

PIANIST LOST:
EXCESSES AND EXCUSES



THE HIMALAYA SESSIONS
VOLUME I

PIANIST LOST:
EXCESSES AND
EXCUSES

Peter Halstead

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*All sudden deaths in music,
such as Lully, blood poisoned
by stamping on his foot while beating
time with his enormous baton; or Alkan,
crushed to death by his bookcase while reaching
for the Talmud; or Fritz Wunderlich, who fell down the stairs—
all such deaths may possibly have taken place slightly before the
presumptive late musician was
about to reveal issues similar to those you are about
to encounter. I am of course foolishly allowing
myself the luxury of anecdotal liberty.*

*Absolutely no tricks
or sleight of hand play any part
in the partially verifiable panorama
you will experience tonight, but,
as with any rear view mirror,
events in the periphery may
prove unreliable.*

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HOW TO PLAY

This is not a dull essay on how not to be dull, but an even duller admonition as to how to play the two discs book-ending this book. Nothing else in this bouncing book is dull, except its boastful table of contents and this warning. Please note that agents of certain international agencies are extraordinarily interested in the insidious activities of people attempting to play classical music in private, and that every move you make, particularly in attempting to extricate the round discs from their square pockets and place them into rectangular devices, will be recorded by satellite and held against you by infuriated bureaucrats who even now study the placement of your furniture and the power of your personal amplification system with a disdain approaching fascism, not to belie the intense seriousness of what follows with insipid attempts to warm up the crowd, the Buster Keaton bumbler pushed on stage to stall while the real act is released from jail.

CD

One disc in the accompanying folder is an SACD. It will play just like a normal CD if you put it in a CD machine. You will hear standard stereo at the normal CD resolution of 16 bits at 44.1 kHz. That means that each digital “word” has 16 ways it can be described, and that the microphone is eavesdropping on the pianist 44,100 times every second.

Like a normal CD, it will begin playing after you load it and press PLAY. By pressing the arrow keys on your remote control you can move from one piece to another.

SACD

If you place this same disc in a DVD machine which can play the Sony Direct Stream Digital system known as an

SACD (super audio compact disc), you will hear the pieces at a better resolution and coming out of four speakers: two on the left and right in front of you, and two either on the left and right behind you or to the side of you, depending on how you've set up your home theater.

It will begin playing after you load it and press PLAY, and you can use the arrow keys on your remote control to move forward and backward through the pieces.

BD (BLU-RAY)

The other disc in the accompanying folder is a Blu-ray disc. It will play only in a Blu-ray machine. Many such machines made after 2009 will play this disc in full resolution on five channels at 24/192. Some earlier Blu-ray machines will only play the disc on five channels at 24/96, which is still a very excellent sound. By 2012, almost all Blu-ray machines will play the disc at its full resolution.

Blu-ray machines take a full minute to load. Eventually you will see numbers on the machine's window, and then you can play the entire program by pressing "Play" on your remote control, or move between pieces by using the arrow keys on your remote control.

ADVANCED INSTRUCTIONS

It helps to have the projector on in your home theater to see the screen commands while using your remote control for the Blu-ray. This will also allow you to view photographs taken by the pianist in the Himalayas.

By using your menu controls to turn the sound up in your speakers, you can create an even volume throughout, which will probably sound more realistic, but I trust that you will prefer your own individual settings. Be warned that

the default volumes of your speakers are probably astonishingly low, and if you can figure out how to turn them up, even your videos will suddenly sound more lively.

WHY THE HIMALAYAS?

This six-volume series is one part of the story of a musician's life, which ended in the high mountains of Nepal.

The second part will be published in a few volumes, titled *Pianist Down*. This will be an excursion through the elegant arcades and nocturnal souks of the musician's somewhat Gothic march through life.

The third part is available in abbreviated form as photographs of the Himalayas taken by the pianist, some of which are on the SACD and the BD. More photographs can be seen in book form in the book, *Monstrous Moraines: A Companion to The Himalaya Sessions*, in the bookstore on Blurb.com. An expanded volume of higher-quality photographs is forthcoming.

A similar concert, in a different performance and with additional text, is available on DVD (see "Further Reading and Listening") That album was performed on an American Steinway, whereas this version is played on a Hamburg Steinway. Each piano was moved into a similar place in the center of its momentary monastic sanctuary and recorded similarly, so that the assiduous listener will be able to switch between discs and discover the much-bruited difference between pianos fashioned by sweating Americans or rival sweating Germans. In fact, both pianos sound surprisingly similar, imitating Nabokov's remark that there is no difference between art and science, only between second-rate art and third-rate science—or something to that effect. There are no books in this brothel.

PROGRAM NOTES

Birds weigh nothing at all, yet isn't it interesting that the currents of air which carry them from tree to tree only hint at the vast medium which must invisibly support such undeserving, lightheaded swallows, so that our shallows float on clandestine depths. I would think that similar massive underpinnings must uplift the pianist's short, relatively trivial time on stage, where each futile second is in fact the fecund wingtip, the toehold, the peeking eye, and the lurking peak of decades of gravity and despair.

