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That Night

By The Beach

and other stories for a film score

Phan Ming Yen



*This book is for
Phan Kok Chai and Lau Foong Kheng,
my father and my mother*

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This collection of short stories has an unconventional but exciting form that uses an extended metaphor which parallels music pieces with the structure of the narrative. The stories begin with music as a source of inspiration. Each story is framed by a musical piece through which the writer expresses moods or even vignettes, like the music – intense and about the everyday – of the 19th century Romantic composers.

At another level, these stories aim to draw the reader to the pleasures of another art form, that of Western art music, and the lives of the men who wrote them. The lives and stories of these people and their works, which are presented as a prelude or preface before each set of stories, also serve as a source of distraction, of entertainment or of reflection from the routine of the everyday. They are stories painting a mood in an attempt to stop time in the quick passing of daily life.

The entire collection has an ambiguous and light, effervescent quality through the use of varying temporal spaces and narrative voices. This gives an almost filmic element to the writing; stories seem to begin out of nowhere,

shift from past to present, and sometimes end nowhere.

Some readers may just drop off the book altogether, while others may be piqued enough to try to work it out. Whatever the case, this is a highly experimental and 'risky' book, especially for one of the newest writing voices in Singapore. Can the written story be structured like a film and succeed in holding readers' attention?

We think the glue lies in the writer's flow of language that is almost musical, and the richness of possibilities offered through the questions which constantly arise as the reader progresses through the book.

The page design and layout, with its wider whites and considered spaces, are also meant to convey this intention – to clarify the text, create a certain pacing, and perhaps even add new meaning and movement to the story.

In this book, we hope to exemplify the life of writers, who are always seeking a new horizon, a new articulation, a new dream.

PREFACE

Do they have to go anywhere, have a beginning or an ending?

Or is the poet T S Eliot correct in asserting that “in my beginning is my end”?

But Eliot also said that “you are the music while the music lasts”.

And so it is with this collection of short fiction which grew from a fascination with the short instrumental works of the composers of the Romantic generation in 19th century Europe. These works, more often than not, were either aimed at depicting an extra musical subject or served as experiments in form and sound, or were intended to just please the listener, client or patron.

Whether they were called Preludes (but preludes to nothing larger), Impromptus (but improvisations that were written out), Character Pieces (but should music depict extra-musical subjects?) or shorter movements from a larger design, the composers of the Romantic movement in the West created lasting moments.

These moments arose either from short works with unforgettable melodies or from larger designs that comprised short memorable movements which could be

enjoyed outside their original context. Moments which stand alone as they were: moments which serve a higher artistic aim, and, at the same time, are pleasing to the ear of the unknowing and undiscerning.

Could one do the same with fiction – create short improvisational pieces that could begin or end at the writer’s whim and fancy, to capture a passing mood and delight the ear?

As such, this collection of short stories begin with music as a source of inspiration: music that would either make for an enjoyable listening experience, or the context or structure or history of which is related to themes dealing with the inevitable of the everyday – of loss, death and betrayal.

Like their sources of inspiration, these stories are journeys in form and sound, postcards of passing moods and moments, intended for reading in the quiet of a sleepless night or solely for entertainment. And as with alcohol, if consumed in the right amount, it leaves the drinker with a mixture of nostalgia and a pleasant light-headedness.

Or perhaps, the stories can be enjoyed as one enjoys the description of an unwatched film but the soundtrack of which one has already heard and fallen in love with.

Phan Ming Yen

San,

The other day when I reread mother's letter, I realised I had not been thinking about home for a long while now.

And I had forgotten.

In her letter, mother told me how our neighbour's son had fallen ill again and he had been coughing out blood.

In the summer, when the heat weighed down on our skins, the stench from the river that ran outside our town would come in stronger than usual. On days when the air was still, there would be the continuous scent of cooked vegetables that had been left in the open for many days and that scent would linger throughout the day, from the moment you wake until dusk when even night would not take the heat away.

One hot summer afternoon, and this was before I left the village to go to the town to study music, I went with two of my friends to the river to find out the cause of the bad smell. The water in the river, to our surprise, was clear and bright in the sun and we could see the grey and light green of the stones and rocks at the bottom of the river and then we saw, still bodies of fishes, floating on the surface, their eyes wide open.

