



ORVIDAS

THE SOUL MIND OF

Latron Dodd's gift of perfect pitch isn't just a talent for music. It's a crack in the wall of his autism, a means by which he deals with the world around him—a world he doesn't understand, and that doesn't understand him.

 *silence*

BY AIESHA D. LITTLE
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In a small recital hall

at the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music a tall, black man sits patiently in front of a sleek Steinway piano. His instructor stands behind him, then leans over to pound a C-minor chord. This is his cue to begin playing, which he does, his long, thick fingers stroking out the delicate strains of "Ivan Sings," the first movement in Aram Khachaturian's *Adventures of Ivan*. Performed in *adagio*, the notes hang heavily in the air, filling the room with a melancholy melody. It's a great piece for a kid learning the complexities of classical music. But unlike countless students who've studied those same notes on thin sheets of music, Latron Dodd plays from memory.

For this recital, the program is filled with CCM's best preparatory students. Thus far, the audience has listened to a couple of pre-teen songstresses over-*e-nun-ci-ate*, Broadway musical-style, and dozens of little fingers tumble over piano keys in a rush of excitement and concentration. But Latron's playing is more natural; he seems unaware of the crowd. Dressed in a white dress shirt and black slacks, his eyes wander from his teacher, Betsey Zenk, who is sitting a few rows away, to the keys and back to Zenk, who smiles brightly whenever he looks in her direction. She is acutely aware of how much it takes for him to accomplish the task at hand. When he stumbles, a wave of nervous energy creeps across the room. It's full of worried parents, after all, and no one wants any of the students to perform poorly.

Latron remains calm. If he knows that something is wrong, his face doesn't show it. He doesn't look to Zenk for help, *per se*. He simply downgrades the tempo a little bit until he gets back on the right chords and ends the piece with a slow, dramatic flourish. Hopping to his feet, his hands folded as if he's praying, he arches his eyebrows and soaks up the applause from the audience. This is his room. His song.

When strangers talk to Latron, they push their eyebrows together, making a face he probably doesn't understand. Their pity is lost on him. Sometimes, people use loud voices, or get closer to him, as if this will change the way he responds to them. But he is silent, sometimes uncomfortably so. He sees them, watches them under lowered eyelids, keeps track of every move-

ment. He has a "minimal touch" rule—a quick handshake or pat on the back is acceptable, but nothing more. Occasionally, when someone reaches out to touch Latron's piano, their hands are gently moved aside. There's a protective reverence in his touch, a sense that he knows how important this instrument is, that he will not let it be handled by anyone else. It belongs to him.

The brain is a mysterious thing. Three pounds of tissue and gray matter with nodes and neurons that fire...or don't. As the engines that drive us, our brains also divide us—into neurotypical (a.k.a. "normal"), for those whose emotional drives and thought patterns are understandable and controlled; and neuroatypical (a.k.a. "not normal"), for those who do not speak or interact with others, or who can only understand the world through a complex set of self-imposed rules. By this standard, Latron Dodd is not normal. Diagnosed with autism when he was a toddler, he doesn't read or write, and barely speaks. Nevertheless, he harbors a deep passion for classical music, which he can play by ear. From Gershwin to Bach to Beethoven, Latron is able to recreate some of the most complicated musical pieces simply by hearing them a few times. How is that possible? His mother, Joyce, doesn't know. Neither does Betsey Zenk—or any of the other teachers at Clark Montessori Junior and Senior High School, where he goes to school. And from what researchers know about autism spectrum disorders (ASD), your guess is as good as anyone else's.



PIANO MAN Latron Dodd, preparing to perform at the October 2007 Association of Ohio Music Therapists Conference, held at Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church in Anderson Township.

First recognized in 1943 by Austrian psychiatrist Leo Kanner, autism is a developmental disorder that severely impairs a child's ability to communicate and interact socially. Babies who don't babble or gesture by 12 months or say single- or two-word phrases by 24 months may display the early warning signs of the illness. Emotional detachment and the inability to maintain eye contact may also sometimes signal autism.