1. *Fryderyka Chopina: Nocturne, Opus 27, No. 2, Lento sostenuto, 1835. Just kidding about the spelling, although the Paderezewski committee isn't (see "Editions.")*

NIGHT MUSIC

When I think of Chopin's *Nocturnes* I think of that despairing French photo, maybe by René-Jacques, when the world was in black and white and every kiss was a matter of life or death, coming just after the war when the universal instinct was to make love in the ruins, and Paris was in ruins, as were people, so I think of that photo of the night flying down some rain-soaked stairs to the dark dirty banks of the Seine, dank underworld highways of sex and failure which surround us in our trenchcoats, glistening in the rain, on the run from the night, like Aznavour in *Shoot the Piano Player*, losers with lamplit halos, lovers of lost color, of daylight and dead music, trapped in the steel of cities destroyed by their own technologies, by the engines of war, knowing that leaves have been dead in the countryside for months, that nothing will come of the spring, that first love is the beginning of betrayal, but still the camera flies down the Fritz Lang steps of the storm, holding back all that despair, the small rooms of the night, renounced by the vast clueless rage that moves the world, yet rhyming still the mesh of perfect marriages with dappled carriages, even though rhymes no longer matter to a society blown apart by weapons and the rain of rust, fog hurling itself around those filthy river walks where transvestites shiver in the litter, hoping even now that the chilling, stripping rain will bring auras to the streetlamps and that somewhere in the mist someone sings for real, all the decades of deceit ripped away, and there the photo stands, listening to night, waiting for morning, for the flirting, restorative day, aim-

ing at tenderness despite the baggage of camp, the sniggers of the broken, strangifying and strangling the walking dumb, the busted, the aficionados disgusted with their own expertise, their inability to start over—it's all there in that photo, in the music of night, the Kantian echo of black and white, where everything is either true or false, before philosophers started to dicker, to recant (as Freud, Jung, Sartre, and Eliot all did), too late as always, their doubts hushed by acolytes who were already profiting from their youthful mistakes: well, here's Chopin's rain again, washing out sores, and let's hope it scours all of us.

In this most naked of confessions entrusted over the masking river swell of warm certainty where the conclusion of the right hand is as affirming as the left, what moves me are the harmonies sprung out of older leftovers, new subtleties invented from already dying notes, cascading and spiraling stairways entirely independent of rhythm, the busy demands of reality overcome with invention, the right hand in its own world, anchoring itself just in time in the river on the bottom, the gently flowing Danube of the salons never descending into those embarrassing gallery-opening clichés, keeping its own company and consequently its timelessness: never imitated, never solved, still hanging, small fragile scents in the summer air, too personal to become a slogan, a motto, a movement, too inner to be a theme.

Chopin was never part of a school, a group, which explains perhaps his inability to be explained, uncovered, espoused, exposed, exhumed. No defense is the best defense, as grass bends to wind, as someone said of Chopin: flowers and cannons, where chords are as indefinable as clouds, too airy to be earthy; where tonality

defies reduction—to clarify it is to ruin it, the way roads destroy the delicate tapestry of fields, the way a flashlight illuminates the obvious and erases the subtle, diminishing as it enlarges. Let me become hysterical here.

Musicians often keep pictures or stories in their minds to help them capture the mood they want, or conversely capture the mood by ignoring the piece, a bit like inner tennis where a mantra's purpose is to distract the player so the body can go about its business, that is, play it straight. So we by indirections find directions out. But to what extent do our inner programs, rather than distracting us, focus us on the programs themselves, which then replicate in the music, as if Marilyn Monroe, while pretending to be a peach to forget her fear, actually became a peach?

Here in the *Nocturne*, from the start to the end, the constant bass notes descend like snow on a quiet Swiss village, while the melody imitates that bass with exactly the same notes, give or take a few, so that you can see Chopin in the process of inventing his melody from his accompaniment, the way Michelangelo said he found his sculptures by chipping away the stone that didn't belong to them. But maybe I am just snow-blind.

2. *Frédéric Chopin: Prélude, Opus 28, No. 15, Sostenuto, c. 1838.*

[The sound of this piece reflects not so much the way it sounded as our getting used to the stone claustrophobia of the monastery with its labyrinth of conflicting echoes. We moved the microphones around subtly, listening through headphones, to achieve increasingly better sound quality. We had had no time to recover from our nausea upon arrival or to test the frozen labyrinth, with its small windows and irregular mud walls, for acoustic values.

So much work is involved in hooking together so many dozens of boxes with so many hundreds of feet of different cables that the pianist had run out of all patience after a few hours and just began to play, perversely circumnavigating the very goals of the new technology, so we had no choice but to punch the buttons and record what we could.

But then, he hadn't asked. We had volunteered. We were pilgrims to the shrine—a tattered, forgotten shrine on a ravaged mountain, surrounded by nothing any of us had ever seen before, no familiar Domino's Pizza flags, not even the small annoying symbols of safety we take for granted, like the occasional airplane. We were very alone, and it was his world, if it was anyone's—François Seurel, technician.]

In trying to play the repeated notes in the bass which George Sand compared to raindrops, you run a risk. If you play them as softly as possible, sooner or later one will not sound, ruining the structure, the constant gentle hammering of the hammers. If, however, as happens in concert, you play it safe and play the notes louder, the rain becomes immediately obnoxious, also ruining the piece. The drizzle of repetition must become an eventual cataract in the prelude's midsection, and then subside again into the mist.

To me, there is great pain here, as if a child has died, or as if Chopin knew that he was sliding towards death in the cold afternoons of Paris. Although Sand claimed the piece was mimetic, imitating Majorcan rain, in fact, Chopin may have written all the preludes before he went to Majorca, according to Gutmann, Liszt, and Niecks, and tinkered with them there. Sand's sloppy emotionalism in trying to find a simple tag for such a spider's web of sadness caused an enormous fight, with Chopin denying that "imitative harmonies" had anything to do with it, and terming "the servile repetition of external sounds" puerile (Sand, *Histoire de ma Vie*). Liszt claimed the raindrop prelude was in any case the F sharp minor one, and Niecks thinks it was the B minor.