And further downstream, we could see men from the village, taking off their clothes and then leaping into the river, while women did their washing.

Mother told me that the village headman said the water has had poison in it for many years now.

I finally called mother some days after I received the letter. I asked her about our neighbour's son.

I told her that where I work now, I have never been surrounded by so much music in my life. I told her that they allow me to play whatever music I like. And I told her I had become friends with you.

Jun

* * *

He worked in a CD shop that was located in an underground mall at a central train interchange. Although many years had passed since the shop opened and although rental had increased after the mall had been renovated, the owner had decided to continue to maintain a presence at the station, albeit with some downsizing.

Whether the owner continued for sentimental reasons or out of superstition because of the good luck this location had brought him, no one knew; his business had prospered and expanded to branches in malls throughout the island.

* * *

San,

How can I tell you how I felt when I first heard the sound of the piano?

Some people said that the piano in the school hall was donated by one of the musicians who had passed by the village on their research journey to write the Yellow River Piano Concerto.

But no one seemed to remember the musician's name and there is no way of knowing whether this is true or not. Although I had been very curious, I dared not ask or challenge this truth for I was merely the son of a flute player who had been sent to teach music in the village after an army song and dance troupe was disbanded. His superiors said they would call him when the time was right and they said they would send him a letter.

I have never told anyone here that I was born in a village. Nobody here knows, not even my teachers or my classmates or the school. I put the name of the town, where I studied piano before I came here, as my hometown.

All I want to remember from the village was that first time I touched the keys of the piano. It was as if something had cut through the air and took away with it the heat and stench of the summer and all that remained was the clean white room, waiting. And I felt, that with the piano it was I who had done that.

From that moment on, I knew I wanted to fill my life with something that could give me the power to take away all the bad things from around me.

Not even the sound of my father's bamboo flute could do that.

Jun

* * *

During the quieter moments of the day, the supervisor would allow the assistant to put on the music of his choice. This would often be during the hours after lunch when there were fewer customers or during the hours when the shop had just opened in the late morning.

These were the times of the day which the assistant looked forward to most. He loved browsing through the CDs and he loved playing through, in his mind, all the different concert programmes that could be made out from the piano recordings in the shop.

However, each time the assistant plays a CD from the classical section, the shop supervisor asks, "What is the story about?"

* * *

It was an accident. We were listening to the news and I had wanted to make the volume louder. But I pressed the wrong button and then there was a silence and I saw the numbers on the display panel move quickly and then the piano song came on. There were no words.

Just the sound of the piano, a flower alone in a field, caught by a gust of wind, pleading. Broken.

I do not know why my father did not say anything. He just called out my name, “San”, and sighed and left the room.

Then I waited for the dee-jay to announce the name of the song which I had never heard before: it was purely just a piano song.

Two syllables.

Bar-lard.

And the songwriter’s name.

Two syllables.

Was it by “Sho-pan” or “Shaw-pan”?

When I keyed into Google all the words that came close to the sound I heard on the radio, a name came up: Chopin.

San,

Now that you have a name, I can write and tell you. Tell you that on the first day you came, you bought a CD of the ballades by Chopin. I remember it was our payday and I heard the door chime sound when the store supervisor was giving out our pay cheques. I remember because we had just opened the shop for the day and it was unusual that a customer would come so early in the morning. The first customers would come in usually during lunch time; never so early in the day.

Then, I saw you, wandering among the shelves. I came up to you and asked if you needed help, but you only smiled and turned back towards the shelves. Then I saw you at the classical section and again I asked if you wanted help, but you said nothing and just smiled.

Can I tell you now that I was happy when you bought the CD because I had played one of the ballades once? Can I also tell you that as I put the CD into the plastic bag, I felt bad I had not cleaned the dust on the wrapper before I gave it to you? I said “Thank you” and said it was good music. But you did not say anything. I did not know then. I could not even guess.

Jun

* * *

The dream is about a scene after a killing where a corpse floats down the canal on a moonlit night.

The story is about the inhabitants of a village who, in their struggle against their oppressors, are suddenly engulfed by waters from a lake and transformed into flowers.

The fairy tale is about a city crushed and falling in tears.