As autistic children grow older, their levels of functionality will vary. Those who are completely non-verbal and disengaged from what's going on around them are considered "classic" autistics. They can exhibit self-injurious behavior (biting, hitting, or scratching); echolalia (repeating what other people say back to them); and what is known as "purposeless movement" (such as clapping or flapping one's arms, or rocking back and forth repeatedly). None of these behavior patterns should be confused with Asperg-

After open-heart surgeries for the murmur, she took her baby home, eager to put the ordeal behind her. And things were fine for a while, but as Latron's third birthday approached, Joyce began to worry. She was particularly bothered by the fact that he wasn't speaking like other children his age, she recalls. Having never heard of autism, she took the boy to the speech pathology department at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center to have him tested. After a series of tests, the doctor hit her with the news. It was 1991, only a few years after Dustin Hoffman's star turn in *Rain Man*, and the single mother of two faced the long, arduous process of readjusting her life to comply with the demands of her son's disorder.

Not so long ago, *Rain Man* was the only reference most people had for autism. Like Hoffman's character, Latron, now 20, has an outstanding creative impulse. But not every child with ASD does, and Joyce only discovered her

*Music is the **light switch** that flips the world on for Latron Dodd. It's his coping mechanism. But when **high school** is over, how "real" will the world become for him?*

er's Syndrome, which is often diagnosed much later than classic autism. With Asperger's, language skills aren't affected, but those with AS still have difficulty relating to their peers.

Latron's behavior seems to fit a diagnosis of "pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified" (PDD-NOS), which often overlaps with classic autism. He doesn't speak in complete sentences, hums when he's excited or upset, and has some problems in social settings, particularly when he has to deal with strangers. Still, through his piano playing, he's found another way to interact with the world around him.

As for what causes ASD, that's not clear. Some say it's genetics, or neurological damage at the cellular level. Still others think triggers can be found in a young child's environment. And there's the controversial theory that a mercury-laced preservative formerly used in childhood vaccines is the culprit. In Latron's case, perhaps low birth weight has something to do with it. Born premature, weighing one pound, 14 ounces, he was deaf in one ear (which doctors were able to correct), was hardly able to breathe on his own, and suffered from a heart murmur. He spent the first five and a half months of his life in the hospital, fighting to survive.

"He had a lot of problems," his mother says, sitting in the living room of the Kenwood apartment she shares with Latron, her eyes the same sad, round shape as her son's. "They say a one-pound baby usually doesn't make it. People always tell me I'm very blessed that he's here."

son's interest and ability in music when he was 16. For the earlier part of Latron's life, Joyce and her oldest son, Dantarius, lived with the disorder firsthand—Latron's detachment and his repetitive behaviors that, if not allowed, led to massive temper tantrums. "It was out of control," she recalls with a chuckle, having enough perspective to laugh at what once pushed her to the limit.

In the last decade or so, more and more American families have come to understand the strain the disorder can cause. The number of children being diagnosed on the spectrum has risen sharply—from two in 10,000 American children in 1998 to one in every 150 in 2007, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "The frequency with which autism is being diagnosed [in the U.S.] has gone way up in the past 10 years," says Dr. Patricia Manning-Courtney, the medical director of The Kelly O'Leary Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. The clinic did hundreds of comprehensive diagnostic evaluations last year; about half resulted in a final diagnosis of autism. "It used to be a rare occurrence that a kid came through our clinic with a very obvious diagnosis of autism," she says. "Now it is the absolute norm."

What that means for the large numbers of autistic children marching toward adulthood is unclear. According to the Ohio Revised Code, students are eligible to attend public school until the year of their 22nd birthdays, as long as they haven't received a state-endorsed diploma. This extra three or four years of • CONTINUED ON PAGE 208

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education can be helpful for kids who simply need more help transitioning into adult life. However, for special-needs students like Latron, options after high school are limited. Joyce Dodd hopes that one day he'll have the skills to function on his own. "I want him to get out with other people his own age," she says. "I don't want him to be so dependent on me."

Whether that's realistic is debatable, but according to Manning-Courtney, at this point there are too few resources to support that goal of independence—not enough group homes, therapies, and job training programs. "As a society, we're just now recognizing the importance of building in support systems for adults with disabilities, including autism," she adds. "It requires an investment of time and energy that, unfortunately, our society doesn't always see [as] the place to put its dollars. You feel for that individual who could make more of a contribution if there were more support."

It turns out Latron was lucky enough to cross paths with a patient, caring teach-

er who was more than willing to make that investment.

In the reception area outside CCM's Werner Recital Hall, Joyce Dodd and Latron stand side by side, arms touching. Parents and their children mill about as Betsey Zenk talks to a woman about Latron's love of classical music.

"Oh, that's amazing," the woman says, looking at mother and son with a plastered-on grin. Joyce gives her a weak smile as Latron eyes the refreshment table. He touches his mother's hand gently.

