



Tim Rayment aims to recapture the elation he felt as a teenager in a schools orchestra.

It was my partner's idea. Eight days before Christmas, in a final act of love in a troubled relationship, Michaela sent me to a small council estate in Staffordshire. I was to drop the children at a pantomime, drive 38 miles to Stoke-on-Trent, view what could be my present and return to the theatre in time for the end of the performance.

The destination was a house with few possessions, occupied by a man with the air of a failing life. He had advertised a viola on Preloved, a classified-ads website, for £160. I had as long as it took for the Secret Seven to solve the mystery in the panto to make a decision and drive back.

The viola's bridge was collapsing. The string adjusters were seized. The vendor, Nigel, made the improbable claim that it had belonged to a player in the Hallé Orchestra. To anyone who was not in a state of uncontrolled excitement, this was a Czech factory instrument of the 1970s, a student viola that was never worth much and was now in a sorry state. I drew a bow across the only two strings that worked.

It was unplayable — but the sound made by the D-string was promising. I gave Nigel £40 more than he asked and left with the viola, two broken violins and two hairless bows. It was the first time I had owned an instrument in nearly four decades.

I did not know it, but I was answering a call felt by thousands of people in Britain in middle age. I was going to make music again.

For baby-boomers, there was plenty to lament in a British childhood. The country we grew up in spoke in whispers, was uncomfortable with emotion and did not really approve of children. But it gave us music. Councils had a budget for orchestral instruments, and at primary school in the 1960s anyone could learn to play. I chose the violin, the viola's smaller sibling, when I was nine. I switched to the viola at 15. When we started adult lives, we gave up.

The result, it turns out, is a sense of loss and longing that can lie dormant for decades. This applies even to those of us who were forced to practise, or who chose their instrument willingly but did not study it properly, as in my case.

On a train later that December day I lovingly plucked the strings of the wreck. Of course, I no longer knew how to play it. I had a vague memory that the viola uses the alto clef, rather than the treble and bass clefs used in most music, but I had no idea how the notes on the page translated into muscle movements.

But why the excitement? Where did it come from, this sense of release and quite unfamiliar joy, just from holding 15½in of worn ebony fingerboard and damaged varnish?

When the shops reopened after Christmas, I was one of the first customers through the door of the violin shop. I am going back to playing the viola after 40 years, I said.

We see a lot of returners, the proprietor said. When children start to play, a parent goes back. Then the children stop and the parent carries on, until infirmity or death. I bought a second viola, Michaela restored the first and soon I owned two.

Alan Rusbridger, the former editor of The Guardian, who was in his mid-forties when he started having piano lessons again, was able to explain what was happening to him only by reference to Carl Jung. The great psychoanalyst believed that finding a place in society — having children, advancing in status and career — “is attained only at the cost of a diminution of the personality”. The passions that defined us in youth become “dusty memories”, Jung wrote, but sometimes these memories are “glowing coals under grey ashes”. To play again is to bring the coals of personality to roaring life.

Jasper Rees, aged 39¾, fresh from divorce and sensing a midlife crisis, fished his French horn out of the attic after 22 years and, without fully comprehending why, set himself the challenge of playing a solo at the annual gathering of the British Horn Society. “I took a risk and lived, and breathed the sweet, rarefied air of utter, inner contentment,” he reported in his book on the quest, *I Found My Horn*.

It's not just men. According to Cécile Limon of Cardiff Violins, who hugged me as I broke down in her shop on the first working day of the year, tearful to be among stringed instruments even if I was incapable of playing one, there are “possibly slightly more women” who return than men.

“So many people are musical in this country,” says Limon, who grew up in France. “I'm always astounded to see how many people [in Britain] have played music as children, which I never had a chance to do. So it is quite a common thing for parents of either sex to say, ‘I want to play again.’”

In France, she adds, it is a national joke that all you can learn in school is the recorder.

I know where my drive comes from. This is about death. There is a reckoning in late middle age, a moment when life's mistakes, accumulating like errors in DNA, can be denied no longer. But reflection generates possibility as well as regret.

I cannot recapture, except in the memory, the elation and exhaustion of when my first child was born. But I can repeat one of the very few things in my 58 years that equalled it, and that is to play in an amateur orchestra.

As a teenager I played in the Sutton Schools Orchestra, which was founded by a BBC music producer, composer and conductor called Douglas Coombes.



Tim, with his violin in the Sutton Schools Orchestra, before switching to the viola at 15

It was not even a proper band when I joined it in 1972. But Coombes turned the children of a single London borough into a force credible enough to take on a concert tour of America. I was his principal viola. I stopped playing just before my A-levels and sold the viola a few years later. For the next seven years I had a recurring dream that I still played.

Other passions have faded. I have loved cars all my life. But when I was 37, roaming the Italian hills in a borrowed Ferrari, I realised to my great surprise that I was bored.

The viola — a little bigger than the violin, mellower in sound, a perfect fifth deeper in pitch, the subject of other musicians' jokes because of the perception that violists tend to be drunk or incompetent violinists — represents a different sort of love. This is not a declining passion but a repressed one.

I found a teacher six months ago in Giles Thirkettle, 33. He was an outstanding choice, who nurtures the tense technique of a student almost twice his age by exploring all the ways to turn notes into music rather than prescribing endless exercises.

“Lighter, faster, tilted, teasing bow,” I have written by bar 25 of Mendelssohn's *On Wings of Song*. “Slower, wider vibrato,” is the scribble on a moderately loud passage in Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*, and “faster vibrato” when the volume drops.

What, I ask, is the difference between teaching a child and a mature student? Enjoying it unlocks the music for both, he says, “but with the adult you can bring things into the playing because you have more life experience”. Even under my inexact pitch and lost sense of rhythm he can hear grown-up cares.

“We have seen people starting the violin in their eighties,” says Limon. “I remember a woman who said, ‘I'm going to die soon, and I have always wanted to play the violin. I can't die without having tried.’ I don't think it went very well because she was full of arthritis, but she had that burning desire.”

To play music is to live. I suppressed this truth for 40 years. I am glad I waited no longer.