This is what the stories are about, the shop assistant tells his supervisor: your dreams about life and death told in music.

* * *

How can I tell him that I cannot speak in the way that most do?

That my voice cannot form sounds that are the words which most are familiar with. My voice cannot ask, “May I please listen to this?” I cannot even be sure that the song on the CD is the same as that which I had heard on the radio. I just see a word that sounds close to what I heard on the radio: Ballades. And the name that came out on Google: Chopin.

I put the CD on the counter and give the young man the money. I can hear him say words that sound like “Thank you” and “This is nice music”.

And I smile as I have been taught to do when someone says “Thank you” to me.

Then I leave.

The movements of my hands would not mean anything to him.

* * *

The mirror catches the reflection of the shop assistant who is standing by the classical music section. He is arranging the CDs. There is the sound of the door chime. The shop assistant turns.

* * *

My parents scolded me when I reached home that day. They thought I had been out alone.

So I lied to them. I told them that I had only walked into a CD shop when my friends went to the toilet at the shopping mall at the train station. I was out with my friends, I tried to tell them. They always worry for me.

At first I was afraid: that I had been mistaken. It could not be. The sequence of notes that came from the mini-combo was too dramatic.

And then on the second track, I heard again, a flower swept away in the wind. No longer pleading. Just broken.

* * *

The hands remember lessons learnt, the body wakes up from its sleep, and the fingers break free from silence by themselves.

Although he has been there for some months now, the shop assistant does not tire of looking through the classical section of the shop. He begins each day by re-shelving the section, changing the CDs to be displayed.

It seems that each day, he is able to find a CD that he had not seen the day before, or thinks that he has not seen before.

He puts a recording on and the room fills itself with flowers, cannons buried within them.

* * *

San,

Forgive me if I write again so soon. But I cannot help feeling that when you leave the shop, I never know if you will come back, just as I did not expect you to come back after that first time. So when we asked for each other's name and then you asked the meaning of my name the other day, I know I did not reply. Perhaps I was hoping that there will be another time that we will meet and I can tell you.

Father once told me that before I was born, he had once woken up early, even before sunrise, so that he could cycle out to the town to take the train to Beijing to listen to Fou Ts'ong who had returned to perform. Father then took the overnight train back after the concert because he could not afford to stay the night. He said that throughout the entire return journey, all that was in his head was the sweep of sounds and the rush of emotions which Fou had drawn from the piano.

By the time he reached our village late in the morning, he had decided, when the time came, on the name of his child.

My father said he wanted his only child to grow up to be a person of virtue, of noble character. He had made up his mind then that he did not want his son to grow up like him, a forgotten flute player in a small village who had spent the best years of his life faithfully waiting for a letter that would now never come.

He told me to go far away. To study piano in the town nearby. And then one day to go even further away. He said he had lost his time: he did not want me to lose mine.

So when, after studying a few years with teacher Guo in the town, I heard that people from Singapore were coming to the academy to audition students, I immediately asked teacher if I could play for them. I did not even know anything about Singapore, except that

one of my classmates had a friend who had worked at the same time she was studying in Singapore and by the time she graduated, she was earning twice as much as she would have if she had remained in the country. My classmate also told me that Singapore is very clean and very safe, and the people there speak the same language, and it is not too far from home, and it is like a bridge to other countries.

It was then that I remembered my father's words and I decided that I did not want to spend my life forgotten in a small village in a huge country. After I played for the people from Singapore, I remembered they clapped loudly.

Mother did not say anything after I told her about the audition. We just sat in the room we had rented until the sound of horns and the roar of exhaust outside were replaced by the voices of neighbours talking, until the only human voice was the cry of a hawker hoping for a customer for supper and the only sound that was left was the constant hum of the air conditioner.

The first letter my father sent, he began with a quote from the famous translator and father of Fou T'song, Fou Lei: "My beloved son, I received your concert programme, photograph and a letter from your teacher ... there is so much good news from you that I do not know where to start reading. Mother still thinks of you as if you are still a child and this gives her much happiness. My good boy, you make one so excited"

San, on that same day you also asked me about Chopin's polonaises. Did you know that the German composer Robert Schumann once described Chopin's music as being like a cannon buried in flowers?