The bizarre notion of a composer's using adolescent mantras to reduce elusive forms to the simple algorithms of mass acceptance, as if Beethoven had a pair of old socks in mind when he wrote the *Ninth Symphony*, and, yes, we can all sympathize with those socks and the universal joy at finding them together in the dryer (not an assured discovery), these romantic clichés may in fact be true, although it is the duty of poets and musicians to deny that they were inspired by an egg in a pan, and in fact, until Warhol, to distance a work of art from its often lowly origins.

Mozart, Haydn, and Bartók, the great folk composers, found their exuberant melodies in the street, and Bernstein wove his collages from already-tested motifs in Mahler. Entire measures in Lerner and Loewe musicals can be found in Brahms, or in a Copland accompaniment Loewe must have practiced over and over until it gravitated and graduated into a full-blown Broadway hit. Melodies graven into the universal race-memory have a better chance of

surviving, and atonal music, in its refusal to cater to basic human desire, has no doubt dug itself an early grave, into which it tries to pull its more joyful colleagues.

Even when it is demonstrably onomatopoeic, music is still just an outline, of course, not a shopping list of socks and eggs, but a Platonic approximation of murmuring shelves whose specificities are entrusted to the shopping musician, who after all has the last word on any composition, any one note, any impulse buy.

What interests me here is the prelude's midsection, written in C sharp minor, that angry cognate of D flat, where the notes are exactly the same as they are in the key of D flat, except they are not flatted, but sharped. That is, instead of having a small italicized "b" in front of them, they have a "#" sign. But the notes are exactly the same.

A similar visual joke is played in Chopin's *Nocturne* on this disc, where the melody is just the accompaniment turned upside down.

The result, amazingly, is the philosophic opposite of D flat; although nothing has really changed, everything is different—the notes are the same, just in a different key, and so the world is thrown upside down, and familiar sounds show different colors, like the rhetorical contradictions of Romeo's "misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms, feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, . . . still-waking sleep."

One can easily find here an unconscious comparison of Majorca's romantic damp with its deadly pulmonary equivalent, tuberculosis; or the chasm between Chopin's domestic sensitivity and Sand's indiscriminate cheating, the pain of a submissive nature enveloped by an oblivious predator; or the grief of Verona's C sharp minor Montagues and Capulets destroying the bliss of their D flat major

teens: same notes, different generations, two keys like two households locked to the death in harmonic cacophony.

In any case, the storm must be stressed, so the aftermath calms: this is an emotional plot, whatever its story, a statement of despair redeemed by forgiveness, rage sprung from drizzle transmuted into rainbows, Sand's venality excused by Chopin's grace: as with Mozart, out of incomprehensible suffering emerges a phoenix of related grandeur, correspondences that can only be recognized in retrospect.

3. *Claude Debussy: Reflets dans l'eau (Reflections in the water), from Images, Book I, 1905.*

Not just an onomatopoeic water piece, Debussy is interested in imitating not just water sounds, but reflections on water, that is, pictures that float, which don't necessarily make noises, so the challenge is greater than mere burbles, trickles, and raindrops. Such sounds in nature conjure up a picture in our mind of falling water, or droplets on ponds, or fountains.

Debussy is dimly focused on interested in surviewing his contents, that is, in suggesting the pictures by the sounds, so obvious water sounds come to fabricate less and less obvious pictures which move and ripple on the water, monsters of the id rising from the deep, where sounds stand in for pictures, interpretations of nature, even philosophy. Music is transformed into grammar, into meaning. Judgments are handed down, a world is set in motion.

The bittersweet calm of random drips grows vaster until it rains, a great guilt or terror arises from below until it becomes almost too intense, and suddenly random wind clears the pond's palette of past memories, a great discordant crisis is reached, flung outside the world of the pond by wild key progressions, and then the drips recur, wiser, sadder, in the great distance, until the final splash is an answer to the unanswerable riddle Debussy has posed, as if the answer to existential void were an almost religious comfort, the reassuring *luxe, calme, and volupté* of nature. The same drips which ask the questions answer them.

The great American poet and translator Richard Wilbur has written a poem about a midwinter thaw, a brief false summer, which captures the exact spirit of Debussy's reflections.

A COURTYARD THAW

The sun was strong enough today
To climb the wall and loose the courtyard trees
(For two short hours, anyway)
From hardship of the January freeze.

Their icy cerements decayed
To silken moistures, which began to slip
In glints and spangles down, and made
On every twig a bauble at the tip.

No blossom, leaf or basking fruit
Showed ever such pure passion for the sun
As these cold drops that knew no root
Yet filled with light and swelled one by one

(Or showered by a wingbeat, sown
From windbent branches in arpeggios)
Let go and took their shinings down
And brought their brittle season to a close.

O false gemmation! Flashy fall!
The eye is pleased when nature stoops to art,
Staging within a courtyard wall
Such twinkling scenes. But puzzling to the heart,

This spring was neither fierce nor gay;
This summary autumn fell without a tear;
No tinkling music-box can play
The slow, deep-grounded masses of the year.

The sad joy of that strong sun lies in the three-note initial theme, surrounded by its echoing chords, chords made up of just those three theme notes, so that every note of the piece reflects every other note, the way a Bach fugue spreads out from its theme, the way a Shakespearean play expands on the initial themes of the first scene, so that the entire play is present in the beginning, as a Beethoven sonata is also entirely latent in its first few measures, or as we can be replicated from one strand of our DNA: in my end is my beginning.

