

PIANIST LOST:
SUNKEN CATHEDRALS



THE HIMALAYA SESSIONS
VOLUME 2

PIANIST LOST:
SUNKEN
CATHEDRALS

Annotated by
Peter Halstead

THE ADRIAN BRINKERHOFF COMPANY

KAILUA · SEATTLE



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Also by Peter Halstead

Pianist Lost (The Himalaya Sessions, Vol. 1)

Sea Sun

Blinds

Into the Window (Blurb.com)

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The Himalaya Sessions (Albany Records)

This is mostly a true story, although names and chronologies have been altered to protect people who might be sensitive to having their lives and motives revealed through intimate diaries which have been obtained under strictures permissible in certain Asian countries. I have been made aware that inclusion of too much detail here could lead to misunderstandings as to the veracity of the former statements. There's always something.

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Music criticism should be to music what
ornithology is to birds.

– Yuja Wang

Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools,
to be precise and perfect in all their actions.

If you will have that precision out of them, and make
their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels,
and their arms strike curves like compasses,
you must unhumanize them.

– *The Nature of Gothic*, John Ruskin

For everybody who is very passionate about life and what
he or she is doing, time is running out.

[Legendary violinists] were not only glamorous soloists,
but very thorough musicians, and with sincerity and integ-
rity as artists that is difficult to find these days. [Heifetz]
pushed himself to the edge, and you hear him struggle, and
that is what music is about.

It needs the struggle, the human component. I don't care
if something goes wrong, as long as it goes wrong out of
passion. For me that is what music making is all about:
bringing the depth and intensity of the composer back
to the stage.

– Anne-Sophie Mutter, from an interview in
The New York Times, February 1, 2009

SUNKEN CATHEDRALS

*On *The Sea of Ice**

What dank and ageless bell,
Hung from phantom rope
In the tide's cyclonic spell,
Drowns the wind beyond all hope;

What bay of hell at ocean's bend,
Its ghostly music turned to haze,
Ringing in the planet's end,
Haunts our flapping summer days;

What ancient worlds of flailing waves
Slide and improvise
With the tossing shipwrecks of our graves,
Whose vaguely human monsters rise

Like gargoyles on a roof,
Their cynic lips thrust out,
Mute, mistaken, and aloof,
Endlessly condemned to doubt

The dazzling phosphorescent shoal
Of the singing sea's black hole.

Red Lodge, Montana

July 29-30

August 3-4, 2012

SUNKEN CATHEDRALS - NOTE

What unconscious monsters spout from raging sleep, rattling the sheets on a sinking bunk, ringing the blood's bell, lightning flashing on the bedposts?

What primal kraken erupt from dreams to whirl us to our raves?

How temptingly the flickers play around the windows, the static whispers on the wall, the roiled pillows turn translucent.

What canopies burst from sodden understories? What heavens breed beneath the leaves?

Water is a bursting scaffold, a skein of microscopic skeletons.

In simple tides lie the ebb and flow of galaxies.

Black holes are the drains of dimensions, lined with time.

Behind each wave lie the errors of orbits, the precession of nodes.

Novas are imploded stars; music is a collapsed prism.

Gargoyles, failed angels, sink into hell because they cannot believe in heaven.

Early film was a negative of the world, resurrected by light.

Around the edges of sinking ships floats treasure.

Wormholes are windows into calmer worlds.

Music is a sandbar waiting to surface.

Hidden under any shoal is an island.

Mathematicians find worlds in numbers; musicians build suns from notes.

We only find what we know is there.

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INTERPOL WANTS YOU TO KNOW

Here are 9 pieces which imitate the various guises of water. They are unaffected and beautiful boat songs. The Chopin Barcarolle, while a breakthrough in the lengths to which a gondolier will go in making a point, is inherently simple.

Included are many excuses for playing such music, for playing classical music, and for playing music at all.

There are excerpts as well from the biography loosely affiliated with this six-part series of performances, in which the pianist perhaps understandably kills himself (after the recordings), or at least disappears into the high-mountain mists rather than return to face the music. He was never meant for criticism.

The pianist Adriance Van Wyck Brinkerhoff spent the last of what had been a vast inheritance to bring a piano into the high valleys of the Himalayas. He was accompanied by a sound engineer, a piano technician, and several ordinary trekkers.

Events conspired, as eulogists often say, to provide more of his life and insights than the pianist possibly might have wanted. As no line of descendancy has been established, I, the editor into whose purview these documents have, I admit, somewhat circuitously arrived, have nonetheless taken the liberty of countermanding the pianist's Gothic predilections in assembling candid interviews with both his paid and accidental companions, along with his own damaged diary, into what will ultimately be a thorough portrait of Brinkerhoff's progress from a dashing prodigy in a privileged world to a beaten-down maniac intent on

destroying every trace of his tortured existence, including these six albums.

Volume III will include more complex water music.

I include a second version of one Debussy piece, on the theory that different performance values on different days produced an entirely separate piece.

I have furthermore eliminated every cumbersome reference other than to title and author, as interested readers can now easily find many printings, online texts, and price points on Google, Amazon, abebooks, etc.

Peter Halstead

MORE EXCUSES

To explain myself more than usual, not that I am the subject of this compilation, but only the compiler who, in the course of things, has allowed certain of my own jettisons to drift into the general flotsam of the frozen Himalayan sea which is our small-fonted world, a sea which once inundated the high ridges with its uncontrollable seiche, and which survives here and there in the high glaciers and water-forced crevasses; but I see I have drifted off point already, and that is precisely the point: that among the obvious jottings discovered here and there, flushed from abandoned apartment drawers whose transient socks and shirts and irate, half-dressed mannikins stood guard at the crux of discovery over hidden, smudged, and yet iridescent linings; or bundled and brandished out of a buried, rigid knapsack pushed by defective orbital sways to the very edge of a ten-thousand-foot drop whose blackened bergschrund would have immersed both notes and tapes, scribbled regrets and bandaged tones, in the same centerfuge, the central fugue of ice and air pounding down into endless soggy caves, unknown pre-worlds mantled in the molten crust on whose jagged upthrust carapace we base our baseless sense of place, of home and town, roller coasters, tidal waves, and moonlight—once again I have drifted off message, reminded by waves and moons that some of the scribblings here reproduced in misrepresentative, neatly standardized channels of type-set characters directly pertain to the magically materialized musical interludes presented here on equally illusory plastic discs, those vast galactic echoes of logarithmically generated chimes and drones forced into arbitrary shapes by acci-

dents of whim and wind, memorized by deluded fugitives, and mirrored by fictive machines whose general-store grab bag of wires, pads, sticks, and boards produces a deficient simulacrum of those northern sounds and lights—and that some of those creaking dirges refer instead to my own crushed ship wrapped in the arctic ice, which seem to have been whirled into the eddy of the lumbering tides merely out of proximity to the more intrinsic devastation of the night.

What I am trying to say is that some might protest that I abuse my own simple role as last man standing to intrude my self-serving claims, like people who write long books about once having, for a few pages, met the Beatles, but all I can say is that history is written by the finders, the antique dealers and morticians, and that in order to see the dwarf, you have to pay the barker, no matter how plaid his pants, and untrustworthy his howls. I trust I make myself obscure.

WATER MUSIC 1

O linden bough, O leaves,
Teach us your intervals:
Our strings are strung so false . . .
– Archibald MacLeish,
“The Linden Bough”

We poor drowning¹ species, frozen between the axes of planets,² between the dark tilt of equators, precessing nodes,³ rising waters, time forwards and time back,⁴ visible and hidden colors, heard and unhearable sounds, in our discordant race to the edges, cut off from deeper music⁵ by poor diet and bad hearing, immersed in our own thrashing while around us cathedrals rise,⁶ inheritors of wrong notes⁷, an unmetred sky,⁸ and monstrous mistakes, what can we offer to the harmony of worlds but our own imitations; how would we talk to trees but through their own

1. “Till human voices wake us, and we drown . . .” – the last line of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” T. S. Eliot

2. Between day and night, both anchored and pulled apart by magnetism.

3. Which shift our calendar dates and trick our naive watches due to minor orbital wobbles.

4. And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back.

You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure,
That time is no healer: the patient is no longer here.

– T. S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages* (although many people remember it from the film *Labyrinth*)

5. No tinkling music-box can play
The slow, deep-grounded masses of the year.

– “A Courtyard Thaw,” Richard Wilbur.

6. *The Sunken Cathedral*, Claude Debussy.

7. *A Map of Misreading*, Harold Bloom.

8. *The Untuning of the Sky*, John Hollander.

sounds, by making pictures of streams⁹ and songs of leaves broken into cries for mercy? Save us, heal us, we have seen the fire in the sky and heard the rain on the water and we have made it into mirrors, to hold in front of powers in the woods: see us, spare us. So the gods who rustle in their seats will finally, finally listen, will feel the aurora before they die in silence. We make these songs for you, to save you from the endless, colorless depths, where there is no warmth, no light.

Music is frozen sky, pulled down to ground like lightning out of rhyming magnetism and cosmic lights; water is that same sky thawed, cut open, released on earth, notes turned from air into molecules weighted with rain. As clouds unleash their store on the earth, music rains its sounds on the mind. As oceans vaporize into clouds which then coagulate into weather, so notes weigh on the mind until they drop into the troposphere of hearing. Vast cosmic forms are thus translated into graspable norms. The unholdable realm of hydrogen and oxygen becomes a repeatable event you can breathe.

We tame our worlds by describing them. We mimic wind in the trees, cars in traffic, monsters. But as the world grows busier, and more distant, the urge to define the elements of our existence has faded, or the presence of those elements has been eclipsed by frequencies, by circuitry, the repetitive on and off of synthesizers and transistors.

There was a quieter world 150 years ago where gondolas, fountains, waves, rain in gutters were a link to the

9. And this our life, exempt from human haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.
– William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II, i, 17–19.

cosmos, where the lap and swash of harbor tides was an onomatopoeia of dread or love, where canals and rivers kept the sounds of nature focused, while today we have the wash of jets, the surf of roads, the breeze of ductwork, the thunder of subways, machines on top of machines, a sensory overload of mechanical clangs before we even make it to the park. No modern man would dare bring up a bouquet or a sprinkler to elicit wonder. The moment has passed, deafened by bombs.

Maybe we are far enough away from the myopia¹⁰ of Impressionism to reconsider the more modern reflections that ripples make against piers, the symmetries between sand and silicon as sea skitters on a glassy shore, the Cantor sets of increasingly smaller mirror images that recede into infinity as waves echo waves, as echoes map the human heart: new ways of listening to the smallest parts of the world late at night, after the engines of the Krell¹¹ shut down. We can revisit the ricochet of the natural world off our metallic cars, hear new algorithms, new riddles in the boredom of downpours, modern comfort in the cataclysms of hail, or the Armageddon of a faucet which urban poets must master on their way to a deeper, floating world, masked in plastic novelties. Sometimes the only answer to a new plague comes from old rituals locked in swamps, and holy men must surf in sewers, the way Tamino must endure the perverse initiation rites of Freemasons to unlock the magic flute's redemptive keys.¹²

10. Monet painted without his glasses to capture the poetry of blurred colors, the way he saw them.

11. *Forbidden Planet*, 1956, screenplay by Cyril Hume.

12. Schikaneder's libretto to *The Magic Flute*, music by W. A. Mozart.

So the visionaries, the futurists of ancient countries offer these ancient runes to calm modern seas, to muffle adult grief in grade school snow, to cover solar roofs with rainy film noir nights, to rock the rental barque in the comfortable sway of tides caught in passing¹³ from the other side of the world.

13. A chess term, en passant, where presumptuous two-stepping pawns are captured as they skip a space.

MY FIRST PIANO

Brains that cannot deal with the cuneiforms of complex notation simply pass by the piano, the cello, the dictionary, and head outdoors for the neighborhood baseball game, frozen in the gnat-filled amber miasma of summer evenings.

Brains left behind at the spinet would have been brutalized by the din, the tag, the slides, the innings and outs of the great outdoors, and are better off in the carrell or on the leather bench of photographic memory.

I was one of thousands of lemming-like robots shuffling into the kiddie concert corner, the vast environment of our obsession etched forever into the silver nitrate of our brain pans like so many Ray Atkesons, Eugène Atgets, or Ansel Adamses.

Not only do we know all the Beethoven sonatas, the Mozart sonatas, the tiny sonatinas of Kuhlau, Clementi, Scarlatti, the Debussy Etudes, Chopin Préludes, and Fauré Nocturnes, but we know Hanon and Czerny scales, Verdi scores, Liszt transcriptions. We know every scratch on our first pianos, the fall of the afternoon on every foxed, yellowing waltz, the teacher's hasty scribble and exclamation point on those missed staccati, the lean of the books in the bookcase, the precise quadrant, line and page, minute and day where we first met the word "etiolate," the hum of the mower outside, the hymn of the washing machine inside, the chunk of a distant duct, the vast empty hiss of the hibernating house, parentless, populated only by machines and slants of dust-filled sun through the Orangeaded saran wrap of the leaden windows.

Such blotters as young minds are soak up every false

step of the knuckle, every tumble of the thumb, the dirty fingerprints of the ivories, whorls and smudges of undisciplined earth which humanize otherwise suave and slippery identities into recognizable characters. Lamplight takes on the same fiendish shade as yellow hemp in old paperbacks.

All scores are footnoted¹ with the honks, tinkles, thuds of Gershwin or Grofé memorized instantly, surrounded by their accompanying piano notes, a neighborhood of hammering trivia structured by the rigor of a fugue into commonsense, childhood given purpose, life composed, the postcard diorama of the picture window and its juvenile recreations turned into Constables by the infinitely mesmerizing creations above the soporific keybed, infantile lawns and rogue sprinklers put to sleep and tucked in cozily by an understanding C chord, bird yodels decoyed into mathematical proofs of divine intercession by the circle of fifths.

Every life is organized by the obsessions of the observer, so that a chemist tastes recombinant molecules in a fish, or a painter finds spectral rainbows in the spectrum of a water glass. Consumptive, compulsive poets sense sparking electrodes in consonants, bubbling lava in vowels, a planet prearranged, ordained by alphabets, as much as senseless schools are magically materialized from the empty hats of algebra books, pop-up phantoms sprung from flat pages by the sheer opening of a book, sea monsters plumped and validated when dumped into a seemingly lifeless glass of transparent water, popcorns sprung from underestimated kernels.

1. Or maybe footnotes are scored.

So, at first sight, not love, but the first and only page of John Thompson's aimless and pathetic kindergarten song, a bumbling novella of doomed notes which come to a bad end as soon as they step off the porch, the confusing exchange of bumping hands and unknown fingers that make up two seconds of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" in the wrong key, is etched into the floodlit quartz of fame by the promiscuous photons of the baby brain, the sluttish over-eager carbons of the naive cortex, determined to make a good first impression on the dawn, to put its best foot forward into the photovoltaic miasma of the electrical super-storm, the hail and mud of the raining brain.

Charles-Valentin Alkan: Barcarolle, Opus 65, No. 6, from *Troisième recueil de chants*, G Minor, 1844. G. Schirmer, ed. Raymond Lewenthal.

My first boat song is in fact the most ethereal, the lapping of the canals elevated to a more general lilt which suggests a traditional Venetian barcarolle without being one. Rather than the syncopated pause of sprung rhythms, the dependable pull of the oars, Alkan substitutes an oscillating figure with no gaps in it, no hesitations or silences between slaps and swashes, but a constant *moto perpetuo* which, while never stopping, connotes all the eccentric sways and yaws of a Venetian barque.

And rather than the pure children's melodies of Mendelssohn or Liszt, Alkan's gypsy harmonies become jazzy, sexy, as if, like a Magritte or a Dalí, they reach outside the picture frame to adjust the hook, disturbing the illusion of purity or symmetry with trumpet scoops out of Ravel's *Bolero*. The constant flow of the arpeggios creates a cozy world of dependable regularity, like John Adams' Phrygian Gates, in which small figures jump out to shake the mood. After the later rhythmic innovations of Stravinsky in the 1910's and Gershwin in the 1920's, or even Satie and Ravel in the 1890's, I still find the intrusions unsettling, and they must have been even more so in 1844.

These invasions imitate Jewish folk song melismas, and seem to thumb their nose at the traditional tonalities of the rest of the piece. Alkan suffered under the anti-semitism prevalent in European society in general to this day, and had enough money to squirrel himself away from society, as Glenn Gould did in his day. Genius rarely knows enough to protect itself against the vulgarians who are its instinc-

tual enemy. Hawthorne's short story, "The Artist of the Beautiful," is a classic example of genius abused by mediocrity, as is John Hersey's novel, *The Child Buyer*.

A barcarolle is a rolling song sung in a bark, a barge, or a barca lunga, a longer sailing ship, by a barcarolo, or gondolier. As a rower has a strong pull back followed by an airy lunge forward into the rowing position, the uneven beat of a barcarolle imitates that sprung rhythm, a schizophrenic combination of male and female, a dichotomy of high and low, in the nonjudgemental vocabulary of music. A philosopher might make much of the contrasts, but an oarsman only rows, Charon ferrying the dead into Hades.

In Alkan's mirror-image song, both left and right hands take up the same notes and rhythm, sometimes together, sometimes in syncopation.

Alkan is here imitating a gondolier from Naples, rather than Venice, although the sudden drops from a pleasant harmony to a guttural gypsy wail indicate Venice's closeness to Slovenia, Bosnia, and Macedonia.

Helen Vendler talks about the first and second orders in Wallace Stevens, where the poet hides his first-hand experience behind a higher and more distant level of language or more acceptable experience.¹

The urge to write a boat song may be as simple as a love of sea air, or the whack of rigging against the sails, or the wash of tide against the belly of a scull. But the melancholy ebb and flow of a gondola song is more of a resignation to a tragic life, interspersed with polluted sparkles. Hidden behind its palatable and understandable vocabulary of traditional Italian lovelorn pathos is a deeper ocean of anxiety, dread, dislocation. Its more frightening vocabu-

1. *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire*, by Helen Vendler.

lary is an attempt to map the emotions, rather than Venice or Naples. As Stevens says:

It matters, because everything we say
Of the past is description without place, a cast
Of the imagination, made in sound.²

Alkan was very short, heavily bearded, a master Bunbryist. If someone came to the front door, he went out the back. The butler instructed always to say, Monsieur Alkan is not at home, even sometimes by accident to the very people Alkan was dying to see, leading to a frenzied chase around Paris as Alkan tried to find his unfairly banished friend.

All his politicking had come to nothing, and he was passed over as director of the piano department of the Paris Conservatoire for a man he considered a last-minute non-entity. Despite being the greatest composer in Paris now that Chopin was dead, and friends with George Sand, Liszt, Hiller, Ambroise Thomas (composer of the opera *Hamlet*, among others), Delacroix, Victor Hugo, Alkan's nemesis (Marmontel) had one friend, Auber, which was enough. In any case, Alkan never maintained his friendships, and had no temperament for dependable appearances in public in any case. Marmontel went on to teach Bizet and Debussy (it might have been Alkan, and both composers might have turned out very differently).

But if caught out in one of his evasions, Alkan would be very charming, explaining that he himself had nothing important to say, and didn't want to impose on his would-be visitor. When Prince Orloff tried to help him gain the Légion d'Honneur, Alkan avoided him until he lost inter-

2. "Description without Place," by Wallace Stevens.

est. My own teacher was very much like that. Bitter over being ignored, when he finally achieved the pinnacle, a week devoted to his playing all the Beethoven sonatas and concerti what what amounted to a festival dedicated to him alone, he canceled at the last minute, destroying his career and cementing his belief that the world wanted to ignore him.

Alkan's greatest achievement was his own death, crushed by his bookcase while reaching for the Talmud, which by custom must have no other books above it, and this be the highest on the shelf. William Eddie improbably claims his umbrella stand killed him. I had an old friend who was killed while standing on a couch adjusting his Monet, a connoisseur in death as in life. And there is Lully, hoist on his own pétard, or rather killed by his own baton, which hit him in the foot and gave him blood poisoning. Batons in those days were larger than walking sticks and you would stamp them on the ground so the musicians could hear you. Or Isadora Duncan, strangled by her hand-painted Chatov scarf as she drove off in the elegant Amilcar convertible of her friend Falchetto. Her last words were, "Farewell, my friends, I'm off to love." Some reports indicated she was hurled from the car by the scarf, which wrapped around the wheel spokes. Gertrude Stein remarked, "Affectations can be dangerous." (I will differ later on.) Or Fritz Wunderlich, who fell down the stairs. Or most impressively, Horowitz, who sat down in a chair in his living room after playing the piano, closed his eyes, and died. Or Robert Maxwell, who was drowned by Mossad frogman whom he expected to be bringing him blackmail funds.

Alkan's death was a dénouement to his lifelong sick-

ness, invented or not, which fed his isolation and creativity, Proust-like, much as it did Glenn Gould's. Gould predicted the date of his death; his seemingly eccentric habits of wearing overcoats and scarves in the Bahamas, in the summer, kept his routines insulated against distracting voices, keeping his eye always on the clock he knew was ticking. Like Alkan's, his behavior was desperately designed as a protective shell to carry his gifts as far as possible through the narrow straits of his body.

Great artists know what they have to do in a short period of time. A novelist knows which books he or she will write, a poet knows how many poems must be written and corrected before night, a painter instinctively knows when the painting will stop. Rossini's operas written, he relaxed into evenings of cards and days of banal piano miniatures; he outlived his gift.

A genius knows that there are only seven years left, a poem every three days, rewrites for a week, meaning ten days per poem, 2,555 days to do it in, 555 of them given over to the necessary pattering that shelters the id from the realities which would discourage its absurd pretensions, the affectations necessary to buffer greater visions from the world, and so in 2,000 days at 10 days per perfected poem, only 200 poems can be properly written. Assuming you waste your life until you amass enough experience to make writing meaningful, and begin at forty, and live to sixty-eight, you have four times 200 poems, or 800 poems you can successfully chaperone to posterity. This, as a poet, is what you focus on, while you lead society a merry chase, hiding all along your morbid knowledge of why you have cheated death so many times on the highway, in the bars, in the alleys. You are being protected, you know, for the

work. And you owe your protectors, whatever they may be, a great debt. There is a pact between you and death that a certain goal must be achieved, not necessarily one of round numbered rhymes, but certain revelations must be achieved and pinned down before you will be let go to play cards. As Grimaud says of Gould: "... no time to stop, no time to breathe, *presto*, forging ahead, even faster, the desire to prematurely reach the end . . ."³

Alkan's music is as antisocial and quirky as the man. It was symptomatic of his reclusive nature, disinclined to cater to his audience, which made it possible for Alkan to achieve what he had to, and yet his achievement took on the color of his defense, whereas Mozart disguised his struggles with absolute joy, as the best revenge against the poor hand he was dealt (a short life, poverty). A genius knows he faces immediate oblivion and ultimate vindication.

Alkan's impossible, complex, note-heavy, harmonies turn suddenly Arabic or sephardic, possibly resentful of and expecting prejudice against his looks, his race. What Eddie calls its "pessimistic" modal changes happen entirely "unprepared," unlike most music which prepares the listener for major changes. Alkan knew he wouldn't be understood, so he sought oblivion before it was handed to him. This is the Iphigenia strategy: become your oppressors, take away their satisfaction, confuse the gods. There are hints in this simple piece of the "barbarous" structures, as Wilfred Mellers called them, which would turn his larger works into armageddons.

Hélène Grimaud says you see yourself before a concert, all flaws exposed. And often you don't like what you see. Alkan was a Toulouse-Lautrec, small, hunchbacked, ugly,

3. In *Wild Harmonies*.

petty, who determined to remake himself into another man. Often pianists look in the mirror and see Brahms. Or we read Nabokov and imagine ourselves to be the only one he'll address. But the moment comes, as it did for Andrew Field when, as his biographer, you realize he despises you, as all artists must despise their mirrors, because they remove the illusions, the Venetian party mask.

Alkan's music is in this way tortured with musical forms of self-contradiction, of hatred, of begging for censure. This gives him the courage to open up a harmonic world where no one followed before Wagner and Schönberg. It's not a nice little boy world, or an obedient conservatory student *étude*. It's in your face. It took an equally rebellious genius, Raymond Lewenthal, to spend the decades necessary learning and proselytizing this impossible music, years that must have been drenched with loathing, recrimination, and anger, thus making Lewenthal a "little Alkan," cantankerous enough, self-contradicting enough to represent the music. All music may demand similar sacrifices, but if it suits us, we don't question it, if we see ourselves as Brahms, as Grimaud does. The great Brahms pianist IS Brahms. Gould comes to mind: equally baffled by the concept of sex, equally hermetic, self-contained, tensely vacuum-packed.

Alkan's pieces are littered with the corpses of pianists, of musicians too good for the music who try to beautify it, normalize it, as early editors standardized all the marginal notation in Beethoven, homogenizing all the repeats, when Beethoven meant the opposite. We all know you have to be angry to play Beethoven; then the moments of calm shine out. The same is true for Alkan, except his tantrums haven't gone into the language as Beethoven's have,

removing the offensive strangeness. Alkan's notes remain strange.

His Barcarolle, however, is one of the few pieces he wrote with almost nothing outlandish in it. The only unusual harmonies are the "minor seventh" chords, which we interpret with a modern ear as Gershwin, or even rock and roll, whose traditional walking bass hits the minor seventh on the fifth note. "Go, Grease Lightning" from the musical *Grease* is a familiar example, parodying as it does that exact progression, hitting a minor seventh on the word "burning" – "Go, grease lightning, you're burning up the quarter mile." Note how the phrase hits a high note (the minor seventh) on "burning," and then goes backwards from that high note, playing in backwards order the same notes it used to get to the high note. This is very easy to play, because you just play every finger until you hit the pinky and then reverse the fingers back down the chord.

Alkan does the same thing with his minor seventh, not a note heard in the Italian convention of a gondola song. When the minor seventh note is reached, it is held, and thus stressed, while the *moto perpetuo* flows around it. This is not *virtuoso piano*, but notes in service of an ideal. As elated as the song becomes, going as far away from the beginning note as possible (twelve tones out of a possible thirteen), it must always acknowledge its root, the disgruntled G minor.

That twelfth note is of course the modern jazz jump. It isn't the normal thirteenth note, just before the scale resolves back into G, but it is the flatted version of the penultimate note, which both jazz and rock use as a shorthand for "cool."

Alkan later introduces another harmony entirely. From

G Minor, the piece suddenly transitions into A Flat, which is only a half note higher. This “neighbor-note” relationship is used in Rachmaninoff, and in tonal clusters by Gershwin, but it’s a kind of “devil in the machine” tonality used to suggest that something is in another dimension, like someone who has returned from outer space whose thumbs are on backwards. It is meant to be shocking, to rip us out of our quaint, predictable, lulling, rolling Venetian gondola and throw us into hell, into the world of Saint-Saëns’ *Danse Macabre* or Mussorgsky’s witches on Bald Mountain.

But we have already been nurtured on such transitions by rock and blues and jazz, so we don’t notice how strange it is.

Tunings in earlier days, before Alkan, were ill-tempered, and many notes stood significantly apart from the well-mannered harmonies of the Romantics, so that certain chords were called “the devil in music,” *diabolus in musica*, also called the tritone, because they jangled horribly (they still do). C and F# are three whole tones apart. You can Google this “tritone” profitably. Paul Hindemith called it an “unstable” harmony. And so there was a tradition of things that nice composers didn’t write. Liszt and Wagner led the way to Schönberg and the anarchist composers who broke down the well-bred walls of socially-accepted harmonies. In my youth, it was Elvis who threatened the social order, and then the Beatles and the Stones. If you grew up in the south, you had the blues and Boogie-Woogie which played with your mind and tempted blond socialites onto the wrong side of the tracks.