Jun

* * *

It is like this on most days: the shop assistant's silence broken only by a smile whenever he is spoken to or when a customer asks for a specific CD.

"Why do you speak so little?" the shop supervisor wants to ask the assistant.

But there is the sound of the door chime and the supervisor recognises the girl at the entrance. He sees the assistant walk towards her, greeting her with a smile.

* * *

Prelude

This, like all that has come before, begins within the last wisps of incense from a wedding ceremony; with fingers that light the thin candles in prayer, but which later ignore the outstretched hands of the gypsies who huddle around the exit of the church; within an old house out in the fields, where a wrinkled hand turns off a lamp hoping for darkness to shut out the white night.

The faint vapours that sting, awaken the ghosts that lie waiting behind each pillar; hope forgets the pity of the present; an old man waits for a young girl who will never return.

References, Recommendations and Acknowledgments

In the course of research for this collection, I referred to a variety of sources. The list below comprises the main texts which I either cited or took references from as well as a recommendation of critically acclaimed recordings of the works discussed. If I had not duly acknowledged any others, it is not intended and I am indebted to the works of the many writers, musicians and film directors which have served as an inspiration.

On an Overgrown Path: Ludvik Kundera's quote comes from his 'Introduction' to the first volume of the *Critical Edition of the Works of Leoš Janáček* which is cited in an Editio Supraphon edition of Leoš Janáček's *On an Overgrown Path* revised by Radoslav Kvapil. The concluding lines on pg 15 make a reference to Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as translated by Michael Henry Heim. Recordings of this cycle by pianist Rudolf Firkušny have been generally highly regarded by critics. **Erwartung:** Arnold Schoenberg's words to Marie Pappenheim as remembered by Marie Pappenheim (cited in Helmut Kirchmeyer's liner notes to the recording of *Erwartung*, Wergo 50 001) and Schoenberg's viewpoint on *Erwartung* from his essay 'New Music: My Music' from *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* translated by Leo Black and edited by Leonard Stein are taken from Bryan R Simms' *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg 1908 – 1923*. The text in German is a quotation from the libretto of *Erwartung*. Theodor Adorno's observation on atonal works

is from *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, translated by Anne G Mitchell and Wesley V Blomster. Other sources referred to include Arnold Whittall's notes for the recording of *Erwartung* by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra conducted by Simon Rattle on EMI 5 55212 2. The disc was a Gramophone Award winner in the Orchestral category in 1995. **Symphony No. 5:** The primary source for this is Gilbert Kaplan's in-depth chapter 'Adagietto: From Mahler with Love' in Jeremy Barham's (ed) *Perspectives on Mahler*. The description "great solemnity" is from Katherine Ame's 'An Affair to Remember' from *Newsweek* (29 October 1990) cited in Kaplan's chapter. The translation of Willem Mengelberg's note in his personal copy of the score Mahler's *Symphony No. 5* is from a reproduction of the opening page of the 'Adagietto' as cited in Kaplan's chapter. Simon Rattle's quote comes from the article 'Sir Simon Rattle on the symphony made famous by a film' in the March 2010 issue of the *Gramophone* magazine. The article was part of a feature on conductors' views on Mahler's symphonies. The same feature listed conductors John Barbirolli's recording with the New Philharmonia and Leonard Bernstein's 'live' account with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra as the "classic accounts" of Mahler's *Symphony No. 5*. The timings of the 'Adagietto' listed include these by Bruno Walter, Herbert von Karajan, Leonard Bernstein and Franco Mannino's recording which was used for Visconti's *Death in Venice*. The dates listed refer either to the year of recording or year of publication of the recording. The 'Adagietto' also serves as a basis for Singapore poet Lee Tzu

