

A CALLING FOR A CONVERT

By Helena Hannonen



Shortly after I was baptized at the age of 10 in Lappeenranta, Finland, I received my first Church calling. It was 1960, and our small branch desperately needed someone to accompany the hymns for sacrament meetings. I was asked to fulfill this assignment.

While my mother had always encouraged my brother and me to pursue artistic talents, I did not know how to play the piano, and we did not own a piano. But I wanted to fulfill my calling, so we made a plan.

In family home evening, we talked about what this calling meant to all of us. However, because my mother was a widow with two young children, we knew it would be a great challenge for us to





I was a new convert and had no piano-playing skills. But how grateful I am for my life-changing call as branch accompanist.

purchase a piano and pay for lessons. We decided that we were all willing to make the needed sacrifices.

The first sacrifice my family made was financial. We decided that from spring to autumn we would ride our bicycles rather than the bus. My brother, Martti, was courageous and became especially good at biking—even on snow and ice. I gave up most of my clothing purchases and learned to sew. We also learned to live providently. We started a garden in the countryside near my grandparents' house and preserved food for the winter. Our "vacations" became our mother's trips to the temple in Switzerland or picnics and camps close to home.

The second sacrifice my family made was with time. We divided the chores and rescheduled our other activities and homework so I had enough time to practice the piano. Because of our sacrifices and hard work, Mother often remarked that we had no free time to get into trouble like others our age. In reality, my calling became a family calling long before I ever played a note.

I began taking lessons with a music teacher at the local school. I practiced using a paper keyboard and on a piano at the church. When my piano teacher moved away, we purchased his piano, and I was accepted to study with a renowned piano teacher in the area.

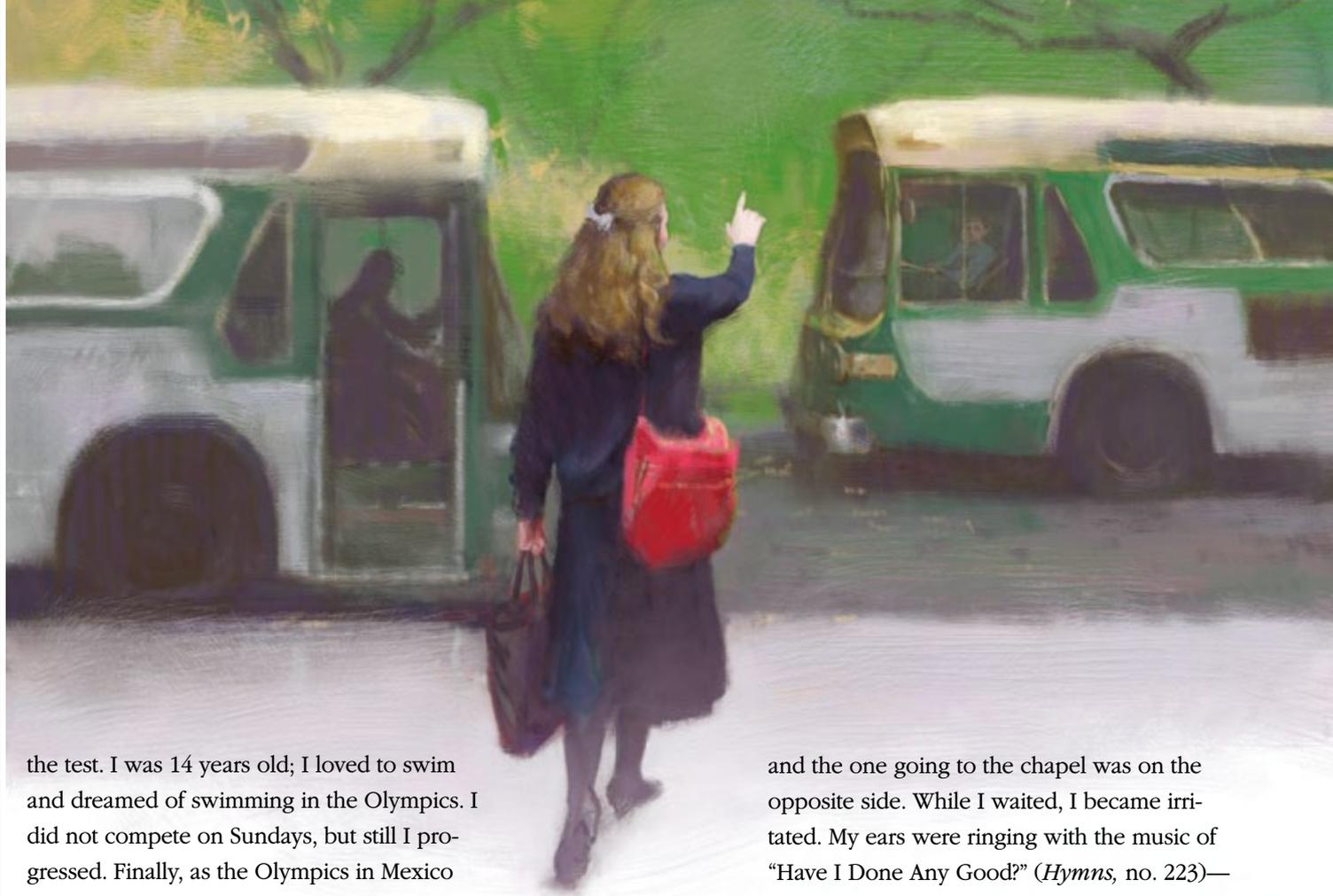
I learned the hymns on my own and practiced a lot with the branch music director. Everyone encouraged me—even if a "sour" note slipped in. My teacher was horrified after she found out that I played in front of people

before I had thoroughly learned and memorized the pieces. But playing with one hand was better than having no music at all.