The cold January freeze is the void surrounding the piece, in its strange harmonies which never resolve.

A MEDITATION ON QUANTUM MECHANICS

As with the Liszt *Un Sospiro* (track 8), hands overlap here as well, as notes crisscross themselves like diamonds on ripples. Roberts says that the great piano teacher Marguerite Long maintained that Debussy thought of the opening of the piece as “a little circle in water with a little pebble falling into it.” As ripples fan out from the center, the way nacre encrusts itself in circles around pearls, or trees grow outwardly in rings.

I am reminded of Douglas Hofstadter’s captivating discussion of Cantor sets in *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, those mirrors in mirrors which replicate themselves to infinity, as a Beethoven Sonata is a widening gyre around the center of its beginning, expanding into inaudibility. Cantor sets are caused by the fact that particles interact. No particle exists until its relations with other particles are plotted, similar to the plot of Goethe’s roman, *Elective Affinities*, where people are treated as electrical charges. As Tom Stoppard said,

Things we know about are influenced by things we know little about, which in turn are influenced by things about which we know nothing at all.

Such hypothetical interactions have been scoffed at, but the recent invention of the quantum computer utilizes just these atomic pairs, where to observe an atom is to force it to stabilize, thus making it either positive or negative. At the same time, its twin atom adopts the opposite charge, even if it is quadrillions of light years away, thus evidencing a force faster than the speed of light. Such twinings of identities may also give ESP a scientific basis in fact. The fact that twins often have simultaneous thoughts would then seem to arise from their shared atoms at birth.

And so the lowly musician may have some reasonable basis for attempting to draw parallels between notes, to twin themes. Even the notion of being meant for each other may become a certain inexorable atomic truth rather than a romantic bit of nonsense. Here is a poem about the amorous consequence of such dalliance:

SUBLIMATION

The properties of particles occur in pairs . . .
—EINSTEIN

If we extrapolate the game
Where every snowflake’s not the same,
Where copying is not allowed
And where, in blizzards, two’s a crowd,
Where every strand of DNA’s
Made to hunt for matching strays,
Knowing in its heart of hearts
Precisely which atomic parts

The universe has yet to fake—
That undiscovered flake
Which, being instantaneously built,
Engenders universal guilt
And is shunned by just the sleet
That gave it patterns to repeat,
As if the ice cold eyes
Of snow are nothing more than spies,
Architects who must be killed
When the galaxy is filled,
Stars lobotomized by sudden fame
(Snow by any shape would look the same),
As if automotive genes could care
That a spoke might need a spare,
Or that an axle might require

For its ends a second tire—
But if the absence of an also ran
Is actually a master plan,
And the random nature of the earth
Isn't random when it turns to birth
(How spontaneous is it when you
Have to order from the menu),
When disorder needs a list,
A program to deny its gist,
And single chaos so depends
On plural structures for its ends
That the snow, inflated air,
Controls the sex life of a pair
That might like eyes just touch
Some other eyes as much

As any one of those
Infinite and sightless snows—
How selfish then to say the twin
Is nature's kind of alien,
Rejecting what lone couples might
Flow from cloning at first sight.

4. *Erik Satie: Sarabande No. 3, 1887.*

Satie was essentially a Dadaist, who believed that the world meant nothing at all, that there were no lessons to be learned from rocks, and who thus set about his own didactic campaign of informing the world of this in witty pieces which quote from other composers, turn familiar music upside down, go on endlessly, often giving sassy, poetic, and nonsensical instructions to the player, thus creating a sort of music which exists in between the road directions and the road, interstices which can never be heard and which can only exist in a performer's or listener's mind, thus creating a kind of "program music," that is, music with a hidden agenda or story, which may have motivated the composer and which can serve to enlighten the performer and inform the listener.

The psychological reality of program music is that such forcible imaginings distract the pianist long enough to let the unconscious instincts convey something more truthful than any planned playing might. So stories distract us to let other stories past.

A Sarabande was a Baroque dance often included by Bach in his *Suites*, but here must be thought of as a mid-summer reverie, a dreamy freeform fantasy, something danced by Miranda on her magic island in *The Tempest* or Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, or Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost*, or Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, where suburban Belmont is a land of strange music, those enchanted Shakespearean summer gardens where time stops and, with it, rhythm. One of the requirements of timelessness is that it have no beat, but be suspended breathlessly above the pulsing clock of night and day in its own world, the way we hold our breath underwater and hear only the beat of

our own blood. That slow throb nevertheless gives a clue of what such soporific trances take for tempi, and playing this piece too fast loses its contemplative feeling.

A hesitant chord begins it, then silence. Then a falling theme, repeated twice more with different notes, getting more insistent. I am reminded of the Lobster-Quadrille in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

"Will you walk a little faster?" said a whiting to a snail,
"There's a porpoise close behind us, and he's treading on
my tail.

See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance!
They are waiting on the shingle—will you come and join
the dance?

Will you, won't you, will you, won't you,
will you join the dance?

Will you, won't you, will you, won't you,
won't you join the dance?"

Static flower-twined chords contribute to the moonlit suspension of time, and the falling notes repeat again, maybe somehow inspired or woken by the chords that call to the dance.

The chords repeat again, but this time fading away, as a dreamy Debussy theme leads to the deep bass and loud dramatic clarion calls to action which in turn provoke the initial dreamy chord to sound, this time more emphatically. So some progress has been made towards getting out of bed, or climbing out of Puck's bower up in the trees.