"What?"

He looks over his shoulder, where other recital participants are grabbing chocolate chip cookies and small cups of tropical punch.

She juts her chin toward the table. "Go on," she says, and Latron trips off.

Aside from Zenk, Joyce appears to be the only other person with whom he connects. They communicate in a special language made up of facial expressions, gestures, and monosyllabic phrases. She doesn't try to process how he sees

the world. What's the point? Will it really change how they relate to one another that much? They have found a way to communicate and that's good enough.

HOW DID ZENK know that Latron could play the piano? "I just had a hunch," she says with a shrug.

In December 2004, shortly before the long holiday break, she taught Latron a few chords by color-coding the changes with blue, green, and red stickers. It was a method she'd used before with other students but she had no idea if he would remember what she'd shown him. When he returned in January, he sat down at the piano and began picking out the beginnings of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata." The other teachers and aides were floored, but for Zenk, who had been hired at Clark Montessori as a music therapist a year earlier and had been Latron's teacher for about as long, it was an epiphany. She had found a way to use what she loved—music—to reach another student. She rushed out and found sheet music for the song and taught him how to play the

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whole piece. "That's a once-in-a-lifetime music therapist's dream," says Zenk, a University of Iowa graduate with degrees in oboe performance and music therapy. "That doesn't happen that often."

Before meeting her, Latron tended to fly into rages. His mother had learned to deal with the constant calls from the school telling her that Latron was in trouble again. He once ripped a teacher's shirt for trying to turn off the classroom computer while he was still using it. Taking care of him during the day and working the overnight shift at Madeira Health Care Center was exhausting. "I would have to spank him sometimes and take his goodies away from him," says Joyce, a nurse's assistant. "It was a mess."

Joyce's days of simply coping are behind her now. "She [Zenk] told me that in music class, he seemed to like the piano and it just went from there," she continues. "He just started changing. He calmed down and he's more grown up."

Latron now walks to the school bus by himself and helps her carry groceries. Those may seem like small tasks, but for

him, they are milestones. Watch him with Joyce or Betsey and you can see that he is interacting with his world, using cues that they can read: Squeezing someone's wrist means he's getting frustrated, a constant low hum means he's anxious, a higher-pitched hum means he's happy. When strangers come too close, they'll hear him say "get back" in a sing-song voice, which he repeats over and over again until they've moved away from him. It's one of the few times he ever speaks.

"When I first met him, all he did was growl," Zenk says. "He's gained so much independence. And it's all been because of the music lessons."

After completing a master's in oboe performance at CCM in 2002, Zenk did contract music therapy for a private practice in the suburbs and worked with kids at Over-the-Rhine's Peaslee Neighborhood Center for a year before a Clark administrator contacted her about teaching at the school. Zenk intended to play the oboe for a living before discovering her interest in music therapy. "I realized it was more important for me to help oth-

ers make music and find a way to express themselves than it was for me to just play for other people," she says.

When Clark dropped its music therapist position a couple of years ago, they asked Zenk to stay on as a special education teacher; she still functions as a de facto therapist, though, working music into her lessons with each of her 22 students. "When you're a person with a disability, your ways of communicating are so limited," she says. "[So] helping them find the creative process, it's just more meaningful work to me than playing in an orchestra."

At the moment, Zenk is sitting outside of her classroom in CCM's Mary Emery Hall, where she teaches adapted guitar for 15 rowdy prep students with special needs—an expanded version of the "Intro to Music Therapy" course she used to teach at Clark. Latron works as her accompanist during the class, playing the piano while she teaches her students the words and chords for songs like "Frosty the Snowman," "The Monster Mash," and "Love Potion #9." Here, students in

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the college's music education program get course credit for helping her.

"I love Betsey," says Tricia Ettinger, whose son, Zach, is in Zenk's guitar class. Like other parents, the Sharonville resident is happy to see her son's ability to interact with others improving with each class. "As a parent you just hold your breath and hope that your kid does what's expected of him," she adds. "Some of those kids would be hard for me to handle. But they respect her."

With Latron supplying the melody, the students have given a fall performance at a music therapists' conference, done choreographed dance numbers to Christmas songs at Tower Place Mall, and sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a Xavier University women's basketball game. But having Latron back her up wasn't enough for Zenk. She wanted to develop his talent in its own right, so she convinced CCM to give him a scholarship, which pays for his private lessons with a piano instructor. Takako Hayase, who mainly teaches Latron how to use the proper fingering when he plays, was leery when Zenk first approached her, but since she began working with Latron two years ago, she's learned that education goes both ways.

