there would be a surfeit of them – great musicians, great writers, great sportsmen and women, a surfeit of super achieving people. But there aren't. There are a lot of capable people and probably a lot of incapable ones. But we can't all be Alfred Brendel or William Shakespeare or Usain Bolt no matter how much effort we put into life.

I had hoped that the good Lord might at least have given me the ability to learn a Bach invention, but I believe now that he has not. My brain cannot cope with multiple musical lines. It's a mental and often physical stress that tears my little brain apart. And I fear this is the same with all artistic expression, that my synapses are not wired to cope with supreme complexities. It simply won't be moulded that way.

This might be the result of poor education and lack of childhood training, I'll never know. Some parents push their children to excel and end up with monsters, some with Mozarts, most with ordinary people working out their lives as best they can with their god given gifts. A phrase which balked a friend of mine who was incredulous at the thought of divinely bestowed gifts, perhaps on me, perhaps in general, I didn't follow it up. I think he's wrong. I believe that something happens to some people at some time which allows them to perform beyond the ordinary, when, in a musical analogy, two-part, three part and four-part inventions become as easy as ABC.