The same chord sounds again, this time calmer, maybe more sure of itself, a bit wiser, and the whole process repeats, the same notes, but this time new emotional issues inform the notes with more meaning, neurosis, sadness, intangible things which can only be communicated by using the notes as a kind of speech to pronounce

thoughts the pianist is having. So reacting to Satie's notes creates a secondary reaction in the pianist which changes the sound of the following notes, and a vicious circle is created, not so much vicious as viscous. Seemingly shallow, Satie's waters run deep, and the conversation he is staging between his polite, if bizarre, voices questions the very existence of music. Why climb mountains? Why even ask questions? The answer lies in our need to ask.

Another falling scale, consisting of strange harmonies, so that the world is lit by a bizarre sun, an alien light, a technique used by Russian writers called strangification, wherein familiar things are described as if being seen clinically for the first time by someone unfamiliar with all their usual meanings, so a surreal world is created. The scale this time leads to a discordant bass note, which invokes a more insistent trumpet call to wake, or dance, leading to the same initial, androgynous, ambivalent chord, either a "let's wait and see" or a polymorphous Orlando-ish sensuality.

Slightly new chords follow, almost conversational, followed by a run leading to a more resolving note, in a more sympathetic tonality. The conversational chords reply, more sure this time, and another run leads to a different bass note which at last seems in the right key, more resolving, more comforting.

Now the longest conversational chord sentence yet bursts on the scene, followed by a shorter five-chord answer, and a quieter, more definite five-note reaffirmation.

At this stage the piece is half over, and simply repeats, more or less, giving the pianist a chance to deepen his conversation with these spirits, to experience wiser replies, until a resolution is reached and the chords fade away. I

must admit I find Satie's last chord a bland goodbye, so I've put in a chord which I consider more in keeping with the piece than Satie's flat D flat chord, the home key of the piece and an obvious way to end anything. Satie is too outrageous in his tonalities to settle for a normal ending after so much invention. It's like Hamlet handing out popcorn after he dies. Let the forces of righteousness assemble against me in the meeting halls of Salem. I have my ticket to Rio.

5. *Rachmaninoff, Sergey Vassilievich: Moments Musicaux, Opus 16, No. 5, 1896.*

The pianist Arthur Rubinstein heard Rachmaninoff play in a simple way only once. It was at the end of Rachmaninoff's life, and he said to Rubinstein that he had wanted to play only simply, but that the world had imposed virtuosity on him. Rachmaninoff of course imposed it on himself, in order to proselytize his music, to turn his poetry into the prose of more prosaic feats, not that the virtuosity wasn't marvelous in itself—it was more than virtuosity really, lush and textured and creative; Rachmaninoff had the ability to compose in other people's music.

Much vilified by pedants for his popularity, the impoverished, silent, aristocratic genius, stripped like Nabokov of family, country, pride, wealth, familiarity, comfort, and reality, found some small comfort, as did Nabokov, in drawing the bars of his cage, concealing the apple orchards of childhood dapple behind the crowd-pleasing chords of schmaltz.

Sadly, the pedants have a point with much of Rachmaninoff, with his predilection for dated jazz even in the otherwise gorgeous concerti, with his whining schmaltz in the Vespers. And yet the *Etudes Tableaux*, the *Préludes*, the *Variations on a Theme of Paganini* rise out of the failures so felicitously, like roses out of swamps, that it becomes obvious we must see beyond any artist's weaknesses to his strengths, or, to quote John Donne out of context, "else a great prince in prison lies." As Walt Whitman said, great audiences make great poets, as well as great composers. We get what we deserve.

Here Rachmaninoff, long before café society's delight with the rhythms of Rio, fits a syncopated Carmen Miranda

samba in between the midsummer strum of the Russian balalaika, occasionally letting the bass bongos echo the sad Copacabana salsa in the treble. The swaying, drunken left-hand Viennese barcarolle and the suave Brazilian dance weave a Ginger Rogers silk that can only be spun from D flat.

As the simplest of the six musical moments, it remains relatively abandoned for its confusion of styles, its Chopinesque lilt beneath the sprung rhythms of its Spanish ancestors, like cellos fighting claves and marimbas. As with the Liszt *Consolation* (track 12), a delicate war wages here between styles and rhythms, or maybe more of a philosophic discussion in a Sevilla café, and resolving its chaos at the start for the sake of clarity sacrifices the point of the piece, which is to arrive at an agreement only at the end. So I hope the listener will pardon the disarray of this impassioned debate.

What makes a D flat tango different from the thousands of similar themes in other keys? Tangos in D major, for example, have an edge, a jangle to them, while this piece is at rest from the start.

Rising out of D flat into crisper, clearer keys, it soon subsides into the submarine seas of its hot tropic beginnings. Harmonies that we have to regard suspiciously, as the key to their key, the code to their cipher has been lost to our generation, reappear, if you listen over and over, with their martini and mango exoticism intact. Learning a piece, you play it ad nauseam and it grows on you. Your victims, often hearing it for the first time in concert, are at a disadvantage, so I recommend the same obsessive repetition for a happy ending. I play it slowly, inner melodies spilling profusely down its walls like bougainvillea.

Just before this self-effacing *Musical Moment* ends, it thickens the sauce with the traditional trick of turning a major key into a minor key in the bass. Mozart does this by using a third chord, called the subdominant, to signal the beginning of the end. Nabokov signals approaching death and dénouement by elliptical mentions of butterflies, often in other languages. Before Humbert kills Quilty in Nabokov's tour-de-force novel *Lolita*, his nemesis, Quilty, mentions the German philosopher Metterling. Humbert growls, "Metterling, Schmetterling, you're going to die, Quilty." Schmetterling is not only another philosopher, but his name in German means butterfly.