But French society was much stiffer in 1844. You didn’t play those notes, you didn’t make those abrupt harmonic

switches. You spent a lot of time morphing from one accepted harmony to another accepted modulation, from A to B, and then from B to C, and so on, until you reached G. But you didn’t go directly to G.

So we don’t hear the seditious undertones of this seemingly tasteful boat song. It is a hymn sung by a hooker. It’s Venice of the bordellos, of the shifty Levantines, the opium den, the sallow-skinned hashishim, the cabals, the dacoits, of the souk, Moroccan and Egyptian cultures, and farther afield of the Hindustani, the Mughul, the Thugee (really any ethnic persuasion other than Queen’s English or Parisian French), all of which were regarded by those nobs and NAP-NAPs as snake charmers, necromancers, sun worshippers, card sharps, and hired thugs.

But to us the harmonies flow unperturbed like the ripples on the canals, unconscious of the deeper floods massing in the tides. Those strange notes should alarm us, but we accept it.

What is also unusual here is that the rhythms of the Venetian waters traditionally take on a lilt, maybe from the syncopated slap and dash of the waters on boat hulls, imitated by composers, a musical onomatopoeia. But here that sprung rhythm, that stagger, or swagger, that dotted-note sly pause and sudden rush exists, but not in the notes. The broken chords which make up every note in this piece are called arpeggios. But rather than write them in a jazzy way, with notes of unequal value to convey the stop-and-start, every note is equal, in even arpeggios, the G Minor chord. And yet the ebb and flow of tide, the rise and fall of the canals, is completely evident, without any rhythm being imposed. Although it seems simple, the fact that the rowing of a currach, the slip and glide of a coracle in

the chop and ruffle of the calle, the traditional rifacimento, the tilt and ride of Mendelssohn's gondola songs, could be conjured up without any syncopation at all, simply by the steady flow of notes, is a small but perfect musical miracle. Later examples of the typical rhythm were written by Schubert, Liszt, Verdi, Offenbach, Heller, Paisiello, Rossini, Donizetti, Poulenc, Rorem, Bernstein and Sondheim, and an entire industry of Italian popular song sprung up around the frequently stale but sometimes inspired displays by the barber-poled, sailor-shirted tenors at loose on the louche waves of Venice, where tourism's mandatory adiabasis into the lowlands of high architecture creates exactly that dichotomy, that push and pull between the heights and the depths that fires creation, as warm and cold winds move like electrons between levels in the atmosphere, a constant exchange that creates the motion of tides, winds, rains and snows that sustain the world.

As Hélène Grimaud writes in her wonderful book, *Wild Harmonies*:

“. . . ebb and flow is the movement of struggle. Fare from simplifying everything and allowing one side to gain the upper hand – day or night, war or peace – this struggle constantly enriches each side by its opposing of the other. . . . the perfect equilibrium arising from this confrontation that defines what is constant.”

So the tacky tourist tides in Venice mask the great movements of the spheres which, like the parts of planetary clocks, hold chaotic space together with the organizing drive of time.

William Eddie's book, *Alkan: His Life and His Music* is a sophisticated look into the depth of Alkan's musical achievement, not much of which is represented by this ingenuous boat song.

Ronald Smith has written a serious study of the man and the his music, to complement his fiendish performances of what, for instance, Martin Cooper calls Alkan's "slightly monstrous" *Concerto for solo piano*. Rapoport refers to its "grandeur and intensity, its pathos, brooding, bitterness, irony, tenderness, violence, madness . . ." All of this later complexity can be guessed at from the despairing juxtaposition of moods in the Barcarolle which, like any suspicious character, minds its own business and then slips in a second into frightening keys and, before there is any chance of taking alarm, slips back slyly into its law-abiding disguise.

RAISON D'ÊTRE

How extraordinary to lose track of all time and look outside and see the snow piling up, mounding the rocks, covering all traces of the mess we made getting in here.

In the Alps, chalets would be drifted on the balconies, pine filigree encrusted with rime, thousands of firs sagging under the weight of a lifetime of Christmas mornings. Lifts would be stopped for the night, chairs laden with romantic powder which falls in the service of mankind, that all forms of pistes be humped with fluff.

But here in the desperate dark rocklands of another planet, snow is threatening. The skin of the world cracks under the weight. If I don't get out of here tomorrow, if it keeps dumping like this, if the wind, from which we are cozily insulated here in our stone fortress, doesn't die down to a mere gale, I am dead. Not figuratively.

And yet this is the reason I live, to hear music like this in wild places, to fight against all the grim pragmatisms of the mercantile century, agents, bureaucrats, obsessed new gurus, climbing fanatics racing up the monstrous treadmill of these Himalayan sandpiles, critics who for unknown reasons single out harmless musicians to destroy each month, my own sense of gnawing panic, of projects piling up like thunder clouds. I run inside my own barrels so that the air is free, so that the Friedrich arête and upthrust granite, the sea of ice that lowers over us can echo with frozen music.

Can you understand it? Perhaps one summer you've stood outside a summer music tent in a mountain festival and listened to the innocence of youth messing around with a Brandenburg Concerto, sounding the way it must

have the first time it was played, in an open meadow with picnic baskets, camp chairs, and nothing else, and you've all of a sudden felt that shudder of absolute freedom mirroring the invention of nature around you. I'm not sure, I'm never sure, that anyone gets this. But if I don't start here, what else can I talk about, if the deepest parts are off limits because they are somehow not entirely normal?

It's about whatever made you happy when you were young, those moments you worry about and avoid because they seem so long ago and possibly part of an immature you, until you realize at the end that nothing else but that made the smallest bit of difference, to the world, to strangers, and you should have stayed in bed reading, or you should have learned that prelude, or pushed that key, or dipped that brush, because that was the point of it, and you played hookey. Hookey that meant responsible jobs and acceptable hobbies. But it was all a smokescreen; your real job was right there in bed, or under the lid of some ebonised Hydra, or inside the varnished case of a blood-red violin.

And now again, I have to escape from whatever fate has built up around me like static electricity, electric connections between the swamps and the stars, or it will end all of us. We have to get out at first light. We don't have enough fuel to melt snow, enough food to feed ourselves, let alone the sherpas, enough stamina to keep us warm for more than a day. It was crazy to lug all this stuff up here for a one night stand, for a dying marzipan era, even if it seemed noble, back in the warm crazy bar. It isn't my dream anymore. Mine is just getting back to that bar, a Beck's Bomber, a hot chapatti—breathing without gasping. My mission now, beaten down, wind whipped, is to bring the nightmare

back to the normal places, to be able to stand up on stage and talk about what it feels like to be buried alive in a snow palace, and not to care. To live for that.

Jacob Ludwig Félix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy: Boat Songs, 1830–1845.

My spell checker insists that these are Bat Songs. Fluttering nocturnally around the gray waves of moonlit, criminal canals.

One of the wonderful benefits of YouTube is that you can listen to any piece mentioned here played by a variety of musicians while you read about it below. You can also listen to the same piece on the enclosed discs, and compare Brinkerhoff's differences of touch, tempo, and volume—gradations which are nevertheless separated by great philosophic chasms—easily grasped, once the background below is understood.

Mendelssohn disliked the name Bartholdy, which his uncle had convinced his father to adopt as a reference to their country estate. “Jacob Ludwig” were his confirmation names, a further attempt by his parents to distance their child from the family's Sephardic roots.

The atmosphere in Hamburg has always been one both of trade and culture, and Mendelssohn grew up among both, using the benefits of one to produce the other.

Wealth has traditionally enabled the leisure which its talented offspring use to perfect their craft: Browning, Byron, Proust, Merrill, Frost, Tolstoy, among others. Modern writers have been at pains to disguise their financial standing; although it is having the leisure which produces high competence—any admission of that discipline's being distanced, no matter how involuntarily, from privation¹ by a happy accident of antecedents producing

1. All discipline is privation, a pianists well know, who stay inside practicing when other children are playing ball outside.

career-damaging envy, although no one would ever confess to it. Nabokov and Rachmaninov profited from early wealth but lost it in the revolution; many critics never forgave them their birth, despite the immense suffering and work it took them to get halfway back.²

Mendelssohn studied with a teacher, Ludwig Berger, who had studied with Clementi, author of the *Gradus ad Parnassum*, those drab steps to the heights, and composer as well of a variety of charming light sonatas, in which tradition Mendelssohn continued, adding an excellent technique which turned otherwise light concepts into more challenging virtuosic vehicles, such as his two piano concerti. The one real ability Mendelssohn had was for melodies, of which his *Songs without Words* are the prime examples, not relying on technique to disguise their simple gifts. They are melodies without artifice. They are not pianistic, or virtuosic, but require the musician to forget about the piano and sing.³

[Rachmaninoff, whose veiled barcarolle is in Volume I, felt that melody was the reason to compose, and technique simply the lure. But Rachmaninoff never had the nerve to pare his music down to essentials, except in this barcarolle, in his songs, and in the famous 16th variation from the Paganini Rhapsody (1934), one of the few successful pieces written after his flight from Russia in 1917.

2. Not that anyone in one generation can approach those vast holdings which can only have been acquired in earlier times, with their concomitant assemblage of stables, boat houses, carriage barns, parterres, galleries, potting sheds: no one builds a potting shed—they simply have them.

3. As Hélène Grimaud says, “The piano is an incomparable instrument when it is touched by a musician in whom nothing of the pianist remains.”

He wrote it at the Villa Senar in Switzerland, which he built in imitation of his Russian estate, Ivanovka, and so found some inspiration there. But he abandoned it in 1939 with the onslaught of World War II. It runs against the grain to write solitary music in public places, to invoke the vast forests of Russia under the palms and striped awnings of Beverly Hills. After Rachmaninoff left Russia, he wrote three successful pieces in Switzerland, and three rootless piece in the States, before he died. He reworked many of his earlier pieces, to varying effects.]

Alkan played Mendelssohn's boat songs in his infrequent concerts, and was obviously inspired by them to write his own insidious version, included in this volume. As Alkan was the master of the seditious modal shift, Mendelssohn is his mirror opposite, the bankerly bulwark up against which Alkan throws his fury. Mendelssohn would never have had a note out of place, an ungroomed strand, or any cadence but the most likely.⁴

Young men in the Romantic era and later in the Victorian era did the Grand Tour, popularized by Henry James and Edith Wharton. They traveled to Europe, or, if European, to America, and everyone went to Italy, where they sketched, like Ruskin and Turner, or composed, like Liszt⁵ and Mendelssohn, who published his first book of Venetian homages in Venice in 1830.

Mendelssohn's low notes in the gondola songs provide an anchor in the heaviness of the dark, polluted, heaving deep, set against the lightness of the colors (the gondo-

4. Rossini said once to Saint-Saens about a piece, “It smells of Mendelssohn,” which annoyed Saint-Saens, although he ultimately saw the humor of it.

5. See “Liszt in Venice” in this volume.

lier's shirt, gondola posts), against the weightless cork-like bob of the gondola itself, which are all represented in the flowing accompaniment in the right hand, until the song of the gondolier floats above both the yin and the yang of the water to integrate all three phenomena into the Italian heat weaving off the waves, the way a summer day creates a thermal shimmer off the pavement on a desert road. Venice is the great dissipator of the Italian interior inferno; like the rock beaches of Capri, or the Ancona coast, the overheated hinterland flocks to Venice in the summer for the cool of the waters.

Italian popular music is like the tarentelle, frenzied with its need to forget the heat, to out-sing the temperature building up on the cobbles confined by the labyrinthine city walls, so you have the hearty *moto perpetuo* of songs like "Funiculi Funicula," or "Gondoli Gondola." But Venetian songs are cooler, slower, patterned on a rowing or a rocking motion, because at last the end of the Renaissance world has been reached, along with the heights of taste, of architecture. Venice is the end of the world at the beginning of the vast sea of Odysseus and Godard in *Contempt*. Rather than a typically sassy accordionate finish, the "soldo" of Louis Prima songs, these earlier, bucolic odes to endless hope just fade away into the hot summer's pale, lapping horizon.

LISZT IN VENICE

Liszt's writings about Venice were forgotten during his lifetime, and not translated into English until 1989.¹

Liszt had heard a gondolier sing a Tasso song, "Gerusalemme Liberata," which became Liszt's symphonic poem, Tasso.² Liszt also rode in Byron's gondola, although fifteen years later. Even in his last years, Liszt was thinking of Venice, and wrote the spare *La lugubre gondola* in 1882, which he turned into a dirge when his son-in-law, Wagner, died in Venice in 1883 and was rowed to his grave in a gondola.

Liszt adapted Schubert's gondola song, known as the Hungarian Melody in 1824,³ before Mendelssohn's lighter pieces.

But by 1882, Venice had become dark in Liszt's imagination. The Romanian poet Eminescu had a similar premonition:

Mighty Venice now has fallen low,
One hears no songs, no sound of festive balls;
On steps of marble and through gateways falls
The pallid moon's unearthly silver glow
Okeanos there his sorrow calls . . .
In him alone eternal youth does blow,
Yet on his bride would he his breath bestow,
The waves break plaintively against the walls.
The town is silent as a burial ground;
Only the priests of bygone days remain,
Saint Mark tolls sinister the midnight round;

1. *An Artist's Journey*, trans. Charles Suttoni, University of Chicago, 1989.

2. Inspired as well by Byron's poem about Tasso.

3. On Volume III.

In sombre tones his slow sibylline strain
He nightly speaks with smooth and cadenced sound:
“The dead, my child, no more come back again.”

– Mihai Eminescu (trans. C. Popescu)⁴

It is the shadows of the canals, so sparkling in the sun, which also lend a darkness to Mendelssohn’s songs; their ambiance extends into the sorrow of the keys and the structure of the descending melodies, falling like the wash of triplets against the palazzi.

This was the age of the Romantic,⁵ and the poets, artists, philosophers, and musicians who made Paris the center of the world were all friends of Liszt: Hugo, Dumas, de Musset, Gautier, Delacroix, Stendhal, Berlioz, de Vigny, Lammenais, Lamartine, George Sand, Balzac, Heine, Chopin.

In 1835 Liszt was 23. Four years later, he invented the modern piano concert, playing from memory, alone on the stage without parakeets, monkeys, comedians, the vaudeville which sustained the public’s interest long enough for a pianist to play a quick piece, and which Liszt folded into his own voices at the keyboard. By the time he was 35, he would never play in public again.

Liszt’s feelings about the ties between music and language at that time is quite clear:

“The more instrumental music progresses, develops, and frees itself from its early limitations, the more it will tend to bear the stamp of that ideality which marks the perfection of the plastic arts, the more it will cease

4. Sonnet VI.

5. Sketched in Eleanor Perenyi’s charming *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*.

to be a simple combination of tones and become a poetic language, one that, better than poetry itself perhaps, more readily expresses everything in us that transcends the commonplace, everything that eludes analysis, everything that stirs in the accessible depths of imperishable desires and feelings for the infinite.”

– Liszt, *An Artist’s Journey*, (1835–1841)

Years later, the sentimental abuse of “program music,” such as an editor’s calling a Chopin *prélude* the “raindrop,” became so reductive to the purity of music, that Liszt and Chopin had to backtrack, and give up the dream of the synergy between art forms. To quote Yeats:

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;
But he fools caught it,
Wore it in the world’s eyes
As though they’d wrought it.
Song, let them take it,
For there’s more enterprise
In walking naked.⁶

But these were the innocent years, when the Romantic age was starting to dream, and Mendelssohn’s onomatopoeia set the standard, where rowing, wavelets, and singing gondoliers were flattened into one Photoshop layer, into a synthesis of Venetian architecture, water, sound, and sorrow, to which all future Venetian water songs refer.

The octaves in Liszt’s *La lugubre gondola* are the same octaves in his *St. Francis de Paul Walking on the Water*. They are a Schoenbergian tone row, setting the formula, the

6. “A Coat.”

scaffolding, around which the water will build. In the way light glints off the facets of a wave, Venetian canal waters radiate scintillating girders of refracted beams, reticulations which Liszt uses octaves to simulate.

WATER MUSIC 2

Music can be snow, as in Debussy's "The Snow Is Dancing" from *Le Coin des Enfants*. Or it can be ice, as in Debussy's "Sunken Cathedral," his tenth prelude. But most often it can be water, flowing around the chinks and gullies of the keys, sliding between the strings, coalescing in the air around a particle, the irritant of the note, agglomerating crystal around a sound to form a drop of frozen nacre, molten ingots frozen in time and imitated by the sprinkle, the shower of treble frequencies, as in Tan Dun's "Staccato Beads."

Water can be a rhythmic phenomenon, ebbing and flowing like tide or the oars of a gondola, in any gondola song, where the tug of the rower is a correlative for the slap and tilt of a boat, of water flowing back up the Bay of Fundy or rising and falling on the striped gondola posts in the canals of Venice. The waltz-like pull and tug of the gondola rhythm turns any melody set above it into an ode to Venice, a miracle of threatened architecture bought with the blood of mercenaries and much appreciated by Walter Pater, Ruskin, Liszt, Mendelssohn: the usual Romantic suspects. The ready availability of web videos on Venice somehow erases the need to see it in real life, the need to travel. We can experience Venice virtually as a tourist, as a chef, as a singer, as a cat burglar, and so all our fantasies are resolved on the small screen, and the magic vanishes into pixels or Disney pixie dust.

No one today writes gondola music. More complex instruments and tempi from more dangerous, less bourgeois cultures claim our attention. Our sympathies for the mobs and mobsters of Venice has long since expired.

I don't believe the time is ripe for a revival of unfashionable and over-exposed musical cultures, or that the gondolier will return as a symbol of musical manhood, but that the pieces written in thrall to those lapping and rising canal waves, along with Titian, Tintoretto, Canaletto, Caravaggio, Giorgioni, Veronese, have been to me a part of life which I see slipping away into the smog of a less fortunate age, a coming era of starvation, waterless nations, drowned countries, rampaging hordes sweeping continents with machetes and suicide vests, and I want to fix in my own mind, while there is still time, the multi-colored reflections of Murano glass, weightless filigree which in fact supports entire palaces, whose delicate traceries are duplicated, shadowed in Venetian music.

As well, the onomatopoeia, the diamonds reflected off the canals, sparkles in the music, and add its own mournful note to the ways in which music has entangled itself with the fractals of water, simple flows governed by impossibly complex laws of moons and stars.

A pianist is impossibly put into the pilot's spot below the tenor, and has to ride the tide without falling into the cliché, the bog of Venetian knick-knacks. I hope the other passengers can share a bit of the queasiness, the sea-sick, love-lorn, sun-beaten, wave-worn wanderers of prisms, putti, and palazzi that compete for our ids in Venice. Given the prevalence of gigolos, *carampane*, pickpockets, mafiosi, prelates, tourists, gallerists, socialites, and bureaucrats stomping the ponti and plying the tides of the *Canalasso*, the defenseless id can be forgiven its sensitivity to the scene, all of which infuses the music, whomever by, with its sociological complexity, its Vegas-like salubriousness and salaciousness, its frenzied cycle of lust and repentance.

Unlike Vegas, the various shrines to great art mixed with well-architected religiosity induce an instant forgiveness

in the sinner, a yin and yang which is like the ebb and flow of ripples, a two-part wave that excites and exonerates, lap by lap, creating a split personality, a psychosis or manic-depressive good-bad tremolo, with the troughs and crests of dirty holy water providing both the emotional lifts and the dips.

Our age doesn't believe in anything sufficiently august to justify exorcism. Without a god, there's no need for the devil. So the dip, the walk of shame, the parental show-down, the dichotomy between passion and intellect, between idealism and desire, between the nun and the chorine, all this is missing—the delightful tension, the two wands between whose electrodes energy flickered fitfully, creating Frankenstein. Lacking one side of the tug of war (the concept that pleasure deserves to be forbidden), the sexual tension of water music is dissipated in its depths (or shallows), leaving Ondine not trapped forever in the trenches of the oceans, but free to marry her mortal or live unmarried with take-out.

There are no more parables, moral tales of punishment for impassioned behavior. We know now that the sin was Thomas More's, for opposing emotional freedom and destroying his family in the name of repression; we know how stupid it is to reject what is possibly our only chance at true love out of misguided respect for what may be in fact a miserable play, a projection on a wall of the mediocre roles we think we should be acting.

And so the great instigator of classic theater, the contrast between mind and body, has been removed so gradually that no one has missed it, and high art must find new motivators, what Hitchcock called the "MacGuffin."¹

1. For instance, in Hitchcock's movie, *Strangers on a Train*, the film is driven by Guy's lighter, as Vermeer's *The Music Lesson* seems as interested in an over-bright wine pitcher as the invisible clavier keyboard.

Thus the inherent dread of a frightening god whose minions walk on water like St. Francis² no longer informs and motivates music. We grow up with nothing but misconceptions about the programs behind pieces.

ON THE ONOMATOPOEIA OF WATER

The stories which accompany water music, its soggy baggage, stand flimsily behind its creation, Potemkin villages of wet cardboard. Simplistic tit-for-tat substitutions cheapen the deeper correspondences.

As Baudelaire said in his poem, “Correspondances,”

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.

The familiar natural metaphors we take for granted in discussing music are in fact quite confused. Trees and sounds aren’t fossilized, but living pillars. The leaves they drop as clues, long echoes of profound unities in the dusk, the pathetic fallacy of a universe compliant and complicit in our imaginary symmetries, is hidden behind the cheap tricks of incense, of sounds, which are mere suggestions of a parallel and infinite world. Music may be a wormhole to that universe, but its clues must not be mistaken for the revelation itself. They are only ways into space, transporters of the spirit and the senses. They are the cars, but not the destination. We must not mistake the forest for the trees. We pass through the symbols on our way somewhere else. We must not get stuck in front of the fire in Plato’s cave.³

2. Ferenc Liszt: *Légende No. 2: St. François de Paule* “marchant sur les flots,” E Major, 1866, in volume III.

3. See my notes to “Clair de Lune” in *Pianist Lost, Volume I: Excesses and Excuses* which discusses correspondences. I am taking a

SYLLOGISMS

Nature is a forest where the living limbs
Of trees drop clues like dying leaves
On anyone underneath them who believes
In such familiar passing whims,

Distant echoes of a dark and deep ravine
Where night and day are intertwined
And in whose mixing light we find
What the deeper spaces mean.

These combining scents would seem
To fuse us with a purer world,
Where amber dusk and incense dream

Of all the final riches swirled
Or stitched from childhood’s gleam,
But which in fact are just its seam.⁴

So the syllogisms we believe to be true between music and their programs are often false.

more nuanced rather than a straight-forward view of Baudelaire’s poem, which was seminal in pointing out the allegories we attribute to nature. Possibly I am being perverse, or semiotic, in feeling that a sign that says “Rome” is only a sign, not Rome itself, and that the confusion of metaphor with deeper music led to the abuses which turned the Romantics against their own youthful syllogisms.

4. My extrapolation of Baudelaire’s poem. Our words try in a confused way to approach the dream of nature, blending our own patently minuscule hopes for a vast unity with infinity, as the sinner hopes for heaven, but it is the poem itself, or any kind of art, which transports finite things like musk or prairies into the music of the spheres. Through the tight structure of its rhyme and meter (which my poem copies), Baudelaire achieves freedom of thought. It is fantasy alone which turns perfume into romance, or poetry into catharsis. We are transported to a higher world through mind, and through the sounds and beats of self-abnegating technique, a seamless poem about the seams themselves emerges.

For instance, Liszt's *Les Préludes* had nothing to do with Lamartine's essay which held that "life is but a prelude to death," but was adapted from a choral piece based on a completely different Lamartine essay, "The Four Elements." The introduction to the piece wasn't written by Lamartine, but by Liszt, who ultimately denied it, and claimed that he intended *Les Préludes* as a metaphor for how the music itself was composed, making Liszt the first self-referential composer, although opera is filled with music masters purporting to sing ridiculous (yet beguiling) tunes in which Mozart or Strauss or Rossini mock their own music.

Chopin also backed away from the notion of titles (which he himself never used). Beethoven would have been horrified by the idea of his 14th sonata being about moonlight, a concept advanced five years after his death. Samuel Barber specified that his most famous work, the *Adagio for Strings*, not be played at his funeral, due to its spurious baggage. (Chopin's "Funeral March," the slow third movement of his second piano sonata, was however played at Chopin's funeral.)

So there must be other solutions to why music seems to be a language, and why it seems to be telling a story, and why its own vocabulary transports us beyond the mere story into the deeper meaning of the tale. I saw the filmed Metropolitan Opera production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* recently where the sound of the opera had been switched for a local radio station, selling ads for hair lotions and college degrees, very much like Woody Allen's *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* In some ways, it was better than the original plot, because it accomplished the same thing as the Wagner with a more ironic and contemporary subtext, proving that the programs of music are probably irrelevant. They

are only intended to get us halfway there, until the real revelations begin. They are the warm-up bands, the skills.

I once sat down at a café in the Lubéron, the once remote area of Provence which Peter Mayle's book⁵ turned into a tourist trap, as Gerry Durrell's book⁶ had equally inadvertently done for Corfu. In a few minutes, several French girls took up tables in a few of the surrounding cafés. The tour buses arrived, spewing out waddling pioneers with the Mayle book in their hands. They all sat down in the cafés, soaking up the "traditional" atmosphere, at which point the girls finished their espresso, got up, and wafted off, leaving the village entirely populated by tourists, looking at each other in confusion.⁷

We mustn't end up at the end of a piece holding onto the same symbols we came in with. The point of the Tunnel of Love is holding onto your date. Fear is only a metaphor. We mustn't confuse the messenger with the message.

Peter Sellars changed the plots of Handel, Mozart, and Wagner operas to more modern scenarios set at beach resorts, airports, and the Trump Tower. Tired programs and libretti are invigorated by substituting new myths. Of course, this is an anarchic approach to history, where nothing is sacred. Or, more accurately, where the body isn't confused with the clothing. Jorge Luis Borges has a short story about Pierre Menard, who "translated" *Don Quixote* by simply copying it over.⁸

5. *A Year in Provence*.

6. *My Family and Other Animals*.

7. Much like Chesterton's book, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, where a gang of anarchists infiltrated by police until no anarchists remain.

8. "This technique fills the most placid works with adventure. To attribute the *Imitatio Christi* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or to James Joyce, is this not a sufficient renovation of its tenuous spiritual indications?"

John Ashbery includes random radio broadcasts in his poems, to open up closed forms to a multi-tasking, uncertain world. Iannis Xenakis called his music “aleatory,” and expected that musicians would take a hand in shaping its form during performance, much like any of Liszt’s improvisations.

Although jazz was built on improvisation, classical structures eventually became set in stone when composers reacted against the shallow to which performers could sink.

And yet science, that most impregnable sanctuary of unchangeable facts, questions itself, as new generations rethink the reasons for existence. That is how Richard Feynman came up with his Feynman diagrams and new theories of particles, using his “sum over histories” model of taking no principle for granted. He developed a new language for science, with its own grammar.

Quantum mechanics came to focus on Schrödinger’s cat, which is neither alive nor dead until you look at it, a form of the Heisenberg Observation Principle, or the Uncertainty Principle, which states that the presence of an observer changes the equation, so the thing observed isn’t the same as the thing unobserved. Does a tree fall in the forest if no one sees it?

HELICOPTER SEEDS

Spinning gyroscopes of spring,
Girls rise swirling on the wing:
Floating dandelions, unplanned—
Their meaning being just to land.