Pheng's poem *Reading the Fourth Movement, The Adagietto of Mahler's Fifth Symphony*. **Romantic Pieces:** Dvorak's comments are from Antonín Dvořák (ed Milan Kuna) *Korrespondenz und Dokumente Vol 2* quoted in Milan Pospisil's 'Preface' to Henle Verlag's edition of Dvořák's *Romantic Pieces*. Other sources include the liner notes for Virtuosi Di Praga's recordings of Dvořák's chamber music on Discover label, DICD 920135. The quotation from the film *Dream Lovers* is from memory. A recording of the *Romantic Pieces* in their form for two violins and viola can be found in Virtuosi Di Praga's disc. The version for violin and piano has been recorded by violinists such as Gil Shaham and Vladimir Spivakov, among others. **Pavane pour une Infante défunte:** The first quote by Ravel is from Robert Andres's liner notes, 'The Complete Piano Works of Maurice Ravel Vol 2'; for Volume 2 of Artur Pizarro's *The Complete Works of Maurice Ravel* on CKD 315 while the second quote is from 'Concert Lamoureux' from *Revue musicale de la S.I.M.*, 15 February 1912, 8 (2), as cited in Arbie Orenstein's 'Preface' to Schott's edition of the orchestral version of the *Pavane*. Two of the most widely praised cycles of Ravel's piano music are those by Jean-Yves Thibaudet and Steven Osborne. **Shopping for Chopin:** Arthur Rubinstein's liner notes comes from the compilation *The Chopin I Love* on RCA's Stereo LSC 4000 while his explanation of his decision of not performing in Germany is from a Juilliard master class on 12 February 1975 cited in Jane Gottlieb, 'Juilliard Receives Arthur Rubinstein Music Collection' in www.arthurrubinsteinmusiccollection.org. Anton Rubinstein's

description of Chopin's *Ballade Op. 38*, Frederick Niecks' of the *Prelude Op. 28 No. 4* and James Huneker's of the *Andante Spianato* and *Nocturne Op. 27 No. 2* are from James Huneker's biography *Chopin: The Man and His Music*. Fou Ts'ong's quote is from the *Time* magazine report 'Return of the Native' (22 March 1982) on Fou's return to China in 1982. During the Cultural Revolution in China, a committee of musicians from the Central Philharmonic Society was tasked to write a piano concerto based on the *Great Song of the Yellow River* by Xian Xinghai. To prepare themselves for the task, the musicians travelled to the Yellow River, lived in caves, interviewed peasants and participated in boating activities. The work that finally emerged was the *Yellow River Piano Concerto*. The quote from Fou Lei's letter to Fou Ts'ong dates from 27 December 1954 and is freely translated and paraphrased by the author. *Shopping for Chopin* also makes references to descriptions of Chopin's works by his contemporaries and other commentators and writers, especially that of Schumann's declaration that 'Chopin's works are cannon buried under flowers!' while the references to the corpse in a canal takes off from Jean Kleczyński's description of the *Nocturne Op. 27 No. 1* as that of a "calm night at Venice, where, after a scene of murder, the sea closes over a corpse ...". Jun's description of the village where its inhabitants were turned to flowers on pg 126 is an allusion to Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz's *Le Lac Du Willis* which has been said to have inspired Chopin's *Ballade No. 38*. Other sources referred include Benita Eisler's *Chopin's Funeral* and Adam Zamoyski's *Chopin: Prince of the Romantics*.

Among the multitude of Chopin recordings available on the market, Arthur Rubinstein's recordings of Chopin's ballades, scherzos and nocturnes are perhaps the best starting points for those exploring the music of Chopin. **Prelude in C-sharp Minor Op. 45:** Friederick Nieck's description of the prelude is from Huneker's *Chopin: The Man and His Music* while the reference to Chopin's own predilection for the work is from K H Ruppel's liner notes 'Frédéric Chopin – Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli' for Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli's Chopin album on DG 413 449-2. Chopin's comment on the prelude for his publisher and his description of the spelling of the princess's name are from his letters to his friend, pianist and composer Julian Fontana, in October 1841 as translated by E L Voynich in *Chopin's Letters* published by Dover Publications. Arthur Hedley's description is from his book *Chopin*.

in the preparation of this book:

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photo by y.y. ho

About the Author

Phan Ming Yen was a research scholar at the National Institute of Education studying Western classical music practices in 19th and early 20th century Singapore.

He is the researcher and writer of *Touches: 10 Years of the Singapore Dance Theatre*; contributing writer of *Narratives: Notes on a Cultural Journey: Cultural Medallion Winners 1979 – 2001*; and co-compiler of *Edwin Thumboo: Bibliography 1952 – 2008*. A former journalist and magazine editor, Phan works as an arts administrator in Singapore. This is his first book of fiction.