But this brief butterfly flirtation with somber death passes after only one note and turns major. All is forgiven, all is resolved back into the contented Sangria of the major key. This is a dance, not a dirge. This major note, a small but vital bird call in the bass, is carried over as the pedal clears away the debris of the night before, and you notice that out of the chaos of thick-tapestried notes, the D flat chord has been created, a small metaphor for the nightclub of tangos and trysts, as the trivial interlude of afternoon infidelities ends dreamily, just before silence falls.

6. *Franz Liszt: Paysage, Number 3 of the 12 Transcendental Etudes, 1826; complicated 1838; simplified 1851.*

[Like all of the compositions on this album, *Paysage* is a musical version of an eclogue, or a pastoral poem, an ode to nature, to an unspoiled countryside whose sense of timelessness long ago fell to the Industrial Revolution, which began around the time Liszt wrote this.]

Surrounded by the most fiery and complicated tone poems ever written for the piano, Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes*, *Paysage* is a break from the thunder and tsunami, as is *Harmonies du Soir* (number 11 of the *Etudes*, also included here).

What is fascinating about the gently undulating countryside of *Paysage* is that, for all its meditateness, it is in F, two tones higher than D flat. F is a somewhat brusque and military key, and this is necessary for the turbulence that materializes in the middle of the piece. But, before the view becomes more animated, it sinks deeper into the nooks and dells of the landscape and modulates down into D flat about a minute into the walk, slowing almost to the point of stopping. This is the somnolent effect of D flat. As in the Copland piece performed next, then, the brash metallic key of F falls becalmed into its relative and antithetical opposite key of soothing, drifting, unambitious D flat.

The bucolic day builds to a climax which becomes more and more beautiful and which turns out to be, not surprisingly, in D flat and its close friend, G flat. Exhausted from the revelation of silence in the landscape, the piano falls silent. Single notes fall down like the dusk to the deep bass.

The original accompaniment begins quietly, to be answered by the bells of evening tolling higher and higher,

until the bass, with one disquieting distant rumble, fades away to dark. Its flirtation with D flat gave me an excuse to include this exquisite painting of a misty Hungarian vista.

It was only in his last revision of 1851 that Liszt added the title *Paysage*, perhaps, as Louis Kentner suggests, as part of the process of simplification, or even simplemindedness, although Kentner himself employs similar poetry to discuss pure music. Were there not in Liszt's mind a transcendental tendency to link literature, vision, and memories of his lost homelands with music, then perhaps it would be wrong for us to succumb to the tinted stereopticons of sight. After all, sight is the great enemy of sound, turning off the ears with the more alluring focus of the eyes. But Liszt, Debussy, Schumann, even the protesting Chopin, knew that everything is part of everything else, as Lévi-Strauss said.

7. *Aaron Copland: Down a Country Lane, Gently flowing, in a pastoral mood, 1962.*

This is the first piece I ever played from a magazine. To produce this idyll quickly when it was commissioned by *Life Magazine*, Copland recycled music he had written about refugees trying to integrate and ingratiate themselves into a small Massachusetts town for a wartime film short called *The Cummington Story*.

Copland adapted the so-called noble theme from the film, a passage imitating the high spirits with which refugees and natives celebrate the harvest at a country fair, a familiar Copland theme, as it must be a theme in all our childhoods, that great brown and orange Charlie Brown pumpkin-patch Thanksgiving, leaves off the trees and smelling of rot around the streets of the town, turning drab alleys into mysterious deep woods by smell alone, the school corridors plastered with scratchy Grandma Moses crayonings of corn and Indians, in retrospect as essential to the American Dream as Copland's music itself.

My parents used to subscribe to *Life Magazine*, as everyone did in those days, as well as *Reader's Digest*, hideous bourgeois intrusions into a world otherwise becalmed with the Kadets of America ("Right Shoulder Harms!" with a hollow wooden rifle and a snazzy new khaki uniform), judo (I would stick my hand endlessly into stones filling the wooden box my Grandfather had made me until my fingers became too swollen to fit between the piano keys, at which time I gave up killing, forcing scales rather than assassinations to the forefront of my childhood world and thus eventually creating the same tawdry one-nightstand concert life I would have had had I become an assassin, without the glamor), and Fu Manchu (the devil doctor

and his mist-obsessed dacoits who spent most fogbound nights climbing up drainpipes into the brocaded chambers of Sir Dennis Nayland Smith, whose eternal cry was, “Good God, Petrie! It’s Fu Manchu!”—I don’t know why he was surprised, because it was never Jehovah’s Witnesses sliding down the bellrope at midnight), so I can remember being as surprised as Nayland Smith to run across, sandwiched between pictures of war brides and amusing animal postures, two pages that neatly unstapled in the middle, comprising, along with large notes for small eyes, a photo of Aaron Copland and possibly of the country lane in question, although the piece may have just conjured it up in my mind. I am not alone in thinking that this exquisite Bucolic was slyly slipped into a national magazine whose readers had no idea what its calligraphy intimated.

I think back to those eternal, immortal cool summer afternoons under the shade of the now blighted, long-since etiolated oaks, whose stillness you hear at the start of Copland’s calm country afternoon. The progression of the eyes back up to the branch-strewn sky is brought slyly to mind by Copland’s childlike but not childish hints.

The smell of wet wheat and summer dust, the flounce of cottonwoods in the hot breeze slipped out of the glaring cream of the pages, and the clouds bent comfortingly over the darkening magazine as it bent like enfolding trees on the piano stand.