When umbrellas tumble from a gentian,
Is it just to get attention?
Is all that windblown fluff a blitz
Without the reassuring Google hits?

Is the goal of simple flight
To titillate the inflorescent sight,
The raison d’être of a seed
Purely adolescent need?

Must all destiny be manifest,
Our souls themselves just second best,
As if “to be or not to be”-ing
Were only based on viewers seeing?

Is a second’s kiss the test of Ever,
Where Never turns to Everest?
Is love created by a prayer?
Do milkweeds whirl because *we’re* there?

Or for plumose salsify to fly,
Its parachute must catch our eye?
Can a tree of heaven really care
That the ground is even there?

Does a hop seed realize
That it’s missing ears and eyes?
But would you criticize a kapok tree
Because it lacks urbanity

And doesn’t really have the wit
To see when someone’s chopping it,
Or, even worse, to know
When it’s fallen in the snow?

Do we have to rate a bird
By whether it’s been fully heard,
Or only focus on a nest
When it’s noisier than all the rest?

Or is the emphasis on sight and sound
About the dark in which we're bound,
As if the nucleus of all creation
Were the opposite of observation?

(Not to say it isn't chic
To reck the rede we sometimes wreak,
Like those high flown girls who, flippant, fell
Upside down in kiss and tell . . .)

And so, to see into the spirit of a piece of music, we must understand its parables, but be able to jump to the underlying meaning of its metaphors. This is the moment when you get goosebumps, when you understand what hasn't been shown, or played, or explained. When you finally "get it."

PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC

Beginning with one-note children's pieces, requiring that fingers which want to stick straight up into the air be sadistically crooked into some evenly weighted assault on gravity, like witches winding down wires¹ in Asian movies, then progressing on to the relative lavishness of arpeggiated homages to the composer's notion of safely abstract subjects with titles like "Autumn Leaves" and very little to reassure the audience that it is being exposed to actual limp leaves other than the apparently treble leaves' tolerance for the pedantic multi-fingered rippling accompaniment below, the grave below their wind, the gravitational root of all those otherwise unmotivated motifs, but, after enduring this belittling initiation, guaranteed to produce sloppy musical analogies for decades, to destroy genuinely imaginative associations, finally the hormonally challenged, girl-crazed, baseball-threatened, Million-Dollar-Movie-tainted adolescent is licensed to pound Rachmaninoff preludes, annex Norwegian cadenzas, dole out equanimity to budding anarchies in Brahms, besieged as he suddenly is with harmonies devised by hermits, pedagogic treatises on the circle of fifths by musical unabombers,² crazed loners with possible criminal records and badly-tuned pianos at the end of the lane on the top of the hill, surrounded by lightning.

But, settling into middle life, none of the febrile filmed Aznavour achievements, the fatal James Mason machismo, the insecure Deborah Kerr octaves, the howling trebles

1. Later airbrushed out.

2. Known euphemistically to their sheeplike folds as music teachers.

of a Dirk Bogarde youth spent in preparation for music prison, none of the scales or chords or speed which seem such obvious goals for so many decades give any satisfaction at all to the nomad who has been induced by simple, harmless gifts to squander his mellifluous youth on monstrous notes, on dial tones gone wild.

Rachmaninoff would freely admit that he surrounded his melodies with cheap octaves and maelstroms of scales, scalestroms, to trick the public into tolerating his simple grief,³ into hearing those solitary elegies for the snow-drift steppes. In fact, only the simple notes, the agonizing flashes that happen to be conveyed by the fragile appendages of the brain, only the human voices made flesh now and then with strings and felts can ultimately reward the maturing matador for the effort necessary to acquire the technique to lure those shy phosphorescent invertebrates out of their spiral shells and glitzy metronomic hells. As someone said of Schnabel, music was only the start of it. Music is an excuse for sitting and thinking. It is ivory couched in ebony, airy ballades in dappled drag.

“Oh yes, Ron, I was required to play the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto during my nude scene. But wait, there’s more! I spent three weeks practicing my nudity, umm, and it was really down to the wire, right, so I had to learn how to play the piano a few minutes before we shot the scene. It was almost nearly bad, Ron! Failure between keyboard and seat! But the director, who is really and truly a great guy, told me in the sauna to do it right the first time. And not one note of mine had to be dubbed by some weirdo. Easy

3. Over his lost Russia. He put all his earnings into his country estate, Ivanovka, and left it forever on Christmas, 1917, during the Revolution.

as one, two, three. Falling on floor laughing . . . But seriously, folks. I think this whole piano thing is just so much fun. Grin, wave, and duck. By the way, I think I am in love with you. Bye-bye for now.”⁴

Unlike truly beautiful and well-proportioned people, we slave most of our lives over velocity, power, strength, lift, and lilt, to be able to achieve the monolithic, irreducible simplicities of love and loss through a syzygy of myriad complexities.⁵ Simple gifts, like breezes, leaves in autumn, the lagoon green of sandy bays, a long ago look under the banyan, almost anything said by a three-year-old—these are the goals of music ed,⁶ liberally mixed with cheap rum to produce a single note of Bach, to have the right to sit by the people we love under a sickle moon somewhere. To look beyond the pawn shop of Hollywood hackers and desperate house pianists of New York which hormones delude us into pursuing.⁷

Or you can do the homework and then not turn it in.⁸ Become an expert skier so that someday you can just stand there and glide. Play Bach so that when you’re old you can play Brahms.

I once spent three months traveling to music libraries in bad neighborhoods to hear every version ever recorded of Schumann’s *Arabesque*. This was before the web, when you can do on YouTube in an hour. I then booked the

4. And thank you, Ismie. Great minds think for themselves. See you later in the hills. Just don’t wear your Yeti hat.

5. As Pope said, simplicity is the mean between ostentation and rusticity.

6. Along with , penury, ostracism, death.

7. I am not a doctor, but I play one on TV.

8. As Bob Dylan suggested: to be able to play the guitar like Leadbelly, and then not. The Holden Caulfield syndrome.

Casa Italiana⁹ at Columbia, rented bad microphones and a Norelco reel-to-reel tape recorder, and recorded my own *Arabesque*, trying to be as clever as anyone and shove all my square voices into the round holes. I then wrote a sixty-page paper about what I was doing (of which this current assemblage must be the long-winded heir). In order to include the last word, I handed it in a day late so I could write up my own teacher's concert, which included the *Arabesque*, and which of course was far better than any of the sixty versions on disk. I was late to the concert, having driven through four states to get to it, and only heard the piece through the double doors of a crumbling auditorium while being forcibly restrained by security guards, whose mandate was keeping classical music safe from any potential audience.

And so I was a day late with the paper, and I flunked. It's the parable of the man and the piano: you spend your life waiting by the stage entrance, and suddenly they tow your car. As the sign said at the Grammy parking lot: Talent Only.¹⁰

But to reprise, as we are trained to: my teacher Hubermann was advised by his teacher, Steuermann, to go out there and "play it straight." Steuermann felt that once you've learned a piece properly, secreting the melody in the scales, the echoes of the goblin night in the voicings — then the braininess, the introspection, is built in, and if you can just forget everything, the scaffolding will emerge in one flawless camera pan, the years of febrile days and sleepless nights seamlessly embedded in the disarmingly harmless

9. Which A. V. W.'s family had founded and furnished with antiques stolen by the Italian fascists to his undying shame.

10. See the frontispiece.

narrative. The only way to keep from being forced, artificial, effete, is to forget. The accent will remain. Anything more is pushy. As Bunny Mellon said, nothing should be noticed. She was talking about fields, but it's also true of matters farther afield.

Hubermann never believed what Steuermann taught him. I remember quite well the color of the light steaming in through lace and mottling the keys one frozen spring afternoon¹¹ in his cluttered and vaguely Victorian living room when I spared myself a gruesome audition by tricking him into conversation, his part of which was, I remember,

"No, no, Steuermann was wrong. It isn't so. You have to think every second you're playing. Only with thinking will anything make sense. If you forget about it, it turns to mush. Even when you practice, if you forget the echoes a scale contains, it'll be fixed like that in your memory, and you'll never be able to get back to what it means."

You can't just trust your instincts. You can't put all that work into it and then throw it away.¹²

Hubermann's insistence on recomposing, on intuiting Scriabin's religious agony, his need for a world view in every note, his obsession that fate falls from every footstep

11. 4:32 PM, I happen to know, for those of you who are keeping track or having us followed.

12. Richard Wilbur says the same thing in his poem, *Parable*:

I read how Quixote in his random ride
Came to a crossing once, and lest he lose
The purity of chance, would not decide
Whither to fare, but wished his horse to choose.
For glory lay wherever turned the fable.
His head was light with pride, his horse's shoes
Were heavy, and he headed for the stable.

(the Butterfly Effect as applied to music¹³), and that any interpretation you give to a seemingly meaningless note in the beginning will have enormous consequences on how you have to interpret vast passages in the final movement, this instinct and agenda often got my teacher in enormous trouble. He got so far afield in one concert at Grace Rainey Rogers Hall in New York, one intonation leading to a new direction, which in turn produced another planet of inferences and references, that finally he was in a complete maze and had to start over, which was regarded as a flaw by the critics, but in fact was a voyage into the dark pastures of the mind unlike anything that might have come from simple obedience to the printed notes.

To forget everything you know frees you from the tension of memory. But to try to invent as you go along, when in fact you are controlled at every step by a smiling yet grim chess master,¹⁴ runs the risk of forgetting yourself, forgetting the piece, and ending up in a dead-end maze, the rest of the evening blocked by a dense weave of your own plantings.

I remember my teacher, again, surrounded by grubby critics, nodding pedants, squirrel-quick students who had been lured in by leaving free tickets at Juilliard (“papering”), dying patrons desperate to buy some posterity (what Shaw called “the ethical nuisances of the world of art”), and, here and there, what might be termed an actual, if nebulous, audience, those hard-to-poll blank spots on the chess board who appear out of nowhere, enjoy them-

13. Namely, that the first few measures of a Beethoven sonata contain the skeleton of the entire piece.

14. As is Luzhin in Nabokov’s *The Defense*. (White king’s pawn to king’s pawn 4, good move.)

selves, and are captured exacty at midnight. In the midst of this hodgepodge human muesli, Hubermann was humming along to the Hydra he was creating out of thin air, using the innocent bystander of a middle movement to move forward in time from Beethoven to Mahler, birthing and slaying whole cultures by the handful, converting chords into countries, inner voices screaming at the top of their lungs to make a wrong turn into the bushes, when it all collapsed and Hubermann was left holding a paper bag with all the air gone out of it, the frat brother with the wrong item on the treasure hunt, a scholar felled by a footnote.¹⁵

So he began the piece again, its magic safely shoved aside in the name of practicality and a newfound sense of schedule. Rather than being embarrassed at what the audience seemed to find a damning lapse of brain power, social training, and structural civility, I myself felt that the bat was out of the cave, and we’d seen Adorno poking his head through the curtains. If we never saw him again, we knew he was there, we knew what could be achieved with subtexts and hypertexts, I don’t know why I say we, I’m possibly hoping that I wasn’t the only one, that there might have been someone else¹⁶ transfigured by a false fork which turned out to be the real one, maybe presaging the rope in the Himalayas that led nowhere,¹⁷ but I saw for myself how pure willpower could change the landscape completely, even if most of the room only saw the mirrors.

It was one of the greatest moments I have ever experienced, because it proved that there was a god, something

15. But not this one, Franz.

16. Ismie, Valentine, Alkan.

17. See *The Lost Pianist*, the lost kingdom.

indescribable, ineffable, accidental, which could still be summoned by belief (and a certain amount of technique). Causing musical chairs to levitate demands a stage full of hidden ropes and trap doors, particularly if the audience is to believe the flyer's claim that "absolutely no tricks or sleight of hand play any part in the completely true events you will experience tonight."¹⁸

And so any concert became for Hubermann a trial by fire, a fight to the death. Not the rote, simply playing the cliché, the expected mimicry of the accepted CD, the perfect Serkin rendition of a waltz,¹⁹ the Beethoven Agenda, Hübner's Approach,²⁰ but the agony of pouring a lifetime of revelation into each phrase, and then drilling down in a Schenkerian frenzy to individual notes, where a slur or a staccato isn't just a marking, but a life sentence. Pianists who play a hundred concerts a year lose that incubating fear, the strangification of the second, in the reassuring casualness, the familiarity of the experience. But it is terror, panic, the little death that each transition recreates, that makes an evening or even an instant unique, and which we only hear from the starving and the abandoned—the desperate—not from the suave, wrist-wringing Romando. Or at least routine should teach us that we need to summon up horrors to dispel the daylight, to contradict the normality of the hour. Nothing should be normal. Every nick in the stage should be a chasm, every spotlight a stroke of lightning.

Ever since that distant night I haven't been able to find

18. See the legal disclaimer on the copyright page.

19. By Strauss.

20. *The Bourne Legacy* (why not throw in Steinways racing around Vienna, a fight to the death in a piano shop?).

it in me to play anything that doesn't reveal²¹ the immense subterranean depths of lost caves,²² Caribbean corals, Arctic wastes.²³

It has to be oneiric or Chthonic,²⁴ dream-rooted, anabasic, vaguely necromantic, something completely medieval, to tempt me to waste my receding future and my gaining past on it.

Another one of a long line of belligerent and benign Buddhas, Irma Wolpe, who was then more productively teaching Garrick Ohlsson and Peter Serkin, said to me, in horror, "The Heroic Polonaise, it's your best piece . . ."

I didn't have enough technique to play Czerny, yet I could toss off warhorses without thinking. Another idiot savant besieging the kingdom of heaven. Blockading paradise. *Le blocage divin*. The celestial jam. The riff of the spheres.²⁵

These Chopinzee triumphs²⁶ didn't survive the crevasses of time; they became trophy tunes, paling insecure

21. At least to me.

22. See *Sbe*—also *King Solomon's Mines*, *Allan Quatermain*, all by Rider Haggard.

23. See Kenneth Branagh's very Gothic film of *Frankenstein*.

24. "Envy, lust, sensuality, deceit, and all known vices are the negative, 'dark' aspect of the unconscious, which can manifest itself in two ways. In the positive sense, it appears as a 'spirit of nature,' creatively animating Man, things, and the world. It is the 'chthonic spirit' that has been mentioned so often in this chapter. In the negative sense, the unconscious (that same spirit) manifests itself as a spirit of evil, as a drive to destroy . . ."—C. G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, p. 267.

25. And so all things come to mean their opposites, a jam becoming a Jam, a traffic jam becoming a full-moon rave, urban rush hour becoming the beachy Madequesham Jam; as with all dichotomies, those who understand one half don't understand the other; if my two fans ever met, they would attack each other.

26. What Irma called "aesthetic spandex."

waltzes dyed platinum, complaining about cellulite and taxes. Miss Havesham with her cakewalk. Gould felt the same way about the Mozart sonatas: too tainted by all those years of adolescent trauma to mature into opera. The sonatas were cursed with being easy to play. Only the sonatas which escaped could be approached with surprise and discovery as an adult. So now all that really matters to me is the ineptly finessed but personally touched, uncorrupted by performance tradition, critical posturing, or the buffer of polished technique, dying to resolve into sentimental suburban backgrounds, but forever outside them, as unsolved as Brahms or Mahler.

And there was the knightly Romando, who was so on top of the pieces he played, one being Liszt's concert étude, *Un Sospiro*, that he would perform all sorts of spirals and loops with his hands before they finally knowingly hit just the right note in just the right way. The entire process left you with a vague feeling of distrust in being so far above the music that you took it prisoner.²⁷

It should be the pianist who is the desperate captive, uncertain of escape, sure of destruction, fighting to get the codes back to headquarters in the hopes that someone somewhere can unlock them. Every measure is a fight to the finish, an age staving off annihilation with dance, prisoners struggling to escape the illusion of the Möbius strip, the so-called reality that drugs us into believing in our dimension alone.²⁸

Genius leaves its world behind, but, as Liszt said, *le génie*

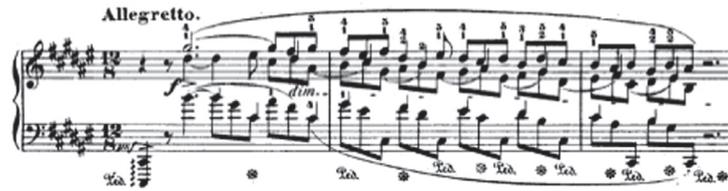
27. Never mind a fear of being alone in the room with Lawrence of Steinway City.

28. The Truman Show, The Matrix, Inception: movies know about mirror worlds.

oblige. Genius lets us spend the day safely in its company, without fear of exclusion or derision when we sneak back to Scarsdale, so that all of us can listen in the dark and then walk the streets again, without a sign of the revelations that fester inside us, the anarchy which defies the sidewalk with a higher scaffolding, lit by the last fuliginous embers of a strangely focused sun, out of sight of carelessly meandering pedestrians.

Here is Hubermann, getting the last word in: “You always had a very clever way of talking everyone out of realizing that you couldn’t really play a single note. But somehow, even your mistakes are musical. . . .”

Fryderyka Chopin: Barcarolle, Opus 60, F Sharp Minor, 1845.



The way a leaf floats to the ground, or the way waves lap without structure, so Chopin gets into the gondola. Although the result sounds like the fractal confusion of water flowing out of a faucet, there is an insidious order to the seiche, as every facet and flume of a seismic wave can be traced ultimately to the reef which creates it, coupled with the fetch, that is, the distance the wind has traveled over the water, atmospheric currents, longshore drift. It may be a lot of equations for a wave which is in fact impossible to measure, but everything will potentially compute, as does this musical seiche which begins Chopin's monumental ode to Venetian canals, to their dapples, their drifts, their laps, their colors, their reflections.

After the sudden chill of the first low octave,¹ Chopin organizes his chaotic fall into the boat simply by using key after key, descending down the piano. It is an onomatopoeia, an envisioning of a stumble (or a woman's elegant reclining into the boat), translated into notes on a piano.

Before you get into the boat, there is no rhythm, no swaying, no suspicion of what you're letting yourself in for. It is all promise. The various motions (rowing, swaying, shuddering) come later.

1. Fear of Flying.

And so Chopin sets out on the waves with a mind uncluttered with keys, in a boat without a country, a blank page. The opening modulates constantly downwards through the keys. By being open to where the boat will take him, Chopin illustrates the mind of a composer setting out on a journey, with no clue of where it's going to take him.

Although he descends through neighboring harmonies, he hasn't yet found a theme, or even an idea. This is music at its purest, without premeditation, music setting out into the unknown.

But if you look more closely, this is simply an imitation of confusion; its apparent mindlessness is highly planned.

The top notes represent a beautiful sighing melody which repeats in seven different keys. If you play it by itself you have a low note, a high note, and the note in between the two. This is a kind of turn, or *appoggiatura*, constantly used by Bach, which Chopin has adapted into the most Romantic of phrases. Possibly Chopin is thinking of the Bridge of Sighs in Venice.

A sigh consists of not just an exhalation of air, but first a statement (an intake of air). The sigh itself is (if you sigh and listen to yourself closely) two notes descending.

Underneath this sigh is its mirror opposite, the same notes, almost inverted. In fact the "counterpoint," the contrary motion, consists of three notes moving up the scale. So beneath each sigh is its opposite: a climbing wave.

The first octave, the dramatic foreshadowing of the rider's fear at getting into the boat, is also the initial intake of breath before the first sigh. The two "falling" notes in the treble right after the octave make up the three-note "sigh" pattern.

So in fact there are eight sighs, as there are eight notes in

the scale. Chopin is setting up what Schönberg would call a tone row, a template for the entire gondola ride. These eight phrases happen in only three measures, and yet every later development in this monumental composition is present in these three measures.

As the sigh fades away towards the end of this long breath, the same bass note which began the sigh (C Sharp) is heard twice in the bass, as a further premonition (of fear, of waves, of drownings).

Despite the apparently aleatory, or random, nature of this Schönbergian “tone row,” the very modern setting on whose parameters the piece will be based is in fact as thoroughly planned as a Bach fugue. It sounds natural, like a human sigh without any artifice, but it is all artifice. The French for fireworks is “feu d’artifice,” artificial fire, flares created by artifice. And like a perfect watch, the clockwork with which this timepiece is made meshes so effortlessly in its gears that solar wind is created, and without anyone realizing it, the time is told: palaces pass by, the current begins to flow, the boatman rows, and the planets sing.

Truffaut said that he would always try to watch Hitchcock movies to find the seams, the way in which the movie was stitched together, but each time he forgot and just watched the movie, so effortless was the sewing.

In a similar way this most erudite homage to Bach sounds instead like the most unpremeditated imitation of a completely idle day, a whim, in which a composer is deciding what to do with his life, with his song. That seeming idleness is in fact a deep decision the creator has made about the nature of water, the lapping of waves, the climbing of tides, and the “descant,” the ebb and flow, the building and

falling notes of a gondolier’s song. It’s all there waiting to be uncovered, actors lined up to go on stage.

And yet the passage seems to have no rhythm, no key, no ideas, no direction, no relation to the coming boat song.

But in reality the main theme of the song is that Italian yodel, the three-note turn, where the top two notes convey yearning.² And so the melody of the piece, that sigh, is present from the very start, but in a Venetian carnival mask.

Heinrich Schenker³ believed that every note you hear leads you farther away from what the music is about. Notes are merely decorative, eye candy, a distraction to the underlying structure. Rather than leading you merrily into the structure, they Shanghai you.⁴

Schenker would maintain that a composition exists not only in the present, as we’re listening to it. It is more than this “foreground.” It also has a backstory. The foreground, the various ornaments or embellishments of the story, distract from the core meanings, which Schenker called the

2. As they will years later in so many pieces by Brahms, where one note, hanging harmonically, cries out to be resolved into the note waiting below it, to be merged with its love, its destiny. But Brahms will delay that resolution, sometimes forever, until you hang on every note the way a lover hangs on the glances of his beloved. In *Opus 116*, No. 4, a lower note inches yearningly upwards, while above it, a treble melody sighs from a high note to a note five steps below. This is the language of longing, of yearning, of outmoded emotions and Romantic indulgences foreign to our less languid age; but a valid vocabulary of compassion from another era, even if later Victorian excesses demonized it.

3. *Chopin Studies*, Vol.1, Jim Samson, Ed., Cambridge, 1988. (John Rink, “The Barcarolle: *Auskomponierung* [embellishment, arpeggiation] and Apotheosis.”)

4. I am not so severe, and approve of eye candy’s role in the seduction of the viewer

Affekt or the *Ursatz*, the creative motives of the piece. It may have been Coleridge or Keats who said that by the time he had written a line, he had forgotten what it was about, and the words had taken over.⁵ Today our lives are slaves of even less visible devices.⁶

However, in the Barcarolle the apparent doodling, the improvisation, the surface filigree, is in fact structure. The eye candy that charms you is in fact the underlying skeleton, the *memento mori*, the harbinger of death, grinning at you beneath the striped gondolier's shirt.⁷

5. This is what Keats called "negative capability," where a poet can remain in limbo, uncertain of meanings or directions or rational applications of his thought, in order to remain open to emotion. A rush to judgement eliminates the delicious *frisson* of mystery, and puts an end to poetic gestation, which can't allow megaphones announcing the global implications of every adverb. T. S. Eliot said it also in *The Four Quartets*:

... one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate . . .

6. A sultry odalisque (could it be Ismie?) in the miasmatic den next to mine cautions me: "Keats felt that the impetus for a poem wasn't verbal, but more of a feeling, and that words gradually eroded that feeling. In a way, it's the observation principle—to express it is to distract from it. Keats's poetry originated in the ineffable and then became concrete through words; a computer, however, is overly effable: even its hidden parts are concrete, man-made, ten steps away from the essence of creation that Keats was describing. So the feedback we derive from our collaboration with microchips, (computers, cell phones, iPads) isn't coming from any direct experience of our being, but from something that's mathematical, cool, distant from that soul where Keats' world began." Love you with all my heart, my hashishi.

7. Were he to inadvertently rip it off. Music has many hidden agendas . . .

It is Germanic to think that the skeleton is all; the French might say the opposite, that the filigree, the way of telling the story, is more important than the story. Critics have said that about the films of Tim Burton, that his surfaces are in fact the plot; Dylan Thomas said it about Joyce, that the genius of *Finnegans Wake* lay in the words themselves, rather than the direction the words took. My own teacher Hubermann, believed that when you concentrate on the horizontal drive of music, the timeline, you miss the static, vertical voicing of melodies hidden in the chords themselves. To bring this out, you have to slow music down, to concentrate on its tiny details, and not be overwhelmed by its momentum. Meeting a movie star, we are bewitched by the fame, and miss the normal person hiding behind the roles. Without a script, an actor is just a janitor.⁸ How disappointing to hear the tawdry comments of stars who have spoken the great lines of Shakespeare, and now are asking for a double latte.

A real mountaineer will admit that the summit is just an excuse for being on the mountain, as putting an autographed ball in a hole is an excuse for being outside on gorgeous lawns in areas mostly privately held and otherwise off limits to ordinary people. Fishing is about standing in streams, outrigger canoeing is about riding waves, surfing is about freedom. Tilson Thomas's overview of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* chooses to ignore the details, in

8. A janitor and Janus, the Roman god of doors, both come from the Latin *janua* (door). Who can resist such correspondences? Janus, like a gate, could see into both the past and the future, as a gate moves between dimensions of time. Quantum mechanics posits that multiple universes exist simultaneously in different time frames, which are linked through wormholes, or doors, thus there may be more to Janus than simple Latin (and to janitors).

which the real plot lives, in favor of the simpler skeleton, to communicate a difficult piece by slimming it down.

St. Catherine of Sienna said, “All the way to heaven is heaven.” It’s about being there, not getting there, getting lost. It’s not about the climax of the piece. All of that is already present in the chord you’re listening to right now.

This is an important point with great music, great drama, great paintings: the whole is present in every part. All of the “Moonlight” Sonata is present in the first few measures. All of *Hamlet* or *Nozze di Figaro* has been set out in the first minute. A detail of Van Gogh’s stars is the same as his sunflowers. The point isn’t in the picture, but in the pigments. There are clever mystery novels whose solution is sometimes present on the first page.

The Chopin Barcarolle is about the tension between the formal structures of Bach and the freedom of French ornamentation. It is a war, a contest, between the steadiness of the waves below and the *fioritura* above: the *appoggiatura*⁹ of the sky. This is a form of kibbitzing, commenting in the margins of the Talmud. Most music comments in the treble, or descants, on an anchor theme in the central range of the piano. When comment happens below the main motif, it’s called counterpoint. When the comment is routine or unimaginative, it’s called accompaniment.

In Bach, such harmonization becomes a complex equation or algorithm which increases the structural vibrations and significance of the melody. That is, it isn’t mere accompaniment, such as the Alberti bass in Mozart. The Alberti bass is just a chord, such as the C chord below

9. Also called *passaggi*, *ribatutta*, that is, flourishes, riffs, *alankars* in ragas which compromise the descant, the digression above the grounding harmonies.

the melody in Mozart’s famous C Major piano sonata.¹⁰ Rather than just playing a three-note chord all at once, Domenico Alberti popularized the idea, prevalent to this day, that breaking up the chord into its three or four notes would make it more interesting. So a C chord (C, E, and G) is played not all at once, but rather the notes come out one by one: C, G, E, G is the most well-known pattern. A waltz bass in the key of C would use a C in the left hand, then play two chords in the right hand. Although the rhythm is different, the concept is the same: breaking up the accompaniment into parts to make it more melodic or more interesting. Of course, you could do better than simple oom-pah-pah.¹¹

Thus in Bach or Chopin, mindless classical accompaniment becomes either Baroque or Chopinesque. The notes that swirl around the main notes become not just hangers-on but friends, spouses, parents, ghosts, gods. They come to mean as much as the melodies themselves. This is certainly true in Rachmaninoff, where any note comes with an entire family of neighbor-notes which give it its context,¹² so that any one note has to be seen relative to the universe which surrounds it, just as Einstein understood that our position in space is relative to the speed at which we and our surroundings are traveling. Quantum mechanics maintains that you can’t simultaneously know both your location and your motion through that location. Thus, the quantum joke: a policeman stops a physicist, and asks him, “Do you know how fast you were going?” And the physicist says, “No, but I know where I am.”