"It definitely opened up my views on teaching students with disabilities," says Hayase, who presented her research on working with autistic students at this year's Music Teachers National Association conference in Denver. "I didn't think it was possible. I'm learning to be patient and I'm also more confident in taking students with autism in the future."

Hayase's experience is at once a ray of hope and an austere reminder—it's one small step toward inclusion, mainstreaming, independent life, understanding each other, but it also reveals the enormous gulf that remains.

...C D7 G Em A7 D...

From a tiny classroom on the second floor of Clark Montessori, one phrase of "The Star-Spangled Banner" reverberates down the hall. Betsey Zenk's students are scheduled to sing the piece in less than a month at the Cintas Center before an XU women's basketball game, but Latron's still having trouble with a few parts. Like the part that goes "that our flag was still there...." Latron knows that he is in charge of the song's tempo,

but he also understands that if he forgets what comes next during the performance, the students he's accompanying won't wait for him to catch up; they'll keep singing rather than stop in the middle of the song. So he must get it right.

...C D7 G Em A7 D...

"Closer. Do it again." Zenk looks at him and waits for him to put his fingers on the right keys. "One, two..."

...C D7 G Em A7 D...

"Again."

...C D7 G Em A7 D...

"We gotta work on that spot."

Latron grunts in protest, a guttural hum escaping his lips.

"I know, I know, but it gets better every time you do it."

...C D7 G Em A7 D...

He plays it over and over and over until his fingering is just right. At the end of the song, Zenk gives him a high five and lets him play a piece that he taught himself. It's a slow, moody tune from one of the many CDs he listens to on a daily basis. As he plays, his lips curl slightly at the corners.

THE SCHOOL YEAR ended unceremoniously, a welcome break from the hectic pace Zenk had been keeping up. She took her Clark students and classroom helpers to Winton Woods for a picnic to thank them for all of their hard work, and Latron gave his last performance of the school year at CCM's Merit Festival, in which piano prep students get feedback from judges on items like musicality, technique, sound, and rhythm. Performing Gershwin's "Three Quarter Blues," an upbeat piece with a ragtime feel, Latron received great marks, all "fair"s and "good"s from this year's scorers. "I personally think he could've gotten a couple of 'outstanding's, but oh well," Zenk says.

"Good rhythm," one said. "Listen to the sounds when you use the pedal... make sure you change when you have different chords," commented another.

"They judged him as a typical student, recommending things like he imagine conducting a choir after learning each part," Zenk adds. "To get comments like that, he was definitely treated as a typical student, not a student with autism."

Of course, it's not as if he'll magically begin to understand and apply these comments on his own. He may never be able

to do any of this without help from Zenk or someone else. For the moment, music is the light switch that flips the world on for him. It's his coping mechanism. But when high school is over, how "real" will the world become for him and other special-needs students?

"It's a really scary prospect," says Manning-Courtney of Cincinnati Children's Hospital. "With the numbers of children who are being diagnosed increasing over the past 10 years, all of these kids are growing up. They're going to become adults. I wish that everyone was going to be cured, but the reality is that they're not."

A cure. No one knows what that looks like. It's been 65 years since autism was discovered and it may take another 65 years to cure it, if that's even possible. While Latron spent most of the school year participating in the Easter Seals Work Resource Center's work adjustment program—where he learned to package kits of Band-Aids, cotton swabs, and test tubes that go to local doctors' offices and clinics, the type of employment he'd likely end up doing well with the aid of a job coach—Zenk hopes that music will continue to be a part of his life, even after he is no longer under her watchful eye.

"Any other kid with that type of skill would be going to a conservatory," she says. "I would like to see him get a job that has something to do with music." When asked how that could be possible, her eyes light up. She's spontaneously plotting the future, thinking of all of the possibilities that would exist for her students if there were enough time and money and volunteers to make all of it happen. One well-placed contact, one selfless benefactor, and in two years, when Latron graduates from Clark, who knows what he could be capable of?

"I know this piano tutor whose wife is a music therapist, so he has an understanding of people with disabilities," she says excitedly. "I would love to somehow be able to find the money to pay him to work with Latron and see if he could be an apprentice and get work that way—"

Her voice trails off. Maybe she's realizing how tough the road ahead will be. She shrugs. "I don't know," she says. "I just do what I can to try to keep the music going now."

And for Latron, "now" is really all that matters. 