The dusty backward back road to our haunted hamlet was, I always felt, in F major, like Copland’s piece. The sun would make on the road, when I walked contentedly along it, oblivious to its never-to-be-repeated peace, halos in the haze. Everything was always bathed in dust in the summertime.

I remember the process of kicking a rock, not as the cursory passing incident it becomes in adult life, but as an endless pastime, replete with distinctions of shadow and angle.

Even now as a supposedly wiser and more sensitive version of my earlier self, I find it impossible to retrieve from the Italian sun that chiaroscuro of smoke and sadness among the architectural and personal ruins of Europe that I felt so intensely as a child. We lose with age only the miracles. After a while, I would forget about the crisp sky, the brisk fall afternoon in the skips, limps, feints, and tricks required to pursue the rogue rock, which takes on an anthropomorphic conspiratorial tilt. Trees fold over the road, protecting the suddenly expansive bushes from the desert of the hill high sun. The world turns a deep green, as if it were underwater on a coral reef.

This was the sudden opulence of D flat, hidden inside every otherwise regulation F major day. Then something, a bird, a modulation, a chord, would snap me out of it, back into the crescendo of reality, and the sky was suddenly huge around me, the air filled with hay, with the high meadows dropping off on each side, as if I were at the center of the world, all around me the hay curving off into outer space.

In Mozart’s opera, *The Magic Flute*, the Prince and his friend must undergo an initiation into the mysteries of life. To me, Copland has similarly wafted us through the afternoon air into the wonders of summer. It may only take three minutes, but when you emerge from this small rain shower of a piece, you’ve transitioned, like the music. Something infinitely sad, beautiful, and bright has happened, and it shines like the hayfield sun, like the reflection of sky in a sprinkler puddle.

Although the piece begins in the key of F, which you will notice is brassier and more determined than the more pensive, expensive, and expansive key of D flat, after a minute the key of D flat is reached. You can hear the air clear and the evening settle in before a crescendo returns the lazy rambler to the initial tempo, key, and day. Copland is very clear about what he wants: “smooth, equal voicing” at the start, then a “slight retard,” followed by a “somewhat broader” area, possibly representing larger fields, then a short D minor interlude played “a trifle faster (but simply),” this being where D flat returns, “gradually slower.”

This idea repeats on a larger scale. When the piece shifts sideways into D flat, note the absolute stillness and contentment which transfuse the country road with sun: this is the D flat effect.

Why not a shocking skip into the Emergency Room of heart-thumping modernity? Aaron Copland was too nice for that. He wants to glide into the heart of the land. Thus D flat.

8. *Franz Liszt: Concert Etude No. 2: “Un Sospiro,” c. 1848, Grove No. 144.*

The exhalation of breath, or even its opposite, the breathless inhalation, are the themes of Liszt’s sigh, or “sospiro.”

Notes rushing up and down imitate those intakes and outtakes of air. Soft breezes or settling summer evenings are the lyre, the harp, on which the vast gamut of the piano, the arpeggio, or harpeggio, is suddenly suspended, like a held breath. In fact, the melody evolves naturally from the top note of each breath, rising naturally out of the energy which enfolds it the way a pearl surrounds a piece of dirt.

The melody is a little breathless, as if the pianist runs out of breath after each exhausting phrase and doesn’t have enough legato left to spare for that poor afterthought of a motif, making the rise and fall of the accompaniment at least as important as the theme, a kind of teamwork, or theme work.

As much as flashy July fireworks, Liszt’s quiescent, longing “sigh” is a hand-crossing study, so that the noisy left hand crosses over the busily rushing right to play a leafy note, then rushes back down into the depths to confirm the forest setting.

The right hand has its own agenda, crossing over the speeding left to play notes on the far side of the body so that the pianist appears to have his arms on backwards. This show continues to the very end, where I play the lowest note with the right hand, and the top note with the left. Liszt wrote a cadenza and a different ending later, both of which intrude on the inevitability of the piece, although the pianist Louis Kentner preferred them.

Liszt has marked the melody with staccato dots which in performance are harsh and modern, so most musicians

prefer to see the dots as stress marks and in fact play the theme quite contradictorily portamento, that is, in a very linked way over the rushing arpeggios.

This is one explanation at least for the staccato marks over the melody. Another might be that the upward rush of notes to the melody dictates a sort of subtle emphasis marked by a dot, rather than a long mark, which would have demanded a less subtle emphasis of the melody, and Liszt was trying to whisper.

Certainly the hands are so busy that they have no time for the melody, and the brusque touch of fingers busily crossing may have been something Liszt wanted to emphasize: to stress the difficulty, not the ease. As Rubinstein said of Mozart: too simple for children, too difficult for virtuosi. Perhaps the current modesty of making hard pieces seem simple is a disservice to difficult pieces.

When I was at music camp, where my parents sent me in error one exciting summer, whenever anyone heard anything impressive from a practice room they said it must be either the best pianist in camp playing something complicated in a simple way, or me, embroidering something simple.

9. *Franz Liszt: Transcendental Etude No. 11, "Harmonies du Soir," 1826; complicated 1838; simplified 1851.*

When he wrote the *Transcendental Etudes*, Liszt was just fifteen. It was 1827. His father had just died, having squandered the all the money Liszt had spent five years building up since he was ten. Liszt was so poor he had to sell his piano. He lived alone on the rue Montholon in Paris, surrounded by books. He had become so inner he could not speak in company, as happens when you spend your whole time reading. He had lost his girlfriend, the daughter of the French Minister of Commerce, who had forbidden his daughter to date an impoverished musician. Liszt was so depressed, his obituary was published. At least we have that in common. So the roots of the *Etudes* are steeped in poverty, melancholy, and presumed death, written in homage to a piano he did not even have. Glenn Gould always felt that art needs solitude to flourish, as was the case with Thomas Mann.