10. No. 16, K 545

11. By Strauss!

12. As in former days the satellite dishes of Pierre Gagnaire would lend a sense of context to even a lowly *bors d’oeuvre*.

Chopin understood that Bach is so mirrored that every note rhymes with every other note. A scale in Bach is just an assembly of themes. Schönberg used this idea to invent the twelve-tone or dodecaphonic scale known as the tone row, which sets up the theme from which a fugue will be built, just as Bach did, except that the rules are looser, so that harmony isn't mandatory, and notes are free and even encouraged to relate unpleasantly and discordantly with one another.

Every note or bunch of notes in Bach will reoccur upside down, or transposed into another key, or rearranged. If Bach wrote poetry, every word would rhyme with every third word. The words would have inner rhymes, off-rhymes, one-letter rhymes, backwards rhymes, until a poem would be a jumble of sounds, and that would give it its meanings. In this spirit I have devised what I call "word fugues," on the theory that Bach shouldn't have all the fun.¹³

Chopin took the idea of Bach's intensely-related note structures and groupings and gave them a Romantic flavor, relaxing the stark German rigor into more broadly melodic swirlings, called *jeu perlé*, pearly play, bead games.

For instance, where Bach would simply write a turn,¹⁴ Chopin would open up this assemblage into an enormous improvisation on the structure wherein the main note swims, so that fifty notes or more rise up the piano and back down to where they began, to fade into the next major note. The below passage plays on the three note pattern of the Barcarolle's opening measures, progressing down the keyboard slowly.

13. Volume 11, *Uncollected Works*.

14. Or trill, mordent, or grace note, using only the melody note and one to four neighbor notes.

(The last *fioritura* passage in the Barcarolle uses that same three-note pattern from the very beginning episode to make what would seem a bravura but unrelated virtuoso statement; and yet it is intrinsically related, as if it were Bach, repeating his beginning in his end.¹⁵)



A good example of this *fioritura* would be the story of Liszt, sight-reading Grieg's piano concerto in front of Grieg. At the very end of the piece the main theme sounds in octaves, very simply: E A, G# E, G# F# D, F# E.

Apparently Liszt made a mistake and played a G without a sharp in the above theme. So he swooped down the keyboard in the key of G, then swooped back up again in the key of G#, hit the proper note, and continued playing: the ultimate *fioritura*, making a joke while salvaging the pianist's reputation. I'm not sure if this is why Grieg later included Liszt's G in the above melody. If it was a mistake, it was a mistake in the shape of a revelation, and to this day we remember the theme, those of us who remember the Grieg, in Liszt's version.

In Chopin, there are no unimportant notes. Every note is a melody, every scale a magnificent rococo pillar on the Bernini altar canopy in St. Peter's in Rome, whose purpose is not only to hold up the roof of the canopy, and thus by extension the Catholic religion itself, but to protect the altar from the roof of the greater church, to form a safe room within a safe place, and, through its wound-up

15. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets. Part II: East Coker*.

beauty,¹⁶ to offer up homage to God. A scale, in climbing the heights (or plumbing the depths), leads to its final summit, that shaken foil, but all the way to that summit is the expectation of the final note, so the anticipatory shimmer of the scale is the point. The final summit is reached at the moment the scale, the climb, starts, because you realize where it's going. When played on a German Steinway, deeply tuned by someone like Krystian Zimerman, who rebuilds his own instruments, the effect of such a scale is of ice crystals growing, like the BBC specials on the Arctic where time-lapse photography shows crystals spreading across the water, like watching an ice palace under breakneck construction from the air. This is what Chopin is like: each ice cell absolutely unique, linking instantly in a unique way to another unique cell, the adamantine blue haze of the ocean shining like the Boreal halo around multiplying cells, something that happens millions of times every second in the particle world, but which we ourselves never see, except through special lenses or atomic microscopes.

But we can hear it when Chopin develops a melody, the way notes expand from notes into equally significant themes. Most composers cannot superimpose layer on layer of barnacled genius to advance a shell's construction. But the cathedral of the Barcarolle is like that, miracle upon architectural miracle, forms linked to one another through references to a common theme, such as heaven or hell. A buttress spanning the pollened air to reach a column that holds a gargoye on a corbel. The forms themselves spring from the miracles described, and so new shapes spring from the buildings which only existed at that

16. Shining from shook foil.

time and for that purpose, never to be used again. Like a Gaudi cathedral, stalagmite drips adhere to one another in novel ways until you have one of the world's most astonishing monuments to the ethereal, the real ether of the cathedral.

So with Chopin, never a dull moment. His invention never flags. No mere cliché, no dull progression crimps the flow of the canals, reflections of spires morphing into mutations of stained glass. Never a simple snapshot, a mere depiction—always a transmuted, transported eidolon of the essence of things.

And not just the steady flow of water through the hose, a cheap imitation of a faucet, but the real ebb and flow of the world caught up in the veins of Venice in miniature, blood racing with the promise of the future, freezing in the presence of lust, dropping off to sleep, slopping up against a landing, breaking into arteries of garbage, the confetti of a Klimt surface over the skin and skein of love and loyalty beneath, swirling backwards with the thrust of an oar: water is the last of the free mediums, unconstrained by social self-consciousness, by the decorum of a café, the expectable rhythm of an essay, the soothing lilt of radios. Water is explosions, electrifications, collisions, drownings, the suck of a drain, the thwack of a rock, the pour of oceans between the levels of a lock, the seiche of underwater monsters pulling the sand out of the harbor. Nothing rhythmic, banal, canalized, Canalettoed. But the rubato of the blood, of the breath, changing with every glance of the eye, with every cloud, every drop of rain, never the same, responding not to set patterns of memorization, but to the spasms of incident, of accident, of a sudden meeting, an overheard spat, a murder.

And so the unalterable orbit of planets grinds inexorably, like the roar of distant surf, under the petty variations of daily life, of detritus, drowned cigars, headless dolls, fingerless gloves, the flotsam of reality that wobbles in and out of focus above the undulations of the Rhine, or the Danube, or the Grand Canal.

As Jeremy Denk says about Schubert's last sonata: ". . . it keeps stumbling into silences; it creates a new idea that also keeps breaking off into silences, places where the pulse becomes threatened, impossible to perceive; Schubert is not interested in communicating pulse."¹⁷

For all his drive, Chopin also needs time to live, outside the confines of societal expectations, as he did in life. Music must be allowed to pad into the room, fall on the floor, turn upside down, and sigh, before it gets up and heads out into the world.

Rachmaninoff's baggage falls around his linear train track sweep in swirls of neighbor notes, not auxiliary comments on the melody but furniture in the room while the writer dreams, dust motes, bird songs, street sirens, radio static, the xylem of photosynthesis, the random molecules whose chaos provides a bridge for the dogged melody, scaffolding over the workaday eddies of the canal.¹⁸

However, Chopin's filigrees, while flotsam and jetsam to his currents, are also more than decoration. They are always structural, buttresses holding up the church, or moving him through the Magritte clouds.

In fact, you could say that the Barcarolle, that cathe-

17. [http://jeremydenk.net/blog/Immortal Schubert](http://jeremydenk.net/blog/Immortal_Schubert), April 23, 2012 (Shakespeare's birthday, by the way).

18. I believe his swirls are simply the patterns of the larger piece reduced to miniatures that foreshadow the structure to come.

dral of connected arches, apses, vaults, and ribs, is simply a Baroque turn, a *doppelt* cadence and mordant, or a combination of two kinds of what Bach called accents, a *steigend* and a *fallend*. Or even a slide, a *schleifer*, ending in a mordant. That is, just three notes, an amphibrach metric line, with the stressed beat in the middle.

The many grace notes which decorate the melody imitate the break in an Italian tenor's high notes. They are *acciaccatura*, and, rather than being decorative, are just another form of the three-note melody.

The *rollo* of a *barca*, the rower of the boat, is the leisurely gondolier. By doubling the usual time signature from 6/8 to 12/8, Chopin creates a more energetic engine, giving himself twice the breath, twice the time for a longer line, as in the dactylic hexameter line of Virgil's *Aeneid*.¹⁹

Chopin uses the "sonata" form in most of his pieces, even if they're short Mazurkas. That is, a forceful beginning and end are separated by a slower, daydreaming middle section. Note that the right-hand accompaniment of this middle *cantabile* (singing) section is the same as the three-note "tone row" of the very beginning of the piece, and that the melody itself simply builds on this three-note figure, making longer leaps to the high notes. So everything in the piece, even its seemingly contrasting lyrical passages, comes from its beginning.

Out of just three notes, Chopin makes a mysterious, modern, tonally vague beginning; a melody; an accompaniment; a middle melody which is just a modified version of the first melody; and improvisatory, seemingly free passages. And yet he makes this completely Bach-like piece sound not at all like Bach, but like Chopin, some-

19. Hamlet's windy suspiration of forcèd breath.

thing which hasn't been repeated before or since.²⁰ This is the secret of Chopin's creativity: he needn't worry about his material, because he has set himself a fugal theme out of the first few notes he's invented, and he simply hews to that very strict base and improvises variations on it: a simple statement of the theme; a lyrical mid-section; a virtuosic, louder reprise of the theme, using octaves; a light filigree breeze to clear the memory (still based on the one theme); and finally a simple statement of the theme before a scale passage (into which is woven the theme) descends to the final quick octaves. As if the gondolier has fallen overboard.

20. Except possibly with Roger Sessions's first piano sonata.

MUSIC AND TRUTH¹

I entertain myself with lies. I make up stories, I alter reality, I watch movies. I read trash at bedtime, intrigues from the 30's, plots from 1910, when everyone was dependably a spy. When I was young I read a thousand books on vampires. I wrote a three-hundred-page paper in high school, "*De Veneficio, Lycanthropo, et Superstitione*." Not much different than now, except in eight languages, most of them dead. More Anthony Ferrara² than Edward Cullen.

I am vaguely aware that none of this is real. It's a distraction from illusory realities.

Music, on the other hand, is mostly real.

There is lying music, certainly. (Let me now mention your favorites.) Club music. Elevator music. Office music. Frankenstein music, glued together in factories. Born to be bland. I might dance to it (although, more embarrassingly, I dance to Beethoven). I reject what strikes me as wrong, and pick out the parts I believe in, in which I need to believe. Then they become my truth, although they have been true before me.

Music generally, like poetry, isn't made for money. It sings of arms and the man.³ Philosophy does that, but possibly not as entertainingly.

I crave teleology, the end game. I want to know how it all ends. Armageddon is on my mind,⁴ simultaneously trivial and, eventually, entertainingly, bombastically fatal.

1. More pompous you cannot get. I blame Adrian.

2. The necromantic hero of Sax Rohmer's *Brood of the Witch Queen*.

3. As Virgil does in the *Aeneid*.

4. And yours.

But I also want to know how it begins. I want to know what Beethoven was thinking

Music is naked. It's exposed. It has only itself to hide behind. And it's a language that everyone speaks, so it's obvious if the feeling is wrong.

I want to be diverted, even subverted, from cheap realities. But, even more, behind reality, and usually contradicting it, is enlightenment. Enormous industries are devoted to it. Writers and gurus, even composers, unmasked, revealed to be self-serving, are over. I want genuine, ancient tablets, not idols made in Taiwan. I want the *i Ching*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *The Golden Bough*, Robert Graves's *Greek Myths*. I want *Pale Fire*; *Speak, Memory*; Joseph Campbell; Proust. I am no different than a scorpion charmer two thousand years ago (although Egyptian Magic is now available as a skin cream). Despite the immense distractions of the wheel, the forge, the laptop, I seek⁵ nobility in the dust. I have heard the mermaids singing on the beach.

I believe that they will sing for me.⁶

5. Along with Hamlet.

6. Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

– *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, T. S. Eliot

Claude Debussy: *La Cathédrale engloutie*, *Préludes*, Premier Livre, No. 10, C Major, 1910.

This was written the same year as Debussy's *Des Pas sur la Neige*, only three years before Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. It was a breakthrough year for Debussy. He had moved from the countryside to Paris, and had been told he had cancer. This was the last time he could make a difference. Surrounded by the city, he lived in his mind, underwater, or under the snow. This piece is based on an ancient Breton myth in which a cathedral, which is submerged underwater off the coast of the Island of Ys, rises up from the sea on clear mornings when the water is transparent. Priests chant, bells chime,¹ the cathedral organ plays.

There is a sense of Armageddon, of apocalypse, of a composer focused on death, on the afterlife which churches suggest, on the coming chaos of World War I. Debussy is looking for that great bourdon, that low organ note which is the primordial soup, the validation of mankind, the underpinning of society. Authenticity lay in religion, but also in the unmoored spiritual, even in Asian religions, in the transience, the jump, from beauty and delight to nature itself in the raga, an almost religious system of tonalities.

The Industrial Revolution, which had created an immensely wealthy middle class to rival the aristocracy, had also decimated agrarian society. The emphasis was now on metal, not crops. Farmers felt abandoned, unable to compete with the new manufactured products. This led to their resentment of the upper classes. When Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated, the poor felt it was a valid gesture

1. Debussy's Bösendorfer produced very bell-like effects in its treble registers.

which underlined their frustration, and the wealthy felt that the promise of war was an exciting jolt to a decadent life of parties, waltzing, and drunkenness. War would bring new life to both sides of the social coin; until instead it resulted in an even greater sense of unmoored, irrational anomie, a society even farther from the idea of god or morality.

The last gasp of organized rationality had been the 11th Edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, an ultimate compendium of knowledge that was to stand against the barbarians, rendering war useless. But instead the cream of the British intelligentsia, the future's hope for the continuity of reason, was senselessly slaughtered in the trenches of a mechanized war that did away with honor and brotherhood—all the civilities which had formerly rendered battle a gentleman's field of distinction, where troops marched singing into posterity with flowers on their helmets. Wilfred Owen, the British poet lost in the war in 1918, wrote in 1917:

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.²

Debussy's piece has much in common with Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, written in 1896, which eerily presages the anxiety Debussy expresses. In both pieces, fundamental organ notes set the bar. Some sense of divinity has been evoked, and man's fate is to prove worthy of that beginning, of the miracle of his own creation. However, challenges to belief arise. In Strauss they are ultimately resolved. In Debussy's piece, there is a sense of resigna-

2. How sweet and gentle it is to die for one's country. The line from Horace's Odes (III, ii, 13) had been inscribed on the wall of the Sandhurst chapel in 1913.

tion, acceptance, calm, or even relief when the challenge of the ghostly cathedral subsides into the sea.

In order to stress the cultural universality of the idea, Debussy uses both the Hindustani shuddha interval of a fifth, and the Grecian golden mean, to meter and space his notes.

The Golden Section, the Pythagorean ratio of 3 to 2, has been used by Euclid, Aristotle, Plato, daVinci, Kepler, Fibonacci, Le Corbusier, Dali, Mondrian, Bartok and Satie, among many others. Its proportions are known to produce the best concert halls, the soundest buildings (famously the Parthenon). Plants spiral in its proportions. In tuning, if an octave string on a piano is cut by that proportion, it produces what we call a perfect fifth. Using a rhythm of 3 to 2 produces a syncopation used by voodoo drums, the Cuban palo, and the Congo Cycle; it is normally called a hemiola.

Not only does a hemiola produce a lopsided pattern (as in Leonard Bernstein's song, "America"), but its fifths also produce the pentatonic scale, used in church music and in the cross-rhythms of Moorish *ostinato*, so there is an exotic aspect to this cathedral. Russian onion domes were modeled after Moorish churches. In 1889 Debussy had heard Javanese gamelan music at the Universal Exposition.

Debussy added to these culturally resonant fifths the effects of light on water. Just as a painting of a saint walking on water inspired Liszt to describe water in various stages of a miracle, so the idea of an impermeable religious icon sinking towards hell allowed Debussy to play with the blasphemous idea of God submerging.

Debussy was intrigued by the tension between god and nature, by what effect celestial divinities might have on tides, as tidal surges are caused by the sun and moon, so

that the very agents of heaven cause the church to sink: nature versus divinity.

Although the “perfect fifth” interval is the basis of the “just intonation” used by modern tuners, the tuning of bells and organs usually results in quite a few bells and stops going flat, causing a flatted discordance called the tritone, the devil in music, so that the jangly tones of Debussy’s piece may be an echo of the deep, the hellish opposite of celestial bells, heaven echoed in Lucifer’s underground, as devils are just imperfect reflections of angels.

Dvorák’s opera *Rusalka* had been first performed in 1901. The concept of a water sprite, an ondine, condemned to eternal watery darkness by her own father for having dared to love a mortal, plays on the Satanic nature of the deep.

Ravel wrote his *Ondine* in 1908. It is the first of the three-piece suite, *Gaspard de la nuit*, a French expression for the devil. In this case, it isn’t the water nymph who must be sequestered away in the deep, it is the listener.

By introducing notes from the Lydian, Mixolydian, Phrygian, and Aeolian scales, a strangeness is introduced. John Adams used such modes in his *Phrygian Gates*,³ and Philip Glass uses the *moto perpetuo* in gamelan music to introduce a strange *ostinato* which colors his music. Very much like Debussy’s *Des Pas sur la Neige*, the stark fifths here convey a limitless space, the carillon of church bells, the organa of medieval chants.

The extreme high and low notes convey the scale of the ocean, the infinity at stake, the celestial music of the spheres which move the tides, and the suspiciously hellish sea which engulfs the holiest of human aspirations, the church spire and its bells, so sacred and profane are echoed in the extremes of the piano.

3. And in the body of his work in general.

The stillest of oceans is possibly illuminated by the moon. Even so, there is something unsettling here. Vaguely Japanese chords convey a sense of well-being. (Orientalism was very much in vogue at the time. Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* premiered in 1904. Monet and Degas were both proponents of *Japonisme*.)

However, octaves descending into the depths roil the waters, until the vast C major theme arrives at the crux of the piece, using dense chords which move up the scale as if there were no key signature, known as parallel harmonic chords, or harmonic planing modulation: the cathedral is carried aloft, possibly into the air, like Christ ascending into heaven.

[See the title poem, “Sunken Cathedrals,” herein.]

The extreme high and low notes return to bring the eternal note of sadness in,⁴ to remind us of the struggle between rational piety and sensual chaos.

Debussy then uses the overtone series to break up the harmonics of a bell into their component sounds.⁵

4. Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach,” published in 1867, suggests that warring human nature destroys idyllic seascapes; the only salvation lies in faithful love:

Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch’d land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.
Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegæan, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery . . .

5. As Richard Strauss did with his overture to *Also sprach Zarathustra* in 1896.

Maybe this is the exit bell, the turning point after the climax, the signal for the building to submerge. Foundry bells are often unevenly cast, and this leads to overtones being present along with the fundamental tone of the bell. These out-of-tune bells in turn react with other similarly untuned bells to produce more overtones. This also happens to organ pipes, and thus you get the flattening tone which we esteem, precisely because of its imperfection, which causes it to waver over more tonalities than our normal well-tempered instruments, creating that spectral churchly ambiance.

The calm religious hymn returns as the church subsides, undercut with a slightly uneasy bass trill, possibly the eddies of current around the vast cathedral as it sinks.

But the cathedral is finally at peace with the forces which have condemned it to a watery grave, possibly confident it will rise again.

All Saints Church in Dunwich, Suffolk, began to sink into the sea in 1904. Legends sprang up about hearing the sound of bells at low tide, perfectly plausible when Debussy wrote this piece, as the bell tower didn't fall into the sea until 1919, although the church was out in the ocean.

Monet painted *Impression, Sunrise*, the root of Impressionism, in 1874. He painted the Rouen cathedral in 1892 and 1893. He began painting water lilies in 1897. He painted without his glasses, so that accuracy wouldn't interfere with how he saw the world. Although the camera existed at that time, he felt that reflections were more intricate than "realistic" views. Distortion has more to say than supposed accuracy. Bending light is what space does. We see the moon and the stars through bending rays at various times. Those bent rays produce prisms, the green flash at sunset. They allow us to measure the distance and the lives

of stars. The vast majority of what happens to light lies outside the straight ray. As Oscar Wilde said, a mask tells us more than a face.

In adapting impressionistic techniques to music, Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, and other French composers freed harmony from the confines of classicism. Rather than simply accompany or imitate the right hand, the left hand was now free to set its own rhythms, to wander in its own world, as if there were two right hands.

Japanese and Indonesian culture was in fashion in 1910, as Chinese culture is now. Artists began to appreciate the unique vocabulary of Asian perspectives, in music, art, design, architecture, and literature. Tonalities strange to European ears, unusual tunings, the timbre of the gamelan, the angklung, and of bamboo flutes, microtones, raga tone rows, found their way into classical music, widening the systems and emotions of composers.

Debussy's cathedral takes on the overtones of monastic, Ionic chants, but also parallels Asian systems of describing the world. By using chords spaced five tones apart, Debussy evoked both the austere monophonic modes of monks and the 22-note octave of the Hindustani *Bilawal thaat*, associated with seasons and weather. By reverting to earlier ways of hearing and invoking nature, Debussy returns to the roots of language which developed in the Indo-Aryan river basin.⁶ (Richard Feynman similarly rethought the traditional assumptions of science, thus discovering new behaviors of particles.⁷)

6. As described by Mario Pei in *The Story of Language*, 1949, Lipincott.

7. He took apart the car in order to find the cigarette lighter. But, being found, it became apparent that the car needed the lighter in order to start.

REVERSION AND INVENTION

By incorporating ancient tonalities into *La cathédral engloutie*, Debussy raises the dead. Such necromancy has a checkered history. Summoning up literary or musical antecedents, negatively called recidivism, can unearth and perfect discarded truths. Nabokov and Rachmaninoff both perfected earlier forms into masterworks. Bach was regarded as old-fashioned in his day. Puccini was writing operas in an earlier style long after Stravinsky composed *The Rite of Spring* in 1913.¹ Stravinsky himself wrote harmonic works long after Schönberg had imposed a more discordant style on most classical music.²

However, the complexities of cultural resonance often mask the easy victories of simple copying. Tradition becomes incorporated into culture by simply appropriating it. That is, civilization is built on a pyramid of plagiarism.

Artists stand on the shoulders of pygmies as well as giants, which is a way of saying that they have learned to plagiarize from obscure sources. The dean of Boston University's College of Communication delivered a commencement address on plagiarism to the journalism class of 1991 which was found to have been plagiarized from an article in *Reader's Digest*.

Puccini copied many arias from both *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot* from a Chinese music box.³

Picasso and Braque took much of their imagery from a

1. La Rondine, Il Trittico, Turandot.

2. Schönberg was scared of the number 13 all his life; he died on Friday the 13th.

3. Reported by W. Anthony Sheppard in *The New York Times*, June 15, 2012.

1907 exhibition at Paris's Trocadero Museum of Ethnography of masks from Papua New Guinea. Brancusi, Klee, and Gauguin also sought to "juxtapose" tribal and modern objects.⁴

Liszt, Bartok, and Mozart all used traditional folk songs in their compositions.

Shakespeare lifted many passages in his history plays directly from North's translation of Plutarch.⁵

Shakespeare had neither the education, the time, nor the library of the Earl of Oxford. It was the prerogative of the aristocracy to disdain "the purple of commerce," and so Oxford hid his guilty pleasure, i.e., writing under a pen name.⁶

Pedants and others frozen in time conveniently overlook the obvious solution to the "Shakespeare" plays written after Oxford's death: they were written during Oxford's lifetime but only discovered and performed posthumously, as indeed the plays of "Shakespeare" himself are accepted to have been printed posthumously. Simple answers are discounted by people with a complex agenda.⁷

4. Catalogue of William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe's 1984 exposition, "Primitivism in 20th Century Art," at The Museum of Modern Art, 2 volumes, MOMA; the faces in *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. M.)* (Avignon prostitutes) are direct copies of tribal masks.

5. Plutarch's "Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans," Sir Thomas North, trans., 1579, 10 volumes. Shakespeare copied extensive passages from this set into his plays, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Coriolanus*.

6. As Lady Bracknell asks in *The Importance of Being Earnest* of John Worthing's father, "Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?" Wilde was here remarking on the inversion of snobish values after the Industrial Revolution, the aristocracy coming to prefer the money of the new middle class to mere heritage.

7. *Shakespeare's Lost Kingdom*, Charles Beauclerk, Grove Press, 2010. Beauclerk's brilliant book unearths probable truths behind many false assumptions of Elizabethan England. The film *Anonymus* was based on this book, but can only be understood by reading the book first.

WATER MUSIC 3

I write this in a sea room,¹ the cold winds blowing off the endless² ocean outside and rustling the room like a constant fan which, however, when I look at its wooden blades,³ is stationery, pushed into action only by the natural condition of air it emulates at the insistence of thermally-inspired electrons.

Hélène Grimaud writes⁴ of always needing to be “within earshot of living water, *legato*, *rubato* . . .” the way waters laps *a capriccio*, molecules linked in an endless river, but then slowing down and speeding up, stealing time from here and making up for it there, but freely, without calculation, without the fussy capitalism of arithmetic, but with the forgiveness of wind, proceeding at its own bluster pace, now soothing, now gusting, always compensating to allow the steady exchange of the same amount of air around the globe, the life-giving flow of the same amount of water, mutating into different shapes, whether cloud, or stream, trickle or cataract, moisture suspended in air, steam evaporating water into stasis, so that both water and air flow with the music of the spheres: elastic, inevitable, but also stable, maintaining the status quo of the universe by catching up or slowing down,⁵ like tempi breathing with the music.

1. As Adam Nicolson called his Scottish cabin in the Shiantis in *Sea Room*.

2. Endless until Alaska, some 6,000 miles to the northeast; while geographers might protest, the effect is suitably infinite for my unschooled eyes.

3. See Shepherd's, Cairo, Anthony Ferrara, *Brood of the Witch Queen*.

4. In her wonderful book, *Wild Harmonies*.

5. As the universe itself wobbles imperceptibly in a poor imitation of breathing.

Some inflexible German machine, some celestial metronome, may dictate how the story unfolds in the long run, as chaotic patterns in a running faucet follow fractal rules not immediately apparent to our washing hands, but, like fingers parsimoniously handing out morbidly accurate scales in subservience to a brutal god with a train schedule for a heart, these waterfalls and fingerfalls substitute the smooth curve of the universe seen at great distance for the sheer confusion of any of its details, replacing the boiling maelstrom inside the pot with its calm iron exterior, like some robotic astronomer aligning the disturbed drafting curves of van Gogh's starry night⁶ to a mediocre grid, or stuffing his madness into an urban plan of geometric street lights.