I rode my bike to my lessons, and when winter came, I tried to walk or ski if possible. On Sundays I walked alone to Church meetings so I could arrive an hour early and have time to practice. I resolved to ride the bus only when temperatures reached below -15°C (5°F). Rain and snow didn't really bother me; time went by quickly as I walked because I had so many beautiful hymns to keep me company. As I walked, I was crossing the plains with the pioneers (see "Come, Come, Ye Saints," *Hymns*, no. 30), walking high on the mountain top in Zion (see "High on the Mountain Top," *Hymns*, no. 5), and standing with youth who would never falter (see "True to the Faith," *Hymns*, no. 254). I could never falter with that support—even though my family and I were the only Latter-day Saints in our community in eastern Finland, in the shadows of the Russian border.

Over the years I became better at playing and could make music rather than just play the right notes. I learned to be prayerful in selecting the music so the Spirit would be in the meeting. And most important, my testimony of the gospel came to me through music. I could easily recall the feelings, words, and messages of the hymns if I ever questioned something. I knew that the gospel principles and ordinances were true, having learned them line upon line and note after note.

I remember one particular day when my commitment to those principles was put to



the test. I was 14 years old; I loved to swim and dreamed of swimming in the Olympics. I did not compete on Sundays, but still I progressed. Finally, as the Olympics in Mexico City were approaching, a coach invited me to participate in special training.

The training, however, was every Sunday morning during Sunday School. I rationalized that I could go to practice and miss Sunday School because I would be back at church in time for the evening sacrament meeting. I saved for the bus fare and planned everything. The Saturday before the first training, I told my mother of my plan.

I saw the sadness and disappointment in her eyes, but her only reply was that the decision was mine and I had been taught what was right. That night I could not get the words to “Choose the Right” (*Hymns*, no. 239) out of my mind. The words sounded in my head like a broken record.

On Sunday morning, I had my swim bag in one hand and my music bag in the other, hoping to lead my mother to believe I was going to church. I went outside to the bus stop. It so happened that the bus stop going to the swimming hall was on my side of the street

One bus would take me to my Church calling, the other to my childhood dream of world-class swimming. The phrases of hymns I had played so many times provided my answer.

and the one going to the chapel was on the opposite side. While I waited, I became irritated. My ears were ringing with the music of “Have I Done Any Good?” (*Hymns*, no. 223)—the hymn planned for Sunday School that day. I knew from experience that, with the difficult rhythm, complicated lyrics, and high notes, this hymn would become a disaster without strong accompaniment.

As I was deliberating, both buses approached. The bus to the swimming hall stopped for me, and the driver of the bus to the church stopped and looked at me, puzzled because he knew I always took his bus. We all stared at each other for a few seconds. What was I waiting for? I had chosen the Lord (see “Who’s on the Lord’s Side?” *Hymns*, no. 260). I had promised to go where He wanted me to go (see “I’ll Go Where You Want Me to Go,” *Hymns*, no. 270). My decision to keep the commandments had been made long before (see “Keep the Commandments,” *Hymns*, no. 303).

Before my brain caught up with my heart, my body took over. I made a mad dash across the street and waved the other bus driver on. I paid the fare and went to the back of the bus

headed to the church, watching my swimming dreams drive in the opposite direction.

Everyone thought I cried that day because I felt the Spirit. But really I cried because my childhood dream had just come crashing down and because I was ashamed that I had even entertained the idea of swimming on the Sabbath. But that Sunday, like those before and after, I fulfilled my calling.

By the time I was ready to go to college, I had trained several branch members to lead the music and play the piano. In college I continued to play the piano and took organ lessons. I thought my chance of going to Latin America was gone forever when I gave up competitive swimming, but after I completed my master's degree at Brigham Young University, I served a mission to Colombia. While on my mission, I taught piano lessons. I wanted to leave those Saints with the gift of music. Children and youth of Colombia walked miles in the hot sun to have the opportunity to learn to play the piano. They too started with one hand until they progressed to play with both hands. And they made more sacrifices than I did in their efforts to learn to play the piano.

It has been more than 50 years since I was baptized. I have traveled far and wide from my home in Finland, but no matter where I've gone, there has always been a need for someone to play the hymns. The universal language of music has built bridges of understanding and love in many places.

On my mission to Colombia, I taught piano lessons. Children and youth walked miles in the hot sun to learn, making great sacrifices to obtain the gift of music.

Today my hands are slow and arthritic. Many more capable musicians have taken my place. My mother often feels sad as she looks back at my early years in the Church and the sacrifices I made, the miles I walked, and the things I went without. She fears that the cold contributed to my arthritis. However, I wear my "battle scars" with joy. I poured my joys and sorrows into music. I learned to laugh and cry through my fingers.

My heart sings with gratitude when I think that Heavenly Father and my leaders cared enough to ask a young girl to fulfill such a challenging assignment. That calling helped me gain a firm understanding of the gospel and allowed me to help others feel the Spirit through music. I am living proof that new converts need a calling—even little girls with no skill at the piano. Through my first calling, I discovered that with God nothing is impossible and that He has a plan and a purpose for each of His children. And through music, I gained an unshakable testimony of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. ■