We often cease our explorations into the uncertainties of existence after discouraging encounters with the unimaginative math of grade-school pedants, but we are wrong to stop at easy answers to impossible questions. Certain⁷ people would rather the loose ends be tied up right now, all problems solved, all plots finalized, all segues diagrammed, rather than having metaphors suggested by poetry lead us down the rabbit hole into vaster dimensions and new questions. Take your choice: robomusic, or the skitter and scramble of bongos; tearoom music

6. Or *Starry Night*, which hung in A. V. W.'s great-aunt's living room until it went elsewhere, dare I reveal; public art often starts its life discreetly, not that Adrian would ever have mentioned it himself, but biographers have no standards. That will teach our subjects to die. But who are we to believe, the demure deceased or their swollen, desperate hagiographers? In the proper spirit of disclosure, Mozart's first four biographers made it up or plagiarized from one another [wie geht's Schlichtegroll, Niemetschek, Nissen, Jahn]. I freely contribute my name to those royalty-crazed immortals. Fame! People will see me and cry.

7. i.e., people who crave certainty.

of the prim afternoon or the gypsy Scrabble of the possibly empty night. Even the social leveler, the suburban yardstick of the waltz, allows its corseted strictures to be pushed and pulled, because musicians instinctively know that charm comes from the quirks, the accidents, the empty boxes where we expect to find pencil marks, the flaws, the uneven flows of the human heart.

As Paderewski said of time:

There is no absolute rhythm. In the course of the dramatic developments of a musical composition, the initial themes change their character; consequently rhythm changes also, and, in conformity with that character, it has to be energetic or languishing, crisp or elastic, steady or capricious. . . .

Paderewski makes another wonderful comment:

Some people, evidently led by laudable principles of equity, while insisting on the fact of stolen time, pretend that what is stolen ought to be restored. . . . The value of notes diminished in one period through *accelerando*, cannot *always* be restored in another by *ritardando*. What is lost is lost.

Music isn't a simple equation, where stolen kisses must be replaced like flowers in a vase, like pennies stolen by children from the cash drawer, so that the world is perfect again. Criminals always intend in their minds to replace the funds they embezzle. They become fascinating to us when they fail; when they succeed, they do not exist.⁸

Proust feels that lost time can be recaptured, not through math, but through art.⁹ We can reverse the flow

8. The observation principle: criminals are those who are caught.

9. *In Search of Lost Time* (in scientific justification of my simple clause, I offer up without asking Proust's several thousands of pages of art: merci, Marcel).

of time with the nostalgia of music, or the perfect equation of words. A verse in poetry comes from the Italian and the Latin words for "flowing." The universe is flowing in one direction.¹⁰ Of course, once Einstein comes along, we realize that time is curved in on itself, particles repeat in other dimensions, there are mirror symmetries, and time can be recaptured. We are blinded to the larger patterns by what Nabokov calls the "frenzied corpuscles of Krause."¹¹

We stop too soon at adolescent answers to discover the tolerance, the flexibility built in to more complex M-theory or quantum mechanics.

The metronome is the great enemy of complex music; its unforgiving schoolmarm ruler-on-the-knuckles school of sing-song scales and slavish rote has gone a long way to remove classical music from the souls of our children, who have by default¹² sought out tangos, rhumbas, ragas, riffs, the more human pulse of less stringent forms. Those who would breast the copycat routine of their high school music masters should sit down by a stream and watch it eddy, trickle, splash, purl, and ripple, among other tricks.¹³ Water fascinates us because it doesn't repeat itself. Water is a portmanteau word which conjures up to the dull a static basin of standing soapy brine, and to the romantic a storm sea awash in spouts and spray. Water as a word may connote one simple essence, such as might be contained in a glass; but the reality of water in nature is a more rambunctious amusement park of chutes, rapids, and waves.

10. *Una versa*.

11. In a reprehensible paragraph early on in *Lolita*.

12. Low angle thrust faults, as in Friedrich's apocalyptic *Sea of Ice*.

13. Even lithologies fracture in allocthons, scarps, and horsts, planetoid throbbings: lithic, if not lithe.

Composers have been trying since the beginning of music to capture its unbridled and indescribable fury, its delicate murmur and drip (Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau*), its demonic rage (Debussy's *Jardins dans la pluie*), the Walpurgisnacht of storm (Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*), gondolas lolling in the canals (Mendelssohn's various gondola songs; Liszt's and Schubert's *Hungarian Melody*, Alkan's *Barcarolle*) saints walking on water (Liszt's *St. Francis de Paul Walking on the Water*), fountains drizzling and trilling (Liszt's *Les Feux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*), tides swelling and breaking (Chopin's "ocean wave" étude), or the infinity and silence of steps or steppes in the snow (Debussy's *Des Pas sur la Neige*; Rachmaninoff's G-Sharp Minor Prélude).

Some water pieces use the pretext and rhythm of a gondola song to arrive at more complex ends (Chopin's only and Fauré's many barcarolles), the way Tom Stoppard uses the cliché of an Agatha Christie murder mystery to present deeper issues in *The Real Inspector Hound*.

As Feynman did, the only way to discover the more intricate nature of particles (or pieces) we thought we knew is to start from the beginning, to change the rules, to relive our childhood in the language of adults.¹⁴

14. *In Search of Lost Time*, by Marcel Proust; *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954*, by Stephen Millhouse.

THE OUTSIDERS

If I may take the microphone. If I may, just for a minute, present my world, free of erudite passions and self-advertising adjectives.¹

V. W.² might have it indirectly, but possibly not as plainly as I will. In my many years of watching artists, I begin to feel that there's an establishment tax. The most amazing performances, the great idea-led concerts come from musicians who haven't yet been accepted into the mainstream. I think there is a great danger when people become their own reputations. You start to believe your own publicity. Your way of walking changes. The weight of great authority is dropped on you. It tends to make you watchful. Because suddenly people are watching everything you do. Freedom is traded fame. Even a small amount of fame wears you down. Not that I know. But I've seen it. We've all seen it.³ Debussy's prescient biographer, the pianist Paul Roberts, has noted it.⁴ Debussy himself said,

1. To bite the whirling hand that feeds me.

2. Van Wyck Brinkerhoff, my *khoja*; not to be confused with the diminutive German version of *Fahrvergnügen*.

3. As Debussy said when he won the Prix de Rome, "I had a sudden vision of boredom, and of all the worries that inevitably go together with any form of official recognition. I felt I was no longer free."

4. "... the middle-class Debussy, the husband and father walking his dogs, seems a less exciting figure than the penniless unknown artist, of dubious background, who is challenging the very foundations of his art. . . . Compared to the outwardly settled artist in his maturity, the youth is in a state of ferment and growth, open to challenges and influences, finding his path in a kind of heroic quest, an altogether Romantic figure." – *Claude Debussy*, by Paul Roberts, p. 18.

“Life is a compromise between instinct and civilization.” Debussy never won a prize for his piano playing. His father had declared bankruptcy and been sent to prison for treason. Such setbacks motivate brilliant children. Debussy’s supervisor at the Conservatoire regarded him as a dangerous fanatic. It is into the void of exile that genius flows. But Debussy learned to play by the rules, keeping his rebellion initially to himself. Genius throws itself into work to keep the world away, and it is this obsessive need to put up a mask which refines its gifts.⁵

Those who are excluded from mainstream society are driven by the very factors which exclude them (poverty, race, origin, religion, rebellion, eccentricity) into producing the qualities which eventually define and sustain that society.⁶

The composers whom Adriance plays⁷ on this program were all outsiders. Even Debussy. His name was Bussy, and he added the “De” to make himself seem aristocratic. He felt patronized by Satie. Not until he was thirty did he decide what his name was. He was penniless. All his parents saw in him were extravagant purchases of books, drawings, and caviar. Parents rarely approve of dreamy male children. They want bankers. And so their own insecurity is handed down. Debussy’s parents had to move

5. Like all average people, I am prone to lay down the law on smart people. Smart people live in fear of us. We are on to them.

6. I have no authority in saying this. But I have in my time been persuaded by bedside brochures and waiting room reading materials that it is so.

7. Recorded by me, I hasten to add, at great altitude under adverse circumstances in a great abandoned monastery build slab by slab by fearful sherpas and surrounded on all sides by seemingly bottomless ice gorges; this was not my idea.

many times, as did he. Such facts are neglected by hagiographers, but nonetheless form a toughness which builds a shell around a pearl, as the subject himself needs to drown out the encroaching sea, the constant ebb of youth and beauty, with the roar in the conch.

My own childhood was a cliché of threats and insults from my father.⁸ I remember each salvo. “Bill’s son has a good job in a deli.”⁹ Ironically I didn’t have the talent to deserve any of this flattery. But I had enough to be a threat to my parents. I might as well have been Mozart. All of the grief, without the music.¹⁰

What does everyone on this album have in common? They are all outsiders.

Alkan was a pariah and eccentric, suffering the constant anti-Semitism of Paris, passed over for head of the Paris Conservatory, which was the end of his music career.¹¹ The victor, Alkan’s student Marmontel, remains forgotten, although he taught D’Indy, Bizet, Debussy, and Edward MacDowell. Imagine if they had studied with a great composer like Alkan. Alkan didn’t play a concert for fifteen years, after which he played six monumental recitals and then retired into obscurity. Alkan kept two houses. When someone would knock on his front door, Alkan would go

8. Soon to abscond from the family, a man who felt that children were invented for military school or the convent.

9. The deli was my father’s version of Goldman Sachs.

10. I’ve never met anyone who sympathized with this. “You should love your parents,” everyone has always told me. And yet everyone I’ve met has had exactly the same experience. Or been bad parents themselves.

11. Eliminating as it did concert occasions, publishing contacts, social advancement, and opportunities to enlist fellow musicians in the performance of his work.

out the back and spend the day in the other house. Surrounded by the mediocrity of Clementi,¹² Auber, Cherubini, Kalkbrenner, Alkan kept his own counsel and, like Chopin, modeled his music on Bach.¹³

Chopin detested concerts, as Glenn Gould did later on. Chopin felt that he was too effete for anyone but aristocrats, who were educated enough to look beyond his small stature and his dandyism. Chopin was naturally isolated by his genius from being influenced by any of his contemporaries.

Mendelssohn's family tried to hide their Jewish identity behind the name of Bartholdy, a large country estate they had bought. Mendelssohn's parents brought him up Lutheran, even though his grandfather had been the distinguished philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn. His music was neglected in his later life due to anti-Semitism.

Like the Wittgensteins, the Jewish Mendelssohns were more intellectual and wealthier than most of their circle, so they were limited to associating with their own family and to producing works of art. Having only his own early genius for inspiration, Mendelssohn never developed as a composer, but remained aloof from the music of his age, which in general he underestimated.

Fauré longed to be appreciated by the public, to be appointed to the *Institute de France*, to become a music critic for *Le Figaro*, none of which happened. At the end of his life, however, he became director of the Paris Conservatoire, took a younger mistress, and felt free at last.

Chopin, Fauré, Mendelssohn, and Debussy were highly sophisticated, elegant, branché citizens of the most cul-

12. Whom Mozart perceptively called "a mere Mechanicus."

13. And Liszt, in Alkan's case.

tured nation in history. But beneath this outward adaptation lay the exile's sense of temporality, the expatriate's need to make up his world every morning. An exile has to invent his reason to live each day. Those of us who are accepted by our towns have less need of calling cards.¹⁴

From 1810 to 1949, during the formation of the Romantic era, European political chaos introduced the age of anxiety long before Auden¹⁵ or Bernstein¹⁶ or Alan Watts.¹⁷ Over the course of forty years there were the Napoleonic wars; revolutions in Spain and Portugal; Russian wars with France, Persia, and Turkey; the Algerian war; the July Revolution in Paris; the Polish revolt; mass demonstrations in France, Switzerland, and Germany; the Boer war; the British Afghan war, the Chinese Opium War; the Spanish revolution; the Silesian weavers' revolt; the Anglo-Sikh War; revolts in 1848 in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Venice, Milan, Parma, Prague, and Rome; the second Sikh War; and the Austrian defeat of Venice and Hungary. The pieces V. W. chose to perform and which later became a set of six albums¹⁸ grew out of these disasters and defeats, possibly as a response to the unknowability of the universe.

Acceptance breeds complaisance. Exclusion breeds invention. Objects, whose acquisition breeds a NIMBY-

14. Not to presume my own inclusion in this brilliant crowd, but anyone who is obsessed with anything vaguely artistic is more or less driven from his hometown, even if by himself.

15. His eclogue was published in 1947.

16. His second symphony, *The Age of Anxiety*, was written in 1948.

17. The first chapter of *The Wisdom of Insecurity*. Art shields us against insecurity; Buddhism accepts the uncertainty of all things. People are only certain because they have missed something.

18. Of which this is the second.

like sense of finality, are the natural enemies of ideas. To covet anything in itself is to miss its overtones, to misprison the mountains and mists which frame the road sign.

(Of course, to be consistently true to such Draconian righteousness would betray the leniency on which humanism prides itself.¹⁹ On the other hand, spirit grows in proportion to the sacrifices we make in its name.)

Hitler denuded Europe of its Jews and with them, its culture, as Stalin did in Russia. Art, culture, music, architecture, literature, linguistics, science in the United States were the involuntary beneficiaries of the dissolution of Vienna and St. Petersburg. But art continued to be regarded as something outré, outside, alien.

Gershwin (born Jacob Gershowitz) was essentially Russian, as were Bellow and Nabokov. The figures we most admire in our cultural past speak with accents.²⁰ Einstein, Schweitzer, Stravinsky, Barishnikov, Rubinstein, Horowitz. Many of our actors, actresses, and musicians cultivated masks very different from their ethnic patronyms. We all know that Bob Dylan was Robert Zimmerman, Alan Alda was Alphonso D'Abruzzo, Woody Allen was Allen Konigsberg, Jennifer Anniston was Jennifer Anastassakis, Jack Benny was Benjamin Kubelsky, Irving Berlin was Israel Isidore Baline, Maria Callas was Maria Kalogeropoulos,

19. As Oscar Wilde said, "consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative."

20. Although Bel Kaufman, who wrote *Up the Down Staircase*, was denied a teaching license by the school board because she had a Russian accent and gave an inadequate explanation of a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Kaufman sent her explanation to the poet, who wrote back, "You gave a much better explanation of it than I myself should have." The administrators later removed all living poets from the qualifying exam.

Kirk Douglas was Issur Danielovitch Demsky, Goldie Hawn was Goldie Jean Studlendegehawn, Wynonna Judd was Christina Claire Ciminella, Natalie Portman was Natalie Hershlag, Tony Randall was Leonard Rosenberg, Gene Simmons was Chaim Klein Witz, Bruno Walter was Bruno Schlesinger, Gene Wilder was Jerome Silberman, Natalie Wood was Natalia Nikolaevna Zakharenko.²¹

Richard Feynman's parents were Russian Ashkenazim. The head of the successful United States missile program was the German Wernher von Braun. Had any of our entrepreneurs and inventors listened to common wisdom, standard procedure, tradition, convention, protocol, nothing would have been invented. The United States as we know it would not exist.

Being outside society makes it easier to think outside the box. No entrepreneur believes the people who say, "It's impossible." DeWitt Wallace of *Reader's Digest* told Henry Luce that *Time Magazine* was a bad idea. Henry Luce told Walter Annenberg that *TV Guide* was a bad idea.

Both innovation and perfection are often viewed as "other," although arbiters of the social order sidestep the issue with "inverted" criticisms, accusing the artist of the sins of the critic. J. A. Scheibe, Bach's own student, reviewed him as having a "turgid and confused style." The Emperor Joseph II was merely echoing the common opinion when he told Mozart that *The Marriage of Figaro* had "too many notes."²² Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was

21. Maybe some of us didn't know about Wynonna.

22. Mozart's response: "Just enough." Of course the Emperor, who adored Mozart, may simply have said, "A lot of notes." A funny aside from one composer to another. Everything you think you know is wrong.

reviewed when it was first performed as “a new, frivolous and pompous style adopted by the superficial talents of our time.” Beethoven’s Fourth Symphony was originally called “excessively bizarre.” André Gide famously rejected Proust, saying he was “too full of duchesses.”²³

Both looking forward and looking back are threatening to society, which bases itself always on the present.²⁴ And yet perfection of a form often comes from looking back. Great achievements often originate in older and thus unoriginal ideas, where the creators have had time to absorb and transcend the rules.

Rachmaninoff was writing in the earlier harmonic styles of Glinka and Rimsky-Korsakov after Stravinsky changed the musical world with *Le Sacre du Printemps*. J. S. Bach was considered antiquated while he was writing the most enduring music in history. Nabokov has been accused of being a throwback. Brahms was considered old-fashioned in his style. Vivaldi was forgotten for over two hundred years. Shakespeare was neglected by England, and revived by Germany many years after his death.²⁵ Interest in Mozart as a dynamic composer, rather than a dull cliché, has only taken hold in the last few decades because of Peter Shaffer’s play, *Amadeus*.

Styles that look back to earlier forms may sometimes be easy riders, but at other times the perspective they offer

23. Meaning he was out of date.

24. “The past is what man should not have been. The present is what man ought not to be. The future is what artists are. —Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. But to forget the past is sometimes to rob the future.

25. Goethe organized a Shakespeare jubilee in Frankfurt in 1771. The plays were revived around 1778 in Denmark, and 1827 in Paris. *Hamlet* was hissed off the stage in Paris as late as 1822.

allows the form to mature. Obsession with the present can be the enemy of both the past and the future.²⁶

Hirson’s *La Bête*, Richard Wilbur’s translations of Molière plays, Stoppard’s Sheridan-like wit, Sheridan himself –recidivists all.

Ironically, European and Russian artists driven to the United States by anti-Semitic policies made it very difficult for many decades to make a career in music without a foreign name, a form of reverse prejudice.²⁷

But the outsider status of classical thinking kept it from being integrated into the mainstream of American culture, which espoused less demanding harmonies.²⁸

But high art remained classical in nature, in exile from audiences, the sole property of critics. When the movie *Shine* brought momentary popularity to Rachmaninoff, critics competed to distance themselves from his music. Musicians know, even today, that they²⁹ are considered second-class citizens, even by the people who profit from them in the music industry.³⁰

26. “Nothing is so dangerous as being too modern. One is apt to grow old-fashioned quite suddenly.” —Oscar Wilde, Lady Markby in Act I of *An Ideal Husband*.

27. Despite the prejudice which predominated against less talented and impoverished Europeans. To quote Juliet, “My only love sprung from my only hate.”

28. Which ultimately incorporated some of the German innovations.

29. Except for the most successful.

30. Brinkerhoff once passed me off as a pianist to a festival director who was extremely taken with his own goatee. Despite my complete lack of talent, I got to be a pretend virtuoso for an evening, object of a mixture of contempt, one-upsmanship, and ostracism. Needless to say, I was delighted to go back to my lowly position as a much-needed functionary. The director was so busy pimping his power that he never noticed I was his piano tuner.

The most devastating attacks on artists sometimes come from the very people entrusted with their survival. They are safe in their savagery, because what musicians will bite the hands that feed them? Only those with nothing to lose. Zombie pianists.³¹ We who are about to die salute you.

Liszt over the course of his life was appalled that musicians were disrespected, ignored, and given no credit for their role in society. He abandoned his writings, and eventually his concert life, in despair over this growing philistinism, even though the art that would eventually transfigure the time was everywhere in evidence. It has long been the dilemma of the artist to be ignored by the present and glorified by posterity. You live for your own death. The Abbé Lammenais wrote, “The artist must be the prophet of (the) future.”

Pianists are impossible to understand for people not afflicted with their gifts. Like Paganini, Faust, or Melmoth the Wanderer, they seem to ordinary people to have made a visible, or at least audible, deal with the devil.

As H el ene Grimaud says,³² this is why they burn witches: some women are just too smart, and too beautiful. Or too pianistic.

Being an exile in your own country is bound to wear on an artist’s inner life. A good example of the despair felt by poets and novelists in our own age is found in Saul Bellow’s novel *Humboldt’s Gift*, about the life and death of Delmore Schwartz, but also about Bellow’s own struggles as a Nobel laureate trapped between academia and the mob, both sides competing to humiliate him. The Univer-

31. Because every hand feeds them.

32. In her wonderful early autobiography, *Wild Harmonies: A Life of Music and Wolves*.

sity of Chicago refused to grant Bellow a position in the English Department, as the faculty were too threatened, in the same way English professors at Harvard told their students to avoid the poet Archibald MacLeish’s lectures. It was threatening to men of milder letters that MacLeish had actually lived in the center of literary history in the 1920’s, with Hemingway, Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, the Murphys, Picasso, Braque, the Steins.³³ The anguish of Thomas Bernhard at Vienna’s anti-cultural leanings drives all his novels.³⁴ Artists have always sensed the ultimate failings of great societies, whether Weimar, Vienna, Paris, or Venice. Before all these civilizations collapsed, they turned inwards on their geniuses. Destroy the artists, and the rest will follow.

33. As Yeats wrote in “The Scholars,”

All think what other people think;
All know the man their neighbor knows.
Lord, what would they say
Did their Catullus walk that way?

34. Let us mention here Stefan Zweig, Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, David Foster Wallace, John Kennedy Toole, the writers who abetted society’s transient judgement with their own hands.

Claude Debussy: *Des Pas sur la Neige, Préludes, Premier Livre, No. VI, D Minor, 1910*

Sad and slow. This rhythm should have the sonorous value of the depths of a countryside, sad and iced-over.

There are two versions included here, each the contradiction of the other.

What is the silence, the quest of these wounded notes, resolving for a second before the next mystery, adding overtones that don't solve anything but, if anything, subtract each time from the sterile moonscape. Attempts at melody fail. Schönberg would be proud. This is the modern world, discovered at the turn of the century, around the same time as Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

The discords now fall down the scale from their clusters. The early footsteps begin again, with lyric overtones up high. Each footstep becomes more labored, descending down into hell, or a crevasse, until the echoing clouds close over the lost pianist.

Matthew Greenbaum¹ talks about the contradictory nature of each statement in *Des Pas*, what Noam Chomsky² would call negative syntax, grating tonal ambiguities which, being put down like footsteps, resolve into the snow, until the next one falls, higher up the tectonic, diatonic hill. Leonard Bernstein describes this in his Norton Lectures,³ using St. Augustine's self-canceling exhortation, both threat and promise:

Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved.

1. <http://www.ex-tempore.org/greenbaum/WOLPE.htm>

2. In his book, *Language and Mind*.

3. *The Unanswered Question*, Harvard, 1971, see the below chapter, "The Augustine Canard!"

Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.

Two sentences, each with a 3-word major premise, each one proposing an opposite action. Each sentence ends with a verb which is the opposite of the other. The middle of each sentence is the same. So nothing has been said. The two sentences cancel each other out. But they are a matter of life or death.

Yet something has been said. Despite the zero sum of the two oppositions, a message has been conveyed between the lines: don't go to extremes, live your life in the middle. Don't be presumptuous, but on the other hand don't be paranoid. Take all things as they come. This is an extraordinarily Buddhist thought for a converted hedonist⁴ two thousand years ago, but then Buddhism was in the air five hundred years before Christ.

But it isn't either or.⁵ Both thieves exist at the same time and in the same space, and have equal merit.⁶

Debussy is posing this "unanswered question." Where are we going? Where is the narrator going? Where is the subject of the piece going? Is it the same direction, or is the composer commenting on his captive footprints? Is the composer lost, or only the pianist? Whose footprints are they? Composer, performer, or bystander?

In a way, *Des Pas* is about the untuning of the spheres, about how dissonance unsettles us, and about how music has the capacity to comment on galactic harmonies. The infinity of high mountain slopes, the immense "giant's sandbox" feeling of the Himalayan moraines can normally be understood only by being there. But Debussy

4. St. Augustine, assuming it was him.

5. As Kant would insist.

6. Hegelian pluralism.

(who wasn't there) creates the feeling of anomie, dis-sociation, strangification, the angst of realizing that we exist peripherally, outside the clockwork of astronomical alignments. (Although musicians seem to be in harmony with the mechanisms of celestial assonance, governments are usually not, maybe with the exception of Bhutan and, formerly, Buddhist Tibet.)

It is the resolution of dissonance which soothes us into believing that the universe can be resolved, that space is finite, that human knowledge can compass and thus control existence. To unearth the earth, to expose our false assumptions, Debussy uses primal scales. This was only three years before Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* caused a riot at its premiere at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées in Paris.⁷

To put it in perspective, Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto had been composed the year before. *Madame Butterfly* had premiered six years earlier. The Model T Ford had debuted two years earlier. Transatlantic radio was only two years old, but still undependable. "Luxury" cinemas would open in Paris a year later.⁸

Can the essential discordance of the music of the spheres resolve into easy harmony, or are harmonies themselves outmoded? Schonberg would agree with the latter. The Phrygian and Lydian modes, scales used by monks, which sound very modern, ascetic, or severe to our more melodic Western ear, are in fact very old-fashioned, harking back to the days before we tempered tonality to be more in agreement with itself.

7. Cocteau got up on the stage and addressed the booing crowd: "Stravinsky hasn't failed you; you have failed Stravinsky."

8. The Gaumont-Palace and the Pathé-Palace.

Older scales, or modes of composition, states of musical being, were more in line with planetary enjambments, the precessions of the nodes, the barely perceived and yet massive underlying tectonic dissonances in orbits and stellar timings—the concomitant fractures in time and space which have led us to more modern theories of nature which attempt to embody these unexplained jagged edges and black hole middles of existence.⁹

There is something in us which dares disturb the universe,¹⁰ which wants to rhyme the single verse¹¹ of existence with our own poorly planned cubist fall down the stairs,¹² to unite the vice versa of space into an adjusted Julian calendar which rearranges celestial time around human affairs.

This is a pathetic fallacy, the illusion that we can control the weather (as we all believe, based on statistical triumphs catalogued by comfortably partisan memory); the illusion that fate shapes its ends around us. Each of us in our time demands that the sky conform to our small commands, our tiny exigencies of shopping, commuting, party-giving, beach-going.

The fact that music exists solely in horizontal, forward-moving time makes it vital that schedules be met exactly, that notes be in agreement, that tunings be pleasant, and that the wolves, the demons, the chasms beneath the grinning facade of the glacier be kept at bay.

9. As Hamlet says,

The time is out of joint: O cursèd spite,

That ever I was born to set it right.

10. Eliot's Prufrock asks, "Do I dare disturb the universe?"

11. The universe.

12. Marcel Duchamp's painting, "Nude Descending a Staircase"; also Tom Stoppard's play "Artist Descending a Staircase."

But Debussy has his cake and eats it, too, by contradicting each note with its jangly neighbor note. Even as one tone cluster resolves, the next appears to contradict what just happened. And yet each cluster is higher than the last. Progress is made, despite the contradictions in each footstep.¹³

Music isn't just a ticker tape, moving inexorably in one direction. In order to be flexible, it has to be able to question, to reverse, to contrast a hero with an anti-hero, a thesis with an antithesis, a note with its opposite, an angry beginning with a romantic second movement. Logical progressions are themselves based on a duality, on contradicting answers: we arrive at correct premises only by posing and then discarding flawed suppositions.¹⁴ We juxtapose the true with the false. In Hegelian pluralism, of course, there can be two or more truths operating simultaneously.

There are flaws in space, worm holes, which contradict an ordered world. Einstein discovered space (and thus time) to be warped, even curved. Quantum Mechanics posits the existence of concurrent universes, where time can flow at different rates.

A similar flaw to logical consistency is revealed by Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise. Before Achilles can catch up with the Tortoise he must logically at some point halve the distance between himself and the turtle. He must

13. Very much as St. Augustine's "negative syntax" produces a similar resonance, as discussed above. See also the below chapter, "The Augustine Canard."

14. Lewis Carroll pointed out the errors of a purely logical approach to life in his *Symbolic Logic*:

No one takes in the Times unless he is well-educated.
Those who cannot read are not well-educated.
Hedgehogs cannot read.
Thus, hedgehogs do not take in the Times.

then halve that distance, and so on. So, if that premise is correct, Achilles can never reach the Tortoise. And yet we know he does. Tom Stoppard bases his play, *Jumpers*, on this paradox. John Barth wrote *The End of the Road* to demonstrate the necessary inconsistencies of existence.

And so Debussy explores through footsteps the concept of music contradicting itself, and yet crawling to the heights, only to fall back down again in the same contradictory patterns to the ends of space, "d'un fond de paysage."

As Paul Roberts mentions,¹⁵ footprints signal the absence of the maker as well as his former presence, so there is a negative syntax implicit in *Des Pas*. Footprints are a contradiction, both life and its absence. Who can say if the mountaineer who leaves behind his ice ax is alive? "Pas" in French is both a footfall and the word which, added to a verb, signifies "not," or disagreement. And so the title is a pun.

But as Debussy wrote in an essay in *Gil Blas* in 1903, ". . . music has a life of its own that will always prevent it from being too precise. It says everything that one cannot put into words; thus it is logical that to emphasize it is to diminish it." That is, he was trying to stay away from a strictly descriptive interpretation of his music. Although ulterior motives make music understandable, and may in fact be the inspiration for a piece, none of us like to have our sentimental, childish first drafts unearthed; we hide behind the rewrites, while critics try to restore the simple MacGuffins¹⁶ which produced the music initially. My

15. In his excellent *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*.

16. Hitchcock's word for the *idée fixe*, his motivating theme. Hitchcock described the word to François Truffaut in 1966 as a story about two men in a train.

One man says,
"What's that package up there in the baggage rack?"

sympathies are simple: everyone but ourselves should be outed. Dylan Thomas wrote completely simple poetry, and then fancied it up in later drafts. Rachmaninoff puts the melody that motivated his Third Piano Concerto right up front, and returns to it at the end, everything else being an improvisation on the initial premise. But, like all of us, no one likes their roots to show.

The year before he wrote *Des Pas*, Debussy realized he had cancer. One can only guess how his urban life in Paris looked back to the wider spaces St.-Germaine-en-Laye, where he had walked in the winter fields, trees fading into the snow. And now Paris was fading into disease and death. The gauntlet was thrown down to art by life.

The world darkens around me. The world, only a few minutes ago spread out so brilliantly and so exhaustively around me, narrows to a black point. All options gone. My last inheritance a chapatti. And some dal. I can't pay the porters. Money should be useless here. You'd think. But it's all they want. Where are the stores? What can they possibly buy? But it grounds them. In the midst of death there is shopping.

There's no getting out. In the world of the touched, I am untouchable. Among the blind, I am invisible.

There should be some maiden aunt somewhere I could phone for another week, another day. Fast funds to the

The other answers, "Oh, that's a McGuffin."

The first one asks, "What's a McGuffin?"

"Well", the other man says, "It's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands."

The first man says, "But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands," and the other one answers,

"Well, then, that's no McGuffin!"

So you see, a McGuffin is nothing at all.

Hinku. Manna to Makalu. Of course they're all dead. I was dead to them before they were dead to me. Bonsoir, Aunt Millie. I remember her fond last words, whispered in my ear: "You'll burn in hell." She was such a drama queen. Grazie, la Signora Sanguie.

The prodigy with promise.¹⁷ No mucho promesa ahora. The world, without its vast systems, its arteries of luxury, drains just like that. The sky goes black and white. A world without Kodak. The day bled off like life. Everything leached of light, of color.

Who would have thought it would have been me, homeless, penniless, lifeless? To jump ahead. How rapidly it happens. 60 to 0 in four seconds. A Ferrari without a road. I'm not ready. O hands. In no particular order. I never played favorites. What have we come to. What have I done to you?

I spread out my estate, on a rock, before I lose the touch of light, the light touch, so I can find everything. Everything I'm left. Everything I am. So. Be everything you can be. See Hunku and die. When I die, who plays my music? You'll all play Chopin. Your Chopin. My Chopin dies today. Surpassing all previous foul-ups. I have everything I want, really. I always did. Except sleep.

And that's it. A few bad dreams, and nothing. Issy, hold my hand. Where is Issy?

The diary. A camera. I shouldn't have given the parka to Ang Kami. I could live, with a parka. The ink is frozen in the Bic. Pencil lead fades. It won't stick. It slips off the ice on the page. The light fades, the lead fades. I'll just sleep now, while no one is looking. What is a world, if everything

17. A tautology. Pardon my jumping in. Footnotes to the bitter end.

is white? It's not that kind of divine light white. It's a blizzard. It's a grey white. Growing black. In the end, it's Kant, not Hegel. There's no choice. It's white or black. Stand by.

On a totally unrelated subject: who will I even write to with my pencil? Myself. I'll send a message in a bottle. Let's make a date. Unfortunately, I'm sick of me. But I'm short on time. I wanted to watch the kids grow up. Everyone says that. Someday soon, there will be no kids. Everyone will be a web site.

Who wants my note? For sale by owner. When all else fails, it's that girl in the carriage. Turning the corner. Her eyes through the tinted glass. I am not an expert, but I took it all for granted. Gone forever. In my opinion. I don't deserve memories. Release the hounds, Franz. I who must be obeyed. Beyond all recognition.

A minute before you go. My piano for a minute.

Footprints whited out. Like fingerprints. By mist. You don't even notice. One by one. Life played backwards by fog.

I'll take the cheap casket. The Total Quality Package. Pine with no handles. Why would a corpse need a knob? My parents never had a coffin. No music please. They didn't want Chopin at the Post Hotel. It disturbed the diners. The VHF of solar wind merging with the white of soap flakes. Yet another acronym. You were my only love always. Down and down until the echo, the last memory, of wind, of me. The underworld evaporates in the wormhole. Lost in the telling. One last chord. What would it be? Sir Arthur Sullivan. How can you joke? All right: Don Giovanni's chromatic scale, slithering magnetic curtains waving across the ice.

– from *The Last Pianist*¹⁸

18. *Des Pas sur la Neige*, in so many words

THE AUGUSTINIAN CANARD

This began life as a footnote.¹

St. Augustine is reputed to have said of the two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus: “Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.”

Or you can say it backwards:

Do not presume that one of the thieves was saved.

Do not despair that one of the thieves was damned.

St. Augustine may have gotten it from Luke.

Luke is reputed to have included the story in his gospel, although no one has yet found it there.

Beckett's characters discuss it in *Waiting for Godot*, where again it is dismissed as apocryphal.

And yet that is precisely Beckett's point: we remember urban myths the way they come down to us, as a game of telephone.

This process is a “canard.” The original canard (French for “duck”) was a French newspaper anecdote (apparently invented) about a mythical duck eaten by a duck, who was then eaten by another duck, and so on, until one duck had essentially eaten all the ducks in the yard. It seems like something that could happen, at least hypothetically. It's a Zeno's paradox, although not by Zeno. The American press picked up the story as true, and after a while, the French press picked it up from the American press, which validated the truth of it. So both sides of the Atlantic were

1. To “Des Pas sur la Neige.” And now it has its own footnote. Our children grow up and have their own children.

hoist on their own petard. As MacBeth says, “. . . we but teach bloody instructions which, being taught, return to plague th’inventor.” [Act I, scene vii]

The word canard is, according to Wikipedia:

Related to French *canot* (“little boat”). Specifically, the term Canard refers to a tactic used by a parent duck to deceptively draw a predator away from its offspring or nest by quacking and feigning a broken wing. In other words the “Canard” or “Duck” is lying.

It is said by Littré to be from the phrase *vendre un canard à moitié*, to half-sell a duck, “from some long-forgotten joke.”

Another dictionary says it’s derived from the Old French onomatopoetic verb *caner*, to quack. Another source explains the half-duck saying. If you sell half a duck to someone, you sell the other half to someone else. You’ve sold the same duck twice, to two different people, rather like selling the Brooklyn Bridge.

So the modern anecdotal history of the word (the marvelous duck) has been completely lost. It doesn’t occur in dictionaries, encyclopedias, or the web. Urban myths come full circle, a game where truths and lies are interchanged and forgotten. The important urge seems to be rumor, or gossip, or word of mouth. We value anecdotal history more than history.²

I heard Bernstein mention the quote in his Norton Lec-

2. As Fernand Braudel holds in *A History of Civilizations* and in *The Mediterranean* that the history of the common man is more important than the history of the great. What normally comes down to us is history as written by the victors; our age, however, is history written by the victims. But was Braudel the result of his era, or did he create the era?

tures at Harvard in 1971, but it didn’t make it into his filmed re-enacting of the talks, nor into the book, which seems to have been based on the film. It was probably deleted by editors as untraceable. At the time, in the talks at Harvard, I thought he had said “one of Thebes” instead of “one of the thieves.” And I thought he had said it was from St. Paul, and that Chomsky used it as an example of “negative syntax.” And so I added to the game of telephone.

I think (as did Bernstein) that the “two thieves” story is an easier way of explaining Chomsky’s negative syntax than Chomsky’s longer sagas of Jack and Jill. And yet it has vanished. You had to be there at the lectures. Another example of the tenuous nature of knowledge.

People spend their lives seeking meaning. From gurus, from self-help books, from talk shows, from rumor and urban myths. Looking for love in all the wrong places. Conversely, *Waiting for Godot*, *Jumpers*, Bernstein’s Norton Lectures, the poetry of Auden, MacLeish, Merrill, *The Golden Bough*, the writings of Joseph Campbell, all shower us in meaning, depth, and the connections between human existence and its scientific underpinnings.³ Even the sense of our own insignificance which they inculcate is a reassuring truth.

Beckett said to Harold Hobson in 1956: “There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine, I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English. ‘Do

3. For instance, *Just Six Numbers*, by Martin Rees, lists the obscure equations which, varied by as little as a millionth, would produce a planet without people. *Patterns in Nature*, a Harvard symposium edited by Peter Stevens, shows, for instance, how lightning forks the way a tree branches, and how patterns replicate themselves in both galaxies and microbes. Jonathan Miller’s book, *On Reflection*, offers a different sort of revelation.

not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.' That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters."

So Beckett more or less made it up the way he wanted to believe it. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn documents that scientists set out to prove what their community already believes. Einstein believed in God, and thus felt the universe had to have a definable structure, and thus must not be expanding into ever-more-chaotic infinity, but in fact contracting. His vision of the universe, of space and time, of matter, of relativity (and thus our view) is based on his initial assumption, that there is a God. He thus devised a test for this which was only conducted after his death.

Here is the modern source of the "two thieves" story, in Beckett's witty *Waiting for Godot* (1953) (early Stoppard dialogue owes a lot to this play):

VLADIMIR:

Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story?

ESTRAGON:

No.

VLADIMIR:

Shall I tell it to you?

ESTRAGON:

No.

VLADIMIR:

It'll pass the time. (Pause.) Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour. One—

ESTRAGON:

Our what?

VLADIMIR:

Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been

saved and the other . . . (he searches for the contrary of saved) . . . damned.

ESTRAGON:

Saved from what?

VLADIMIR:

Hell.

ESTRAGON:

I'm going.

He does not move.

VLADIMIR:

And yet . . . (pause) . . . how is it—this is not boring you, I hope—how is it that, of the four Evangelists, only one speaks of a thief being saved? The four of them were there—or thereabouts—and only one speaks of a thief being saved. (Pause.) Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you, once in a way?

ESTRAGON:

(with exaggerated enthusiasm). I find this really most extraordinarily interesting.

VLADIMIR:

One out of four. Of the other three, two don't mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him.

ESTRAGON:

Who?

VLADIMIR:

What?

ESTRAGON:

What's all this about? Abused who?

VLADIMIR:

The Saviour.

ESTRAGON:

Why?

VLADIMIR:

Because he wouldn't save them.

ESTRAGON:

From hell?

VLADIMIR:

Imbecile! From death.

ESTRAGON:

I thought you said hell.

VLADIMIR:

From death, from death.

ESTRAGON:

Well, what of it?

VLADIMIR:

Then the two of them must have been damned.

ESTRAGON:

And why not?

VLADIMIR:

But one of the four says that one of the two was saved.

ESTRAGON:

Well? They don't agree and that's all there is to it.

VLADIMIR:

But all four were there. And only one speaks of a thief being saved. Why believe him rather than the others?

ESTRAGON:

Who believes him?

VLADIMIR:

Everybody. It's the only version they know.

WATER MUSIC 4

Quite a few years ago I rode around Venice in a *vaporetto*, a water taxi, taking pictures of Venice¹ reflected in a chrome fender which was lying on the boat's deck. The reflections rose and fell, merged and split apart in the chrome, the way the waves interwove on the water. The balconies of palazzi, the striped barber poles on which gondolas tie up, the ornate lace of the lintels and mantels, all swirled around and piled up on one another the way waves create fractal patterns which are theoretically rare, but which in practice occur constantly. It is this penduluming of forces by which a child pumps a swing higher, and by which waves pile up to create rogue waves.²

When I would look away from the camera at the reality of single-screen Venice, it seemed dull compared with the perfect storm of images Photoshopped³ over one another in the camera lens. If you looked at the chrome fender by itself, you saw nothing. It was only through the polarized telephoto lens that the world started waving.

This seemed more accurate to me than the single-view version of Venice. When we look back at a place, all the images jump around in our mind, the way dreams do, the way thoughts do on dreamless nights in bed. This Twister game of photos seems to me to be closer than the dull Victorian Johnny-one-note slide show, one shot at a time. The world is lumped together.⁴ Our minds are a con-

1. A few are in *Into the Window*, <http://www.blurb.com/bookstore/detail/20526>.

2. According to Susan Casey's book, *The Wave*.

3. An anachronism: this was long before Photoshop, a sign of editorial tempering.

4. As Claude Lévi-Strauss said, everything is influenced by everything else.

tango of videos, magazine blurbs, movie trailers, pop song snatches, billboard shots, radio channels, picture captions, swirls of skirts, Hawaiian shirts, sweating models, a short phrase from Carmen or Bohème thrown together while our voices continue on auto pilot about the stock market or the weather.

The way we think of Paris or Venice is jumbled up, buildings heaped on piers, girls and gondolieri, pasta and Bellinis thrown together into a melismatic soup of summer haze and evening breeze, lust and rectitude, logic and frenzy on top of one another like tourists, summarized in squints and grunts from the part of us that filters out the noise, the static, the rumble and hiss of the record filtered to focus on the tenor's text, or the full moon just visible in the blue shimmer off the spangled canal.

And so the cubist tangle of polaroids falling down the stairs in Braque or Hockney is how the eye sees, and the ear hears. Although the dozens of water pieces here under the jeweler's case all present only one facet of their oily, limpid, sleek, slippery ripples, taken together they are a group portrait of water in the age of genius, when the naive ear was beguiled by a fountain or a rainstorm.

This was discovered in the pianist's knapsack at 21,000 feet. I believe I have a photo somewhere of his footprints (des pas sur la neige),¹ trailing off into eternity.² – Ed.

LOST PIANIST

All pianists are lost. Or want to be lost. To be discovered today is to be dropped tomorrow.³ To lose yourself is, on the other hand, to unravel the world. As long as I seem to have the time at the probable end of my life to scribble parables, and maybe that's why parables are the chosen form of saviors everywhere, – when you're a god, and ready to beam up, you try to change the subject – let me say that only the buried can really discover. You have to have something to gain. When you're lost, you need to find yourself. When someone else finds you, you lose yourself. When you're named, you're stuffed in a box. And by whom? Better to find yourself than to let others do it. Still, finding yourself is another form of hubris. It's a toad, liking what he sees in the mirror. What a toad. Or it's a toad, being watched jealousy by three other toads. That's fame, lads. It seems obvious when you put it like that. When it's toads. But when it's us, we say, Hiya, froggie. We are the only exceptions to all our theories.

Looking around me at a concert, I see thousands of hopeful faces. People who expect to find. Who expect me to know. To open up worlds for them. Absolutely terrifying. All it does is encourage me to lie, to convince even myself that I can provide the revelations people want. Just

1. See the notes to this piece in this volume.
2. Over a cliff, in any case.
3. To be discovered is to be found out. – Oscar Wilde

to steady my nerves. If I look into my soul, and only the pure can do that, I see nothing but mistakes, false notes, half-learned chords, question marks. And so that's what I play.

Why me? Who am I to risk the public's soul on limericks? On sight-reading? I, whose technique reduces a *langsam* to a dirge? Whose presence subtracts from a piano? To whom *adagio* only means slow?

Adagio. Slow down. I don't speak Italian. How can Italian music have meaning to me? To an American whose idea of Italy is Buco di Beppo, a bad pizza on Saturday night? I don't have Bellini for blood. I don't even have oregano. I have to add it from a shaker.

But if I give in to the truth, of all things, I'll run away screaming. The truth is, I'm out here to fake it. To guess at where my hand will land. To clone emotions. With borrowed notes. Cliff's notes. Monarch notes. I need notes to notes. Cheat sheets. My own scribbles, not Mozart's. Quavering semi-quavers. To make music is only to vamp till ready. And you're never ready. So it's all vamp. Chest-beating. To disguise the fact that there is no organ-grinder. Only monkeys.

Gabriel Fauré/ Halstead: Barcarolle No. 1 in A Minor, Opus 26, 1880

People have speculated¹ that Fauré watched the lake at Lugano in Switzerland, where he spent his summers, and that the bezels of light and shadow off the ripples there were the visual equivalent of the major and minor flickers of tonality across the surface of his compositions, particularly his water pieces such as the barcarolles, which he wrote on and off during his life.

In the way that light was everything for Monet and Turner,² Fauré is here trying to catch the midges in the air, the soft summer yellow light on the underside of a chestnut leaf, the fresh smell of mulch, mowed fields, flowing water, and, maybe in the distance the faint music of a Sunday lunch on the grass, tipsy villagers humming sporadically to music strummed by amateur guitarists. The gondola here is a French dinghy, a barque, just as much a tradition as the Italian gondola.

You can hear the wandering melisma³ of the accompaniment. There is an almost Gregorian nature to its chant, more pagan than churchly, from an earlier era that was closer to the origins of rite in the Greek myths as explained by Robert Graves, where the Hydra was in fact eight tribes of Maenads, drunken Bacchantes who would get drunk and slaughter errant villagers, as the hashashim would be

1. Jessica Duchon, *Gabriel Fauré*, p. 158

2. Monet painted without his glasses so people could see the world out of focus and filled with textures as he saw it, Turner had himself strapped to the mast during a storm at sea so he could paint it later.

3. Ismie, always wandering, whose favorite writer, she said, was Ibid; I refuse to explain myself

drugged by their leaders in ancient Persia so they could kill without remorse. I mingle it more mysteriously with the melody, so the gossamer glints of a gentle, warm day become inseparable from the Venetian theme, the dream-child moving through a land of wonders wild and new.⁴ When played too matter-of-factly, the dream dissipates. Pierre-Alain Volondat captures it well,⁵ although my own path is more dreamy. The melody is so distinct that you never run the risk of losing it in the swallow spirals and vine traces of its companion runnels which rise to the sky from the deeper tones of the river.

The mid-section is that exquisite afternoon in a boat, any boat, on the Dordogne, or along the Seine in any of Manet's rowboats, cue the poem:

All in the golden afternoon
Full leisurely we glide;
For both our oars, with little skill,
By little arms are plied,
While little hands make vain pretense
Our wanderings to guide.⁶

By bringing out the melody at the expense of the wandering, lost descant, the music becomes too deterministic, goal-oriented, which is the opposite of the mood Fauré seems to intend. Does every Saturday afternoon in the park have to end in a business meeting? Do the important parts have to be so insecurely loud? Can't they make a point without shouting? Does every note have to be squarely in place

4. "All in the Golden Afternoon," Lewis Carroll's introductory poem to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, to suddenly veer off down Victorian alleys.

5. On YouTube, assuming that YouTube will exist when I die.

6. Ibid.

and in its time slot, like a worker in a factory, or is there hesitation, doubt, invention, improvisation, some silence where you can hear the composer composing, where the former takes a pause to write (rather than perform)? Does there have to be a rush to the end, or can it just fade away slowly like the light at the end of a perfect day on a country river? Has anyone who plays this piece ever drifted without any agenda down a river, past hollow willows, hungover vines, oaks shading the moving world with barely moving shadows? There is a world beyond metronomes, schedules, trains to catch, autobahns, of confused alarms of struggle and flight,⁷ of lovers praying for the day to continue. Do we play for them?

You might wonder how Fauré embroiders his notes around the melody, and I think it's exactly the same way as a seamstress feather-stitches a seam, making a small pattern out of what would otherwise be a nondescript line of reinforcing thread. Fauré uses the notes under and over the melody, neighbor notes, to create a scale, and then simply continues that scale farther than usual, so it spirals up like smoke. But, like smoke, it has to waft with the breeze, be susceptible to the thermals at sunset, wander into the last sunlit spaces under the dark foliage, like that Sempé bicyclist,⁸ like Courbet's *Young Women on the Banks of the Seine*, like many of Monet's and Manet's rowboats, indolently becalmed in dark, Henri Rousseau primeval forests,

7. *Dover Beach*, Matthew Arnold.

8. Sempé delivered wine by bicycle in his youth, and he became a great illustrator of bicycles in all environments, particularly one he designed of a bedraggled night cyclist surrounded by a mysterious Corot moonlit forest for the cover of Paul Roberts' book, *Claude Debussy*.

not too different from the riverbanks of the modern day Dordogne.

Rachmaninoff uses swirls of neighbor notes around his melodies. In Rachmaninoff they are aggressive and discordant in the fast movements, but similarly midsummer in the slower movements. Over time, Fauré became more dissonant, but here there is only a hint of the later modernist. You could choose to accent the fairly shocking dissonance of the wraith-like aurora that cloaks the dark forest with clues of a more brutal, industrialized world,⁹ or you could let them rest for the time safely in the past.

Fauré didn't feel that melodies should be confined to any one hand or part of the piano, and blurred the lines between melody and accompaniment, so that I don't here stress the melody, even though it is very lyrical; it becomes just part of the interlacing patterns of the light wending up through the dappled filigree of the forest. It is even more ethereal when woven into the leaves.

As nature doesn't beat you over the head with its revelations, so Fauré believed in subtlety, in the surreptitious and the clandestine, the nuanced, elegant, and restrained. This is a particularly French ethos.¹⁰ If you study the light in Corot, Rousseau, Manet, you understand the gradations of light and dark he intended. 1880 was a world alive with impressionistic glimmers and ripples, such as Renoir's *On the Terrace*, or Monet's *Woman with a Parasol*, Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold*. There were no sounds on the country river back then other than leaves rustled briefly by the breeze, the backsplash of the oars, the furl of small sails. Impressionists hadn't yet begun to differentiate them-

9. That is, bring out the dissonance.

10. Jessica Duchon, *Gabriel Fauré*, p. 172.

selves, and Paris was united in the way to see nature. People saw Monet's colors in the sky.

This is a song from that period, before the camera made clarity a novelty. Myopia allows a more mystical attitude towards objects which the camera would see as realist, grimy, seedy; and the zeitgeist finally, along with Fauré himself, seesawed away from this golden moment (but not necessarily beyond it).

The middle melody reminds me of the music played at bandstands during the summer in town parks all over the United States and Europe during my youth (and during Fauré's). These are great whirling accordion themes which carousels came to cheapen, with their mechanical whines and grinds. But they had in them a long time ago something of the magic of a child's summer evening, small girls in pinafores who chased boys in sailor suits madly around the bandstand with their peers, the world filtered through the eyes of a seven-year-old. Rather than being elitist, This midsection is the music of the people, of the working class, empowered by the Industrial Revolution, with a dependable salary not tied to crops and weather, who could promenade while their children played in the garden atmosphere of music, food, and wine suddenly available to more people than ever before, before machines and buildings and electronics began to erode the innocence of leisure with the frenzy of communication.

Here is a message from the world of your great grandparents, a postcard from a bandstand.

THE CONCERT LIE

Stepping out on stage, in the sweat of the lights, blinkered like a horse to the reality rustling around the hall like a multichannel spider, whatever you do is a question mark, a lie, an exposé of a sloppy past.

The way you walk betrays maybe a slight mince, an unmanly hip-happy ramble, an ascetic, tight-loined pad, an obnoxious party-girl stride.

The way you hold your hands is either up in the air as Rubinstein did, Tyrannosaurus Rex-like, proof of absolute brainwashing since the age of three: no social airs have crept into the conservatory practice room to spoil the rarefied helium.

If you smile, you are simpering. If you frown, you are defeatist. If you have no expression you are robotic.

It is not that catcalls and hisses proclaim judgement on the ambling, doomed, self-styled crypto-musician. It is the music that judges you, that leers at you from inside the brain where it is being held captive like a frenzied ape. How can anyone possibly remember a million notes, all of them shouting out with voices of their own: Hit me. Hold me. Love me. Whip me. Touch me. Not so hard. Over on the left! Higher. By the spine. Now harder. Sssh! It's too late. It's too fast. It's dirty. It's a lie.

The very isolation of practicing needed to produce high art, the stuff of concerts, lays the groundwork for the agoraphobia which inhibits the display of concerts. All the self-loathing, the insecurities of the solitary practice room, the combinant DNA of unworthiness sprung from decades of self-abnegation in the service of music materializes in the firehose pressure of the stage, in the sud-

den focus of attention which spotlights all the flaws in the stone, the crevasses in the glacier.

How can anyone presume to even touch the piano. Music is the ultimate affectation. A human being is meant to sit on a bench. Pianoless. Just a bench in the sunset. To place, in front of that hunched, unprepossessing bench,¹ this immense jangling coffin, filled with Jacobean teeth, Byzantine wires, sadistic felts, Jungian dreams, Cagean silences, Mannheim rockets, is to insinuate that you have an edge on truth. That any one person can defy augury, predict the future, unearth the past, solve the present, that you can resurrect the dead, understand the Parisian night, the Kazak steppes, the flow of the Don, the bells of Kiev, the Andalusian maraca, the Tibetan gong, the Bermuda triangle.

It's not that an innocent passerby can't grab your hat and throw it in the air. Or that a monkey can't dance to an organ grinder. Anyone can play the fool, grab a cheap laugh. But what you have up your sleeve is pure magic: a combination of trapeze, sawed maiden, bird in the air, rabbit in the hat. Comedy and sudden revelation. The gasp of disbelief followed quickly by the uneasy chuckle of revelation. What you have in mind isn't easy. You plan to enlighten. To storm the temple walls, to bring down the house. To glisten, rage, weep, and lecture. While making it fun. And behind everything, you're going to prove there is a god. Or a Chopin. Or a painting.

You play one note. Here the world focuses on the point of a finger, the fulcrum of the planet, on which populations hinge. Your entire life goes into that note. From it, a trained critic or a small child can tell that you were lazy

1. And its easy rider.

when you were seven. That you kissed a dog. That you eat Fritos when no one is looking. That you are guilty, guilty.² The finger crooks too chubbily. Or not enough. The tone is weak, insincere. It has no story. Or it has the wrong story. Everyone knows suddenly that you cannot bench-press your own weight. That you cannot carry a tune. That you cannot hold the crowd. That you cannot catch a falling star.³

Is that first note a Horowitz, a clarion call, an eagle's cry, a tsunami, a tubular bell? Or is it a clank, a crank, a scratch, a squawk? Is it virile, or is it prissy? Does it carry the conviction of its own beliefs, or just yours? Is it Beethoven, or just V. W. Brinkerhoff? Even *The Herald Tribune* knows now that you have no technique, or that your technique is a hollow imitation of a dead genius. You have not prepared well enough. You slacked off in your twentieth year. You didn't pay attention during a burial. You didn't really love your first girlfriend. You took advantage. You lied, and now your life, your notes, your pretense, your dandyism, are on display for everyone to immortalize.⁴

It has been a major mistake to risk the marketplace, to taunt the crowd. Not only that, but your clothes are shabby. You are hiding behind a monkey suit. You have nothing to say. You are just some other pianist's CD. You are a copy. You have nothing to add to anything. Or the story you are going to tell was cribbed from National Geographic.

You have no perfections. You are a whole note glued together from two half-notes. You are an atlas of mistakes. A Frankenpianist.

It's the wrong audience. They came for Volodos. For

2. Guilty.

3. Or tell me where all past years are.

4. Or mortalize.

Graffman. Good god, maybe they came for Peter Serkin. They got the day wrong. Change everything. Play more Peter Serkin-like. Slower. Deeper. Relate each note to the beginning three.

The crowd is cynical. Filled with second-rate nightmares. A hall of forgotten notes, misplaced ringtones. No one believes in you. You're too fat. Too thin. Too tall. Too short. You look like a duck at the pedals. Your hands are not slim, your fingers pudgy. Nothing real can come out of that wrist. Since when does salvation come from fingers anyway?

That note in the fortieth measure, is it a G or a B flat? To have thought of it this far in advance is to bungle it. To measure it is death. It's waiting. It's just around the door jamb. Und hier ist nichts.

In a flash of sickly stage lighting you see the structure of the piece, something that eluded you until now. It is too late. The fingerings are wrong. Everything will have to change. And if you change one voicing, everything moves: the preordained order of touches, modulations, ritards, spasms, attacks—nothing is set in place anymore; everything is homeless, drifting out over the sixth row, having a smoke backstage, hiding in the green room. Let one spontaneous moment in, and everything disappears. Structure vaporizes, memory flees in horror. All for a second of truth. But not to take the plunge is to live a lie.

But the fingers have race memory. They are programmed for pianissimo here. Change it, and everything goes up in smoke. Flamen. Numina. Nothing is attached. Notes float free, notes crash and burn, the entire Chihuly disintegrates. Don't change anything. You don't dare, do you, Fritz?

Momentary inspiration is like playing drunk. It feels

completely right until, if you have recorded it, you listen to it sober. Then it is hammy, wobbly, flaccid, bland, self-indulgent. Are you then willing to risk everything on a toss of the dice? A self-indulgent whim? On a passing cloud? Or is adherence to the safety of a prearranged marriage admitting failure in the first place? Rubinstein sometimes seemed so last-minute in person. But on video he comes across as cynically calculating, callously throwing off fireworks like a farrier. He is shoeing horses, not blowing glass. A performance should be like cutting paper with a scissors: plebian chords gather in the wings until, with a quick ruffle of the bellows, angels appear.

Beethoven should be hard, not soft. Ugly, not pretty. Speak truth to power. Change our lives. But tonight it's so banal. So memorized. A sermon in church, droning on, hitting all the right notes, saying nothing. Just those sibilant hisses, that hint of the devil old Father McMahan preening his inner snake on the mesmerized old ladies in the pews.

Do something exciting! Shock yourself! Smash it! Feather it! No, don't touch it. The critics are out there, snorting out roots like pigs. They'll crucify you if it doesn't sound like their favorite CD. If Beethoven isn't Rudolf Serkin, forget it. Smile like Dinu Lipati. Smooth your hair. It's all about diet. Suck it in. Stoop like Gould. Keep your hands below the key cover. One finger above it and you're a Bulgarian, a goulash-eating strobe-lit nightclub gypsy. Frown like a son of Schnabel. Have some dignity. Grab some gravitas.

It's no use. You're a stumpy pretender, a rotund easy rider, easy piggy, a chubby wannabe, a has been before you've been. You'll never eat again. Food makes you stu-

pid. Every cheese doodle is one etude down. A cadenza kaput. You can't even get near the keyboard, you're so fat. You need a broom to reach the treble. You can feel the dismay, the ripple of hilarity and disgust combined. They don't even hear the music, they're gorging their eyes on you. Their ears have shut down. Good. No one hears, the pressure is off. Maybe they're all deaf. Maybe they're all mutants. Yuggoth armies who have eaten the normal audience. Do Zombies buy tickets? Or is it all just papered, a bunch of Juilliard kids with fliers?

You shouldn't've skipped that master class. They all talked about you. They hate you, because it's so easy for you. You don't have to try, you just know it after you play it. So you don't try. And now you're paying.

Suddenly nothing is automatic. Nothing looks familiar. Where is the keyboard again? Why are the white keys white? What's the first piece? Didn't your aunt tell you never to play it in public? But what did she ever play, even in private? But her mother was a concert pianist. She had to know. But she was an ogre. Doesn't that cancel out the rest of her?

Why couldn't you be one of those glib, suave, smooth velvet jackets with the foreign accent and the phony floating fingers, twirling plastic hands killing time in the air until the next, inevitable, unforgettable note? So perfect, and so empty. Bench-shaped buttocks, key-shaped fingers. Professionals at three. Sixty concerti in their brains by ten. All the Beethoven, all the Mozart, both Chopin. Only four Rachmaninoff. Hah. Losers. But god, that velour. Satin collar shawls. Lounge lizards. Born inside the bench. Second nature. No nerves. Slick, sick patrician aristos. Slept with all the critics. Gender no issue. Suck up to the trust-

ees. And what they do with finger food. Pliés and fouettés with the wrist. Gods of the buffet. Bacchuses on steroids. Back off, Bacchi.

And then there's the second measure.

And sometimes, sometimes, in the midst of heaving gut and spinning lights, lurching room and whirling head, when all is already lost, and the fingers play in an unheard daze, while the body rises to the ceiling and hovers like a horror movie—paramusical experience, Chopin and Beyond,—(who is that playing below, that automaton, that lopsided phantom entirely disconnected from the music, the audience, the pianist?)—when the brain, from another state, or from its orbit high above the city, sluggishly notices that a finger fell right where it should have, or a sound came out like a cello, and then, only then does the room start to come into focus, the world alphabetized by emotions, the piece itself etched clearly into the keys, every problem solved way in advance, every tar pit paved over, each chasm heavily bridged, and the pumping, blood-soaked brain begins to drain, the red veil falls away from the eyes, and the frozen shoulders relax into their sockets: you are alive, you have the bells, the tubas, the piccolini lined up, the future writes itself in the sky, insights unfurl from memory like a fire hose, and you are surprised yourself at how the dots connect, the hints assemble into meaning, the sky opens up above the stage, the whirling planet newly sprung from spruce and maple forests, and there is so much to be said that the notes are hardly enough.

It's not the physical part of the night that lights the aurora, it's the ideas that leap across the hands, that bind the black keys and loosen the knuckles from their fear, because the inner game of proving things is bigger than the audience,

and replaces impossibility with potential—buildings are being built, movies are being made, and tonight's the night when immortality is made man.

To those who play every night, those who are used to that dazzling, invisible, thumping, wheezing beast protected from sight by the force field of the Fresnel, like the monsters of the id, where only the glare and bent down metal stairs betray their heaving presence—to those whose business here on stage is only business, not life or death, hallucinations are just another gimmick to weave into the infomercial passing for a human sacrifice, the cheap imitation of passion they pass off nightly onto vaguely disappointed crowds who assume that the pianist is fine and they are the culprits, who have somehow failed the music, who haven't responded to the false fire and wormwood of the mountebank. Photocopied Rubinsteins, they greet their temporary families in the gilded salon, anecdotes, jokes, slipping through their fingers like butter. For them, it is a simple affair.

But for those who insist on putting their lives into every note, philosophy into every chord, no note played so selfishly as to interfere with any other note's trajectory, voices separated in the chess-master mind, intonations not just mindlessly voiced to differentiate sounds but sounds in fact carrying their characters into every battle, every cluster and crash of swords, every huddle, so that personalities and motives shine through not out of mere quirk but from inexorable plots whose machinations breed over decades, not just on the spur of the wrist—for those sad and shadowed poets, there is no such thing as a mere concert, just a few dozen jousts, galops, bayaderes, moriscoes, hoe-downs, saturnalia, carousels, wakes, romps, gambades, revels, revelations, and fireworks.

I once asked my teacher, Hubermann, how to play a certain note I was having trouble getting. He said, “The reason you play it is because you cannot miss it. It simply is essential.” Technique is finally a discipline of the mind rather than the body. But the body counts too. Lisitsa practices twelve to fourteen hours a day. People ask her what she does for fun. “I practice,” she says, with her veiled observant eyes briefly relaxed into amusement at the joke of such discipline behind disconcerting beauty.

Hubermann said to me often that to play a note without an agenda behind it was to waste time.

“Every phrase must relate to the meaning, not only of the section, of the piece, but of that particular hall, that special ambiance; each phrase is what your life has been leading up to. It is a microcosm: your grief, your gods, your devils, your loves. It must exist in its own world, immune to intrusions, isolated against outside rumbles, coughs, explosions.”

At the same time, you must be free to think, to romanticize, to speculate, to invent. Within the Machiavellian assassination plots, the rococo intrigues, the mechanistic clockwork of the court, you have to be able to follow a secondary figure you never noticed before sidling through sliding panels and into secret grottoes; you have to keep subplots and hidden libraries where they belong, while remaining open enough to enter and entertain the room like Beethoven. The theme must drive through the crowd, cut through the miasma of a thousand stale breaths, but every now and then a spark flies: you have bought enough time and credibility to improvise.

Of course, this is what you aim at, but you often get lost in the labyrinth, up false alleys whose abrupt end slams the

door on memory, which is why having the physical notes in front of you, rather than distracting from the essences behind those notes, provides a guide when the fires of hindsight grow too bright. Memory is a conceit, a distraction, that risks the ultimate achievement of being able to weave nuance and spontaneity into structure, rather than simply draining the notes of their many directions for the cheap appearance of mastery. You sacrifice the guest list in favor of following one obvious courtesan into the washroom.

But then there are phenomena like Marta Argerich and Yuja Wang, whose music explodes out of them without boundaries, all strands seamlessly projected out like sparkles and trceries off a detonating, sky-high nova that flashes, whistles, crackles, spins and blasts in rainbow colors above the crowd for whom every parachute, strobe, candle, and repeater, although they’ve seen them all before, is as unexpected as first love.

Chris O’Riley said to me that “Concertos, hard and fast, are always memorized, and I’m coming to think that the more demanding solo repertoire (like the Berlioz-Liszt *Symphonie fantastique*, the Rach Sonata #2, the Liszt *Don Juan Fantasy*, even the Liszt-Wagner *Tristan*), really needs to be off the page. Just no way around it. You need to be navigating Olympic leaps with balletic poise; you can’t be wedded to the page.”

All this is the prep kitchen of music, the thirty, forty, fifty years of fear and adrenalin that presages the final goal of actually daring to appear in public with something different, innovative, shocking, astonishing.

The first lollipop, the sacrificial lamb thrown away to the screaming demons of the trembling id, the disposable Mozart, the inconsequential Scarlatti, becomes the repos-

itory of all the sins of the world, the misspent days and errant nights, like Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, the focus of the evening's ills, the undeserving, noble target of the hall's woes, the critic's failures, the socialite's sex life, the beneficiary of the indigestion in row H, the disease in row C, the petulant child in the front row whom no Armageddon can delight, the nodding, brazenly sleeping row D. The hacks, the gargles, the chokings, the potential Ebola in F 17, living catalepsy in B 12, catatonia, cataplexy, an army of mutants, Voormis, Valusians, their ectoplasms vaguely noted in the offing, beyond the erasure of the Leko, that force field of light which ensures a total lack of connection between stage and mosh pit. If I can't reach them, if they can't reach me, it's all empty, and thank god for that, no one should have to touch these dirty chords, these bland scales, these dead octaves—maybe ambiance will fill in the blanks where the music fails, the holes between the notes. My kingdom for a legato. Give me fortissimo, you gods of the hustings, lords of the flys, divas of the durbar, give me reverb, let me pile up in the floats like a cumulonimbus before a storm.

Paul McCartney put on a disguise and played "Yesterday" on the street. A few people tossed coins. No one stopped. Joshua Bell played his two million dollar Strad in a subway station for forty-five minutes and made \$32.17. One person recognized him and gave him twenty bucks, and two people stopped to listen. It's all in the pitch. Given a stage, a minion is king. But put a king in a subway, and he's a busker. One more minute of this and it's the subway for the rest of my life.

Each decorative fripperie has to surprise me with its power, and yet its delicacy. Melodies must sing in between

its frills, behind its lace. Everything has to be faster than possible. Think Hamelin. But Hamelin is too polished, too cool. Think Volodos. Russian warmth, power, eccentricity. But if it's a competition, forget it. Judges reward character, innovation. But no gestures. Keep it quiet. And yet Lang Lang branded himself by breaking the rules. He gestured. He reacted to the music. But I haven't practiced flailing. I'll miss a note; it'll screw up the timing. It'll kill the tone. But it's all about looks, not music.

But hold everything. Leonskaya is so still. Her music rises out of despair and darkness. Even her arpeggios are framed in silence. Stop bouncing around.

What CD am I? Who should I be? Should I push it beyond what I can handle, like Horowitz? Or maybe sensitive and elegant, like Lipati? If it's Chopin, they're hearing Zimmermann in their heads, and scales had better be strings of pearls. What I want to be is Pressler. Warm, humanist, singing, folksy. But then Cziffra pops up. Superhuman. Superficial. Stupefying. His wife Soleilka told me in the church in Senlis that he wasn't naturally gifted. He just practiced twelve hours a day. He had no sense of music, really. But for the fast parts, he was untouchable. He had no brain for the transitions. He had no silence. But he was king of the friska. Either you're Cziffra or you're not. An impossible role model.

It doesn't really matter, as you have no memory of even having played the first piece. It could have been Bartok, it could have been Wolpe. Who remembers? Brahms, you always remember. Because you have to slow down, catch the house in it, listen to the feedback from that wheezing judgmental organism which is now your partner in crime, without which nothing registers.

But it can't be too slow; the structure has to be there. It keeps the schmaltz down. It anchors the grief, the yearning, the longueurs. It keeps the whipped cream, the Schlag, off the Linzer torte. It makes Vienna a little bit German.

But now, after the little Rondo, or Allegretto, the warm-up waltz, the sleeper must wake. You must watch yourself from the lifts. Out of the body, in the drops, maybe, but also zoned. In the cloud.

I don't agree with this, but some guru once told me, "Remember that nothing can be heard. None of your subtleties. No accents, no inner voices. The hall is too big. Only the melody holds it together. All the tricks, the small accents, the staccato in the base, the legato in the middle voice, all is drowned out by that strutting Italian tenor treble. If there's no treble, then you can spend some time whacking out the bass. But it has to be simple. Nothing thought out. It won't fly. Just play it straight."

And then if memory frees you, if you've become the piece, sometimes everything falls just right. The notes are pleasantly early, or surprisingly late, and it catches you off guard, along with the crowd. People stop breathing. Something special is happening. It can't be planned, or timed. It's improvised on the spot. You can't fight it. You have to run with it. Some chord, some inflection produces a gasp of recognition, touches the communal cortex. People stop snoring. You can feel the pulse of the hall morph into one subliminal throb. You can't fall back on what you practiced, or what you know. You have to follow the lead of what just happened. You have to make it up, change it all, discover a new country hidden in the whirlpool of the notes, the dark star of the memory. The danger here is that you become the composer, you suddenly channel

Beethoven: you forget yourself, the hall, your life, all the little neuroses that keep you you. And suddenly you wake up and you're no one. Beethoven is gone, the moment has passed, and you have no idea who you are, where you are, what you're doing. The audience is on the edge of a cliff known as you, and they're falling off it. the piece has vanished, its memory written over by what you've just done. It was a miracle, and now it's a debacle. The flip side of inspiration: abyss.

So you can never get too inspired. You have to pull back, to have some anchor points where discipline kicks in, where you return to your home town and have a cream soda. You can't lose yourself in heaven for too long. You have to have a trap door, where you can slide down into the pit, collect your street clothes, and walk home in the rain. Hopefully when you forget yourself, you won't forget Brahms. Someone has to be there, lurking underneath the ego of that run, some metronome behind the rubato which, when the storm has passed, reveals the dripping, glistening branches of the sonata.

There are as many dangers to success and adrenalin as there are to paralysis and anomie. You have to glide between the cliffs and the waves, between Scylla and Charybdis, to stay in the channel even while you channel the tide.

But if grace allows you that sudden lightning-lit insight into the labyrinth of the Krell, when all the voices become both separate and whole, you have seen that infinite logic board on which all hopes and histories are formed, and you understand in the frozen strobe of the instant who you are, and why you have been chosen, here in this filthy sanatorium, this mis-named auditorium, to pull living rabbits out of tattered hats.

MONTANA

To give you an idea of my own unique qualifications (or lack thereof) for my eventual position as a half-dead lackey to A. Van W., the death-wish pianist, let me describe my most fragile memories. As someone said, it is the fragile dreams that bind us. I knew him when he young, A. Van. So you could say I knew him at both ends of his life. The mysterious castle part and the ice palace part. A dream gone mad.

It's all about dreams, isn't it, Jung? Did you know that both Jung and Freud took back everything they're famous for? Should I say that again? I know you weren't listening. You were just trolling along, going with the flow, the words just passing the time in between bites of some tasteless sandwich. You read a page, and you have no idea what it said. But why go back. You finish a book, and you might as well have watched TV. Nothing remains. No residue. You've learned nothing. It's only language. The only way people learn anything is in a bar fight. Believe me, I know.

Anyhow, Freud and Jung, they invent neurosis, and then take it back. They just recant. They recall it, like car parts. An obscure way of saying they were lying sons of bitches who invented a whole sick galaxy based on a lie. Every neurosis, every shrink, modern anxiety, half the poems Auden wrote, Leonard Bernstein's piano concerto, a lot of creepy Psycho-type music, Bernard Hermann, maybe even Berg, Wolpe, Iannis Xenakis,¹ all based on something that someone took back.

1. Ignore names, unless you have idea of what I'm talk.

“Sorry. We misspoke. Those statements we made were not meant to be fact-based.”

Someone said that everything we believe is based on lies.² We get it wrong, and base our lives on it, and then someone bases their life on us. It's all about lies. Nothing is real. Even truth probably started as somebody's lie. Who knows if movies are just made up? Or what if movies are the real part?

But I forgive Xenakis. You can't blame someone who looks like Truffaut. And who was an architect besides.³

The most down-to-earth people you can name, fill in the blanks here, hula hooper inventors, roller blade painters, cage wrestler psychiatrists, are still completely invented by their dreams. Thank god. Some people are just born into a better dream. V. W.⁴ was. He was born to be a bus. So maybe you can't go around judging dreams.

Most little boys on a ranch dream of being somewhere else. And the somewhere they dream about is dreaming of them. I mean, people in Malibu want to live on a ranch in Montana. A virtual swap-meet. Who do you want to be? Hedy Lamarr or Hedwig Keisler? Who knew that Hedy Lamarr invented spread spectrum communications? Every movie actor in Hollywood used to have a made-up name. Stars are just normal people with made-up names, made-up lives. Stars are written by writers in cheap Hollywood motels, trying to change their luck. They change the lives of stars, and go on being sad sacks themselves. Be the dream, don't write it. Be written about, don't write.

2. Harold Bloom: *A Map of Misreading*.

3. Ignore outbursts like this.

4. Van Wyck Brinkerhoff, in case you have no idea what this book is about, I certainly don't.

On the other hand, writing is wasted on the written-about. Generally, the written-about can't read. But then writing is such a talent that it condemns people to write. To a life of poverty and obscurity. To being passed over at parties. "Oh, you write. But do you publish?" "Oh, you publish. But have I read it?" "Oh, I've read it. I forgot. I hated it." If you don't manage a hedge fund by the time you're twenty-five, forget it. Of course, if you don't play the piano by the time you're four, forget it. And if you do, forget it. Being a genius, a pianist, a writer, is a great gift. It means you're condemned to life in a small room. By writing, I reduce myself, I condemn myself to being a writer, a person to whom even day is nocturnal. Because you never go out. You look up from the pad, and you've missed daylight. Not that it mattered. The successful lives are lives that can afford their own screenplays. Some people write novels, and then set out to live them. Other people just write novels. As Shakespeare said, we are such stuff. As a piano-playing son of a cowboy, I have learned never to quote Proust. Always go for the Brits. Walk into a cowboy bar, hold your finger up, and say in your best American-French accent, I will now quote from Proust. And the whole bar comes at you. Quote Proust and die. Mention Proust and then run. As such, Proust-mentioning is highly athletic. A sort of sport. Sport Goofy. These are French people who walk around Euro Disney and French ski resorts dressed as Goofy. Goofy is bad enough, but Sport Goofy is French.

So my name is François. Call me Frank. I'm not really French, although I was beaten up for years because a lot of people in jeans and bandannas couldn't get past the name. They should look at themselves. Bandannas. Vraiment. Why not wear a banana?

My parents moved to a small town in Montana when I was seven, because of Yves Montand, whose real name was Ivo Livi. Livi was Italian. But his parents moved to Marseilles, and eventually Livi escaped and sang in music halls. He became Edith Piaf's lover, made up a new life with a new name, and, voilà. A star. A crazy woman had his body dug up to get a DNA sample, which proved that he wasn't the father of her child. This is what waits for us all. Not heaven, but exhumation. What is to stop Ramona Slutsky from saying you're the father. You're dead, and crazy women surface like zombies. This is why I don't look forward to being dead. Unlike Adrian, who lived to die. Living was just killing time until death. Someone may have said that. But I said it, too, and I deny knowing who else said it. What am I, Google?

But maybe I'm just naturally depressed. You would be, too, if you were a French cowboy turned failed pianist turned piano technician. A technician is to tuning what a mixologist is to bartending. I'm not saying I'm interesting. I'm not. That's why it's depressing. Imagine setting out in life to be boring.

I won't tell you the name of the town in Montana, speaking of boring. They're already waiting for me with pitchforks. Somehow my lugging the bags to the train and leaving forever, and not just forever, but for a killer school like St. A's, well, that was it. It was a slap in the face to all the people I cared about. They felt belittled by it. By the fact that I could go out there and become something. And maybe they couldn't. I didn't leave them. They left me.

Already I get hate calls. Late night hang-ups. Strange people saying, "I Googled you, and aren't you the person from that little nowhere in Montana?"

This is a dead give-away.

But I won't bore you with me. This isn't about me. It's about you-know.

I got to be a technician one night during a trip. An inner trip. My friend Bruce and I were on the floor, looking at floorboards. As people do in certain circumstances.

Maybe when they're surrounded by granaries. Ghost silos. Schooner of the prairie. You could climb up them on the outside ladder, some sixty over the waving fields of grain as far as you could see in every direction, and here below you in the silo was more grain, tiny, burry seeds that closed in over you when you jumped. For a few seconds you filtered down through the grain, completely folded into the texture, like a berry in a batter, the soft fingers of the fields caressing you, holding you lightly. And then you shot out onto a bed of yet more grains in the waiting trunk, monocots spilling over you from the hopper until you rolled out the back and handed yourself down to the ground.

I shot the silo at least once a day. My father owned it, so no one told me I could die. As long as you didn't breathe, you were fine, although you were spitting and sneezing cereal for a minute or two afterwards. But the smell of newly mown grain is the most soothing smell in the world. Sometimes in big towns a health-food store will have a few bins with grains in them, but they aren't as fresh or as explosive. There's no way anyone today can know the absolute coolness of the inside of the tube, or the softness that fondles you. Certainly sex was a big letdown after a silo. Of course, there's sex in a silo. You'd have to be crazy. And all cowboys are crazy. Do you realize that the cereal you eat . . .

"Way cool, dude. Yeah, look. Cracks."

Bruce was staring at the mill floor, lightly dusted with wheat powder.

And then we saw it, lurking in the corner, hidden by mist. or maybe that was the blood in the veins of our eyes. It all gets big with a good drug.

It was an upright piano. But we had no idea.

"What is it, Frank? It's, it's, it's from outer space maybe."

"Is it a bomb? Look out, Bruce, it's ticking."

This continued for an hour or so, and when we stopped our ape dances in front of it,⁵ we looked at each other.

"Doctor Frank. See if it's alive."

"Yeah, mein herr Bruce. We'll do an autopsy."

We spent all night taking it apart, and grim morning shone on hundreds of Rube Goldberg gewgaws spread out on the wheat. Flanges, bushings, knuckles, jacks, rollers, whippens, felts. Then of course the shame set in with sober, amber afternoon.

"Frank, duke a duke, what are we going to do?"

"Let's hide it, my man."

"Where? Where?"

"What are you, drunk? In the closet?"

"It won't fit in the closet."

"Let's just put it back."

"What?"

"In the case."

"And put a sheet over it."

"They won't know, Frank."

"Know what?"

"That it won't play."

5. 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. See Homer.

“You mean it plays?”

“Well. Yeaah.”

“So let’s play it.”

“You can’t just play it. It needs to be together. You need to know things.”

“Sure you can play it. You don’t need a letter.”

“Like football!”

“No, doof. A letter from yo mama.”

This is a crude approximation of what any two drunken tool school dropouts might have said, assuming we could have remembered anything we said that weekend. It isn’t worth repeating, really. I’m only saying it because it all started there, in the granary. People ask me.

“So how did you get into this?” Usually with an emphasis on the how or the this or the you, like I’m retarded, or unauthorized.

My father said that to me once.

“Hey, Dad.” I said to him, back when he was around.

He grunted, in some vaguely comotose imitation of a seal.

“Maybe I want to be a writer.”

“Yeah? What makes you think you’re authorized?”

That was the only witty thing he ever said. Not that he knew it was witty. It took me a few years to realize it was funny. I just thought it was, like, insulting? So I never forgot it. And then I thought he meant it to be funny. And then I realized he’d never know what it was. Or what I was. Or that he even had a son.

So anyhow we put the piano back together over the next few days, sustained by wild sex with waitresses. I wish. For waitresses you need a restaurant. The closest we came was a self-wash. A laundry. It course it was filled with beau-

tiful laundrettes. I confuse my life with foreign movies sometimes. Was that me, or Antoine? Did I date Fabienne Tabard? Or marry Yvonne? As everyone knows from taking cars apart, not everything that comes out goes back in. Manufacture is obviously about overkill. Despite missing vital refinements from the 30’s, yes, the upright, morally solid piano made reassuring sounds.

Thus begins the beguine. The nights of tropical splendor.⁶

My father believed that Yves Montand had taken his name from Montana. Montand was always being a cowboy, with a kerchief, sometimes a Stetson, and even sang a song called Le Cowboy. My father became obsessed with cowboys and horses out in the less primordial jungle of Lyons, what we called the HLM, maybe as a way of forgetting he was surrounded by gangs. He wanted more romantic gangs. He even joined a singing group who did wild west songs in four-part harmony. Imagine the exercise. Thus I come by my modest musical talents honestly. Although, like everything else in my life, with a certain amount of embarrassment. I am honestly awful. But it takes a lot of study to know how bad you are. It’s an art, judgement.

And so we went from Lyons to a small town in a wild west movie. And as my father escaped Lyons, so I had to escape his version of paradise.

I was not about horses, or 4H, or campfires. I was about Greenwich Village. I was about Brahms. And so my past, my parents, all of France faded into the western sunset like a high plains drifter, those vast coulees with skulls for mileposts, and the distant, dry sandstone hills waiting on the horizon with more of the same, a changeless landscape

6. And rapture serene.

stretching into the future for as long as you live. No escape, except by the magic of demographics. A French cowboy specializing in Chopin was just what all those New England boarding schools wanted, to make the point to some invisible judge that they had equality, as well as fraternity. Maybe not liberty. So I was in like Flynn, out like trout. *Ma jeunesse fout le camp*. I had broken camp at last.

But rewind the movie. I was asleep during the first part.

Like all of us, the street where I grew up wasn't a place so much as a cosmos. The street, which on a sobbing revisit is depressingly mortal,⁷ only about a mile long before it winds its way into scraggly and forbidding wilderness around a watershed (a dirty summit choked with pines dwarfed by the wind, feral vines, snake-shaped boughs, a Bald Mountain with strange lights dancing at night, not that anyone had the nerve to be there at night, but in any case the far reaches of the street itself were adventure enough for my easily satisfied imagination), the street, the street, is anyone listening from all that time ago, do you see it now the same way I do, or does it only look different to me? This very street was a self-sufficient world. It closed in over you with its 1950's canopy of luxuriant dapple,⁸ before all the trees in the ratty grain depot that was our galaxy became bleached out and scrawny. The lawns were smelled of leaf piles, smoky burnt leaves, or brisk leaves, newly fallen. You expected to see pumpkins everywhere, but the growing season was too short for anything vaguely colorful.

7. Not the virtual equivalent of the Nu'uuanu Pali Drive in Honolulu or the Boulevard de la Garoupe in Monte Carlo as Adrian would proclaim.

8. Thank you, Adrian.

The milkman knew our names, as did everyone in town.

Every house on our street was well-tended, with perfectly mown lawns, peonies with wire wickets around them, dogwood at the corner of the tiny eighth-acre lot (although it seemed enormous to me once), sprinklers rainbowing the air on a summer afternoon, a lone forsythia bush big enough to hide in and do forbidden things with the religious little girls who suggested them, the sound of children (us) seesawing or swinging or just running, maples dappling the grass with their yellow and black leafy shadows, and the final white picket fence like everyone else. It could have been Ohio.⁹

Of course our yard had none of the dappling. My father, before he absconded with the mower, had cut down the trees in the yard, because he was obsessed with grass seed, which he sold in the village, and so regarded trees as the enemy of the smooth and self-advertising lawn.

Our street was a normal street, like any small town in the center of nowhere. It had its detractors and its enviers. It either wasn't good enough or it was too good, depending on where the bully lived. The one sure thing was that you were going to get punched out for it.

Our street had spreading chestnuts, effusive dogwoods, stately elms, all the clichés, before blights eliminated all of them, and my father the rest. I didn't know until later that our house, like our lot, was also small, Victorian, fixed in flat prairie light like the permanent past. I had seen it as rambling, endless, with dozens of hiding spaces and places which still have ghosts.

9. Although I've never been to Ohio, but everyone has an image of Ohio, imprinted on us at birth, even in France.

But across the street from our neat little lawn, and out of place in our tiny toy-railroad village, was a castle. A cut-rate, Addams Family copy, maybe, with strange wavy shingles, but it had turrets and leaded glass windows, through which no one ever looked. The rumor was that it had been built by a magnesium magnate back when the town was all brothels and mine shacks, and was now owned by the Montana Mob, although it was called Schloss Schwarzenau. Who knew there were Italian-American Germans in Montana. I don't think you have to be Italian to be a mob. You just call yourselves a mob, and no one dares to say, "Excuse me, I think you've overstepped a bit; you're really a band." Band is French for a group of thugs. In America, it's a gang of musicians.¹⁰

I never met anyone who lived in the castle until much later, even though it was just across the street. The shades were always lowered. There was a rumor their nephew Romando, an Italian-German transvestite, was a famous concert pianist, so I forgave them the rumored random massacre. I later met Romando at college. We practiced on the same piano, we played the same pieces. Except Romando could finish them. Romando spent his time practicing, while I spent my time trying to impress Romando.

People in Los Angeles refer to people by their cars. "Is the Lamborghini single?" People where I grew up referred to their neighbors by their houses. Schloss Schwarzenau owned the lot next to it, which was a Riesling vineyard on three different levels, and descended to a cliff overlooking an undeveloped coulee. At the bottom of the third vineyard was a miniature version of the Schloss, which must

10. Same thing, I heard you say. Shame. Thugs are more educated.

have been a guest house. The vineyards gave me endless dreams of a more expansive land, possibly as they did the mobster children, of an Italian valley of manicured lawns and misty orchards, crossed by Viennese lanes hidden behind tall poplars. Here and there were vast Orcian villas, always abandoned, as were the bigger houses way outside of town, lived in a month during the summer by the big city ranchers, who had better things to do than dawdle in our fantasy land. Even the bigger houses were only three rooms or so. They seemed big to me.

The town was peopled by my mother's relatives. My father had had the pick of the town. When he wasn't being beaten up in the bar, he was being chased by women, because of his accent, and his way with a bandanna. You know, the bandanna gene. So he chose my mother, a big-eyed Irish girl, from whom my deplorable third-rate talents flow.¹¹

My uncle bought a house so big he couldn't afford to furnish it or go anywhere on vacation, so they sat on the floor for ten years and then bought a smaller house where my cousin had a train set that ran on three levels, like the castle's vineyard. It had an oil well that pumped real oil, and you could see the train when it went underground, like a cut-out in a cartoon.

A cousin lived down the road from us. It was there that my father closed the door on my thumb. I was in agony until I thought of turning my back on the door, which let my other hand reach the handle, although it took me fifteen minutes to manage it. I couldn't ever figure out how he could have closed the door on my finger and walked

11. Even first-rate talent condemns you to a third-rate life; with third-rate talent, you have a chance.

away with all the screaming that was going on, although he claimed not to have heard anything. I think he was hoping it would be the end of the piano.

This only encouraged me. I was in such a bad mood inside my cousin's that I remember my sister putting an empty birdcage over my head as protection for herself. Maybe so I wouldn't fly away. The adults were too afraid to laugh in front of me, due to my temper, so they went in the other room and laughed, which was the same thing. It wasn't as if I wasn't ten feet away. So I just walked in and talked with everyone, with the bird cage on my head. I thought it gave me a certain something, and it did. A flighty reputation.

People say the strangest things to you when they know you play the piano. I suppose it's because they have no idea what playing the piano is. When you grow up thousands of miles from anyone who's actually heard classical music (except for Romando, whom I didn't know¹²), their sole reference is Chopin's "minute" waltz. It was meant to be my-NOOT, as in inconsequential, but Americans call it MINN-it, and think it has to be played in a minute.¹³

"Oh, and do you play The Waltz?" I was always asked by the same aged but otherwise charming lady every time there was a get-together.

"Oh yes, and very fast," I would lie, checking first to make sure there was no piano in the room.

"Oh then you're so advanced!" My elder fans would clap their hands and look as satisfied as if they'd heard a con-

12. As by then he was thousands of miles away, if you are keeping track of him, because of some twisted fixation with transvestites.

13. But thank you anyway, as it leads to the funny Barbra Streisand song.

cert. I knew something in that moment of what real pianists feel, the surge, the high, and the absolute absurdity.

I later got to go to a Rubinstein¹⁴ concert, and he switched the order in the program. I happened to know he wasn't playing the "revolutionary etude," but the elegant Euro ladies around me, who had completely intimidated me with their fans and their brocades, began sighing over revolutionary this and revolutionary that, and I realized suddenly that no one knows anything.

How could anyone know in any other way the incredibly small world of talent so high it's a tightrope act. Talent is an urban myth. It's a story of what other people far away might be. Talent is just rumor, unless you can get tickets a long time in advance to a big city show and somehow find hundreds of dollars for the plane and the hotel, which just wasn't going to happen for anyone in the sticks. Before YouTube, talent just wasn't visible. It was an hour's drive to the only store in the county that had a few classical records, so that was all the talent I knew.

It all came down to three records. Rudolf Serkin playing three Beethoven sonatas and Alexander Brailowsky playing some Chopin Polonaises. And *Sparky's Magic Piano*, which can play Chopin's "revolutionary" étude until one day it quits and Sparky is left playing a child's piece on stage, to his great humiliation. But if you kept on playing that child's piece,¹⁵ one day, you, too, would play that étude in Carnegie Hall. We all practiced with that dream lying on the music stand.

I played the piano in the Schloss once, a long, ornate relic.¹⁶ The Schloss across the street. No some dream

14. Artur, not Anton; if you think this is funny you have a problem.

15. Which was even beyond me.

16. The piano, not the castle.

casa. Although maybe it was a dream, the way Montana was a dream. Nothing I can believe actually happened. At least no one tried to stop me playing that coffin-like concert grand (some gangster put his hand on my shoulder and croaked, “Heya kid, how’s da stretch?”), but what made an impression on me is that it’s about the only memory I have of Ivo, my father, who stomped out, possibly in embarrassment.¹⁷ He never thought the piano was something you were allowed to play. Pianos were for born pianists. Not for me. If you weren’t already a pianist, you couldn’t be one. Pianists were for other people. Like talent. This is very French. But everyone was like that in Montana, too, so I don’t know.

My mother’s father was my only grandfather, as the other one, my father’s father, had run away, so the family legend went. Not much of a legend. A legend implies that something is passed down through the astonishing efforts of dedicated family members over many generations. Not something which says all the family members ran away. The legend of Karl. My other grandfather.

But this was why we had a piano, because of my good grandfather, Will, who wasn’t part of our legend, because he was a fine person, and thus not legendary material. I don’t know why not. Legends should be about the good, not the deranged. Will was the only normal person in our family, that I could tell. Although goodness wasn’t normal in our family. So I should say that my grandfather was abnormal. It was certainly abnormal to leave us something like a piano. No one had any idea of what to do with it. I played Henry Mancini on its cracked keys out in the silo. After Bruce and I put it back together. I remember say-

17. Slightly before he stomped out for good.

ing to a girl who walked to school with me every day that Henry Mancini was bigger than the Beatles, bigger than Beethoven, and that he would be there one day, with his Moon River, when everyone else was forgotten.

In a small town, everything is exaggerated. There seems to be only one, or maybe two pianists. There was Serkin, and there was Brailowsky. I thought they were both about twenty, heavily muscled, with iron bands around their biceps. Something like Gordon MacRae in Oklahoma, my only reference for people I didn’t know, as it was the only American movie I’d ever seen, filled with people I hadn’t met, and thus my template for the rest of the world. Everyone was either Gordon MacRae or Eddie Albert or James Whitmore or Shirley Jones. This made sense, because they looked like people from our village. Maybe not quite so shift. Although Rod Steiger, who played poor Jud, was a lot closer to the boys who hung around the general store. Brailowsky must be like Eddie Albert. The power they had, my two pianists, they must be giants.

And so there was only Mancini, Serkin, and Brailowsky. And then you learn to define everyone with one fact. Van Gogh cut off his ear. That was all he did. Mozart was commissioned by an angel to write his own Requiem. That was it for Mozart. Schumann went mad. Schubert didn’t seem to have done anything, so he wasn’t a known composer. I had one fact for everyone, so I could shove them in their drawer and feel like I knew something. In retrospect, every fact I knew was completely wrong. My sense of culture was based on fairy tales, the kind that adults tell children to keep them in line. Everything is reduced not only to a blatant lie, but a bland one. This how deeply society is shocked—shocked!—by artists. In the way that Hélène

Grimaud feels that a woman who was too beautiful or too talented was burned for a witch. We have to turn our saints into sinners.

One day I came home and Grandfather Will's piano was missing from the silo. In its place, now in our one room house, was a mahogany table with an ivory top and a doily, on which was a small, useless-looking bowl. Looking closely, you could see the top was made up of small rectangles, glued together crudely. I asked my father about it at dinner.

"What's that table?"

"It's quiet," he said. "Chew your food."

Each piece had to be chewed forty times. You had to move between the food groups when you selected the next bite, never obsessing over the peas. There had to be equality among the lifeless leaves lumped around the fishsticks. We ate exclusively out of the freezer, where packages were torn open and shoved into the oven. We ate whatever was rescued from its frightening bakelite cave, whether raw or desiccated. Nothing resembled what I later came to recognize as food. There were no gradations of taste, no juices, no textures. These preparations had to be severely masticated as a defense, an invocation against their bestial origins. I was completely unaware that food had any relation to anything you might encounter outside a freezer. Food was similar to toothpaste, or spam. Everyone in our town was fascinated with what astronauts ate out of tubes in outer space, and we all sent away for samples.

"Write your 4H, soldier" my father would shout, in his drill sergeant way. He'd been in the war, and he never got over it. Dinner was called "mess." We lived in the "fort." Over the edge of the universe, out in the silo, was the hori-

zon of our small boot camp. And over the horizon was our piano. No man's land.

So it was a breakthrough, really. You could cut them down. Write ag reports on them. Because there was no music possible for an intact piano. There was only pounding. A piano was a just a giant jackhammer. This subtle view shaped my own approach to the instrument, according to the discouraging¹⁸ pedants I encountered whenever I got my courage up to apply for lessons. Even lessons were forever closed to me, as much as city drawing room or country estates, untouchable worlds of wealth and culture known to almost all my classmates later on at St. A's.

Randy, the son of a tennis pro, had access to moguls, stars, even professional athletes, and was therefore a god. They were all gods, my classmates. Their lives were preordained. They would graduate from St. A's, then from Yale, go into the family business, rise immediately to the top, retire after a few years to spend weekends on the boat or at the club, fattened by drink and success, have large families and bored wives from good families. The stuff of legends. There would be inheritance. Beyond talent, above knowledge, there was posterity. Families would continue. More important than today, is what today will look like in ninety years. What we see is only the shadow. The real film starts when we leave the room. Foundations will be endowed, legacies will be left. At St. A's, we served up immortality. Live for your obituary. Let nothing stain your herald. And all of us failed abysmally. We were failures, even as fascists. Not that I was one of them. But I was caught up in it, because of Adrian Van Wyck Brinkerhoff.

¹⁸. Discouraging in direct proportion to their own lack of talent and success.

But I digress. My car has just been towed, a car you can't even service because the thugs who run the dealership are clueless criminals. I'd like to drive it through their showroom and scare off a month's worth of customers. I'd be Used Car Man, the savior of the victimized poor. A week will now be sacrificed, trying to get that useless piece of scrap back from the other criminals who man the barbed wire payment booths, barbed wire so the angry crowd can't get its hands on the morally deformed and hateful clerks who take out their own frustrations on the powerless citizens whose lives they hold in their rubber stamps. I'd like to drive my now impounded car through the clerks behind those bullet-proof windows and avenge the thousands of people whose lives are ruined every day by bloodless bureaucrats. Parking Violations Revenge Man. I would be popular. I could run for mayor and let cars park wherever they wanted. The city would shut down in a day. The tow trucks couldn't even reach the cars to tow them. They would taste my Steinway.¹⁹

That's me now, hello out there. How the proud have fallen. But back then in Montana, before I had the audacity to think that one day I would have the privilege of even having a car that could be towed, back then I would sneak next door to the northern neighbors who let me use their smaller, but still intact, baby grand. I was playing there one evening when my father burst in, grabbed me by the ear, and hauled me out, forbidding me to return.

My father, before he quit the high plains, had acquired the tiny lots which surrounded us by cheating at cards, as far as I know, and sold them to the wranglers he beat, so we were surrounded by a Jewish family, a Methodist fam-

19. I suspect I am an insane anarchist. But isn't everyone?

ily, and an Italian family. The Italian family was known to have a very loose daughter, whom I only met once. I used necromantic words, guaranteed to encourage the libido of impressionable Sicilians, but I don't remember any sultry resolution.

The Methodists next door all had crewcuts and toned their biceps hoeing in the garden. Their grandfather, who lived with them, looked me up and down for a few years, and then told me one day I would die of sex. I believed him. Sex happened to me, long afterwards, and it was definitely life-threatening. I am still praying for a happy death.

The Jewish neighbors had, unlike the others, books and a piano.

My father said they didn't wash, and their house was a ghetto inside. As I played their piano, I checked out the pristine carpet, the bookshelves with actual books in them (written by the notorious gunslinger novelist who had run away with our neighbor's former wife, maybe not important to my story which, I repeat, is about whatsit, but somehow a validating detail²⁰), the burnished coffee table, symbol of proper ranch life, and the immaculate kitchen, through which my father dragged me away, forever, as it happened.

"But, Ivo," my neighbors protested, "we came home to music!"

At this, my father hit me. "You have no right to play their radio!" He never identified what I did on the piano with what might come out of a radio. That may have been my fault. Not everything I played could be identified as music, or blamed on any particular composer.

My father had changed his name to Ivo when he moved
20. At least for anarchists.

to Montana, a year before the blizzard during which my mother left him,²¹ or he left her.²² In any case someone must have been right, as they both disappeared at a certain point, thankfully just before I got my secret acceptance letter to St. A's, as they never would have let me go. I don't think anyone at the school ever expected that I could pay tuition, but they didn't expect the total²³ orphan they got.

Back then, radios had dreadful sound, so I was influenced in my technique by the Saturday afternoon static which passed for Schubert, not that we got that station, but I heard it once in a tractor shop years later. All household pianos sounded back then like bad radios, muffled by wall-to-wall carpets, by overstuffed unused easy chairs, by heavy, always closed drapes, and by closed piano lids themselves which held, in every house that had a piano, family photos. This was what a piano was for. It was an expensive and too-high coffee table on which were displayed the artifacts of a family's success: handshakes with the head of the local bank, relatives everyone hated to visit, and, in our house, faded summers on a crowded Camargue beach from when we were in France, whose main memory for me was always being dunked by bullies in crab-infested waters. Maybe a shot of our shanty town of stilt shacks, shacks being an honored tradition in that part of the world, which part now is a parking lot next to a purpose-built ziggurat in a mass-hallucination resort for cult victims near the Spanish border. It's a very surreal feeling to stand where your childhood summers were, and put euros in. My bedroom was meter 79. The porch was meter 81.

21. According to him.

22. According to her.

23. And totaled.

Every house on my timeless shaded Montana street had its own theme. There was the depressing stucco slum (memories of France!) with its glassed-in porch, which somehow was the most haunted area I had ever encountered, with its cheap electric heaters and its lacy bricolage, whose inhabitants I subsequently erased from the yard sale of my antique French memory.

There was the larger peaked-roof witches' house where I was allowed inside, and where I eventually showed off my moose-ready Bowie knife. I was just telling my play pal's suspicious mother how my own more permissive father let me have that knife at all times, and was brandishing it impressively, when my father rode up behind the kitchen on his nag, and my time with that particular family came to an embarrassing end.

Down a few houses on the castle side of our tidy street was my best friend. Together, we set fire to the meadow behind his house, using ice trays filled with gasoline and a match. We used this same technique on his barn. The trays produced a consistent seven-foot flame, which like a vine climbed the posts into the hayloft, but my friend moved away shortly afterwards, to a desolate farming community up in the vast eastern oilfields, where he became a basketball-dribbling thug, entirely uninterested in more urbane disciplines.

But before that, we held a messe noire in his attic with a willing farmgirl.²⁴ His parents hired an itinerant ranch hand to babysit his 16-year-old sister. The wrangler was a very intelligent guy, and the sister's subsequent disappearance became our town's defining moment. I'm amazed it wasn't up on a banner as you entered town.

24. A sorceress from the local Catholic grade school.

My only piano lesson was from the local organist, who lived up a very long and steep driveway, and had a piano with a lace shawl over it, on which I sight-read Liszt's Second Hungarian Rhapsody (guessing at the hard parts), after which the woman refused to teach me, as she played only hymns, not godless friskas, no matter how inept.

I became her replacement on the organ²⁵ at the local church soon afterwards, and angered the powers of heaven by playing Bach, which the priests hissed at me was an insult to God, as it distracted people from the Latin they didn't understand. The only reason we had an organ wasn't music, but hymns, which had accompanied by organ. Accordions would have turned the mass into a polka. Pianos were the chosen instrument of the devil. I played piano music on the organ, as I didn't know any organ music. The only good thing about my piano music was the pedal, which blurred it all together into a horrible goulash of wrong notes, missing notes, and occasional, badly played correct notes. Without the pedal, everything could unfortunately be heard, especially on an organ, which magnifies bad notes until the angels themselves complain. The only organ piece I knew (or could come within a few inches of the actual notes) was the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor by Bach, which was at the time the theme from "The Phantom of the Opera," and the congregation would gasp and look up at the choir loft, where I hunched my back and flailed my hands, in my best Richard O'Brien imitation.²⁶ I conducted an entire Polish Christmas singalong with my foot on the wrong pedal, which I couldn't hear for all the

25. Our town didn't have radio, but it had an organ.

26. Not that I had seen Rocky Horror.

carols. Pedals were where you kept your feet while your mind was otherwise engaged. When I left for boarding school, the priests decided I had been the last volunteer organist. From then, they would pay. Given how cheap they were, this was my first bad review.

The one advanced piece of high tech equipment our small town had was the railroad track, used mostly for wheeling hay and grain from the prairie schooners out to those states which didn't have any. It was hard to imagine states which weren't filled with rolling fields and purple mountains, but which had erased their ability to grow food in favor of having futuristic Fritz Lang Oz-like²⁷ clumps of populated stalagmites, or that's how it looked to me, the small figure in the cornfield at the end of the rifle.

But, alone now in a house which seemed to have outgrown me, parentless,²⁸ I had a mental block about catching the train. It was so far away, it only came once a week, and then it stayed for three minutes, hoping no one would get on.²⁹ You had to pack everything you cared about in the world, all of which amazingly fit in one suitcase, and then you had to walk with that suitcase dragging on the dirt road for over three miles. When you set out, you were always late, and you knew it wasn't worth it, you were going to miss another one, and why even bother, and you went on like that for what seemed like hours as you built up a sweat, dragging this weight through the dust in the late summer heat, knowing you would see the train long before you could catch it, and watch it wait while your heart began to beat harder and your legs froze underneath

27. That is, the city in the film of The Wizard of Oz.

28. If you pay attention to footnotes.

29. As then the train would have to slow down to let them off.

you as it pulled slowly away just as you got within potential running distance. But you couldn't run. Apparently leaving earlier wasn't an option. Every part of the race was mentally improbable. Packing your life into a strange case wasn't something you did, and every item had to be loved and then discarded, or hated and practically included. You can't get too attached to a comb. And then when you missed the train you had to drag it all back to the haunted house and unpack it. So I lived off the bed on which my life was arranged for more than a month before I finally got in the kind of shape where dragging a heavy weight for three miles didn't depress me.

I assume everyone has transitional memories like these, where the flaming leaf piles catch the setting sun or the sawdust on the concrete barn floor remains intact after everything above it burns down. Just the sad afternoon light rapidly fading from the neighborhood into a grown-up urban world of emotional trauma and career disaster.

And the arrogance of it all. I was a pretty good sight-reader at our beat-up upright, and could astonish the monks with my out of tempo, over-arpeggiated Waves of the Danube, schmaltzing it up. In the light of full confession: *The Warsaw Concerto*. French yeh-yeh bebop. Uh-oh. I stooped to conquer. Or I conquered to lose. This is not easy for me. It's hard because it was too easy. The simplemindedness of my facile triumphs. It was all that laurel-resting which turned me into a piano tuner, instead of a pianist. I memorized most of what I sight-read, and I sight-read everything wrong, so most of what I memorized was mistakes. If I'd had the humility to play things slowly and accurately, instead of always wanting to play them perfectly the first time, or better than perfectly, I might have

had a chance.³⁰ It was my own conceit that ensured my ultimate downfall. What is that saying in the Bible about never taking the best seat at table, because you'll be asked to move down? So I was always trying to get the best seat at the piano. Pardon me Paderewski. My skin crawls with the greed of it. And now I'm not even good enough at tuning to wrench the pins of Romando across the street.

Romando wasn't any better than me, when we were in college. He played the same pieces I did, although he had a very phony flourish in his wrist when he had an extra second without any notes. Flicking the wrist showed that he was so far ahead of the demands of the music that he had time and brain power to throw his wrists around. He looked like a complete fool. But he got on Ed Sullivan, and old ladies threw themselves at his feet. Romando was a total Liberace.³¹

My college years³² were populated with the pianists I could have been. Lorin Hollander. Manny Ax. Leonid Hambro. Charming, velour-clad esthetes. Everyone I knew knew some up-and-coming pianist. I was walking down Bank Street one day with a now forgotten girlfriend,³³ a beat girl with thick eye-liner, seven jangling bracelets, a toe pierce, concomitantly voyeuristic sandals, and an Indian tattoo, when the sound of some Samuel Barber piece came sliding down the pollen-filled air, through the chewed-up leaves of the battered trees, filling in the

30. Still the hubris.

31. Although I always enjoyed Liberace on the dorm TV at St. A's before someone switched the channel to mass beatings, crucifixions, and other adolescent sports.

32. That is, the years when I should have been in college but was in fact in Greenwich Village.

33. We are all forgotten.

gaps in the brick houses with what I now realize was the soundtrack of my youth, and this girl perks up and says to our other nameless friends, "Let's go visit Lorin!" and off they all go, leaving me wishing I could play something other than Man of La Mancha, and embarrassed at the jobs I got playing cocktail tunes at pompous hotels.

For a decade or so, hotels actually felt it was a plus to have live piano music in their lobbies. It attracted the kind of clientele they prized, and it discouraged pickpockets. Their ideal client profile was Blanche duBois, Mrs. Robinson, and the Bride of Chucky. Sensitive women. Woman with perfume that no die, who sit on the bench in a variety of alluring positions, and ask questions that became more and more suggestive as the cocktails take over. I was becoming a gigolo. Furtive breaks lasted longer and longer, involving dangerous sex and safe liquor, and gradually that avenue of musical beds closed down, as I developed a reputation with managers and as it began to dawn on hotels that they wanted a better class of gigolo. The actress Alicia Witt played cocktail piano somewhere, it was rumored. A gigoless. I know how you spent your summer vacation, Alicia. In my fantasy. But you escaped. I guess I escaped. Here I am. Some escape. A prisoner in a different room.³⁴

I was a long way from the practice rooms at St. A's.

And so I hope you can see how this isn't about me, who is only the humble prostrate seneschal, the Himal hamal of the great Adrian Van Wyck, whom I was soon to meet, assuming the reader has paid attention and realizes that yet another mire must be unearthed to wallow in the beginnings of the real swamp, the uber-pit.³⁵

34. With a view.

35. Unlike the horror of only some of it.

And so let me leave you briefly with Adrian's note, one of many discovered by me in his knapsack after his disappearance. It was never before. I would never have delved into that sacrosanct gore-tex catafalque, let me assure all of you, staring accusingly in the window until you are distracted by sounds of laughter elsewhere in the lobby, but for—before you go, a word or two—but for my vow to Van W. to felicitate myself from absence,³⁶ or something to that effect. Having wasted my life on him, I wouldn't want his life to go to waste because of me. After all, he has been my mainstay.³⁷

It is because of this note that I have dared to name the collection of his music and his own random scribbblings "Lost Pianist," or "Pianist Lost," one or the other, it is hard to concentrate in this wind.³⁸

— from *The Last Pianist*

36. As Hamlet said to Horatio, which sounds like the setup for a joke, as the rabbi said to the hooker. From the backwards Hamlet.

37. While he stayed.

38. The referenced note is here included in the chapter, "Lost Pianist" in this volume.