As James Huneker said in his book, *Liszt*, when Liszt rewrote the *Etudes* in 1839, he wrote the history of the piano during the last half of the nineteenth century. Everything the piano meant to its composers and its audience, everything the piano could do, was thrown into the mix. With it, Liszt wrote his own identity. The sunsets of painters, the fight for Polish independence, the stillness of preindustrial meadows, all are there. History is not just the machinations of ministers, but the emotions that spring in any given year from a summer sky.

Amy Fay, Liszt's American student, a schoolgirl in Germany in the 1870's, has left us one of the most realistic portraits of Liszt's playing:

It was a hot afternoon and the clouds had been gathering for a storm . . . a low growl of thunder was heard muttering in the distance. “Ah,” said Liszt, who was standing at the window, “a fitting accompaniment.” If only Liszt had played Beethoven’s *Appassionata* sonata himself the whole thing would have been like a poem. But he walked up and down and forced himself to listen, though he could scarcely bear it. A few times he pushed the student aside and played a few bars himself, and we saw the passion leap into his face like a glare of sheet lightning. Anything so magnificent as it was, the little that he did play, and the startling individuality of his conception, I never heard or imagined.

But here is the great pianist and teacher, Siloti, equally impressed with Liszt’s tone:

[T]he piano was worn out, unequal and discordant. Liszt had only played the opening triplets of Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* however when I felt as if the room no longer held me and when, after the first four bars, the G sharp came in the right hand, I was completely carried away. Not that he accented this G sharp; it was simply that he gave it an entirely new sound, which even now, after twenty-seven years, I can hear distinctly.

It was Liszt’s sound, not his speed, which fascinated everyone. As the musicologist E. J. Dent wrote:

. . . minor pianists turn [the greater works of Liszt] into mere displays of virtuosity because their technique is inadequate for anything beyond that. . . .

Heine confirmed that when Liszt played, “the piano vanishes, and music appears.”

Liszt’s technique eventually advanced to the point where he no longer cared about it. “My dear, I don’t care how fast you can play the octaves,” he told a pupil. In 1851 he revised his octaves away from sheer technique into the version that

is performed today. Nevertheless, Liszt was said to be able to hit two notes many octaves apart with one hand, so fast that it sounded as if both notes were hit at exactly the same time, so simplicity, in his case, is a relative term. This ability to leap great distances without sacrificing delicacy or accuracy of intonation is one of the many challenges of the piece, as well as anyone’s mission in life, namely, to bridge ages and places, composers and classes, without losing our own music.

In fact, nothing beautiful is really difficult, because there is so much motivation to learn it. The Godowsky vivisections of Chopin’s *Etudes* are difficult, because they complicate for the sake of complication. Any virtuosic showpiece is as suspect: febrile, spiderlike skitterings about the web are rarely as beautiful as the dew suspended delicately on it.

Liszt’s complexities are simply multiple simplicities. The great rolling chords, the Harmonies of the title, are in fact three melodies played by one hand, so that the middle melody, for example, must somehow be made to tie into the middle note of the next rolled chord, as if three singers were fighting for prominence simultaneously: hopefully, no one wins.

The colors of evening darken in their husky D flat registers, and the fuliginous sky gathers its penumbra of heliotropes, to put it the way writers of the day would have—that is, the sunset thickens and grows, as the muumuus and murmurs of willows and poplars grow into a great coloristic grove of sound. This is sound imitating sight.

Whether or not Liszt is thinking of clouds bloodying or leaves rouging, skylong rays of gold linking all the clouds, or yellows deepening to rococo velours in the distorted

lead of a monastery window, the pianist must have something in mind other than the notes and half-notes, the haves and have-nots, the notes and half-notes.

Only then is technique transcended by thought, and technique is what the *Transcendental Etudes* transcend. Having played in Khatmandu, just before the roof collapsed, killing a servant who was dusting the piano, but just missing the more culpable pianist, who has always felt he was the point of that architectural criticism and thus falsely spared at the expense of a blameless boy, such aleatory incidents remind me that music is not just a Western toy, it is equally a prayer flag on which to ascend into this swirling Himalayan vapor, into the numina, the spirits of the sky, the icons which lead us to their palisades and palimpsests, to their cloudy tents and pentimentos, to unearth in the sky states hiding in statues, traps in tropes, hopes in notes, the point of it being to unearth the earth, or at least free us, and that dusting boy, from it.

You can hear the dripping verdure rustling broodingly in the building evening wind, distant sunlit fields shining through the dark Corot landscape, the chords rising towards the sky like giant trees in the half light.

The broken chords (which are chords so large they must be broken up into their individual notes) actually have inner rhymes like poems, where the end rhyme is only one feature of the chiming line, and so every note of each ripped chord is in fact a melody, and you can hopefully follow these lower melodies as they wind their inexorable way higher into the evening sky. These fevered climbs are interspersed with panting lulls which only set the stage for the next spasm of tendrils and vines.

Then the clamor-filled sky falls down into the dark

understory and the bass takes over, using similar syncopated broken notes to create a stable foliage over which more simple chords rise and fall and rise, growing more ecstatic until they fall into the exhausted eye of the storm.

The midsection is what Schumann called the most fervent in all of Liszt, where a sustained melody is contrasted with more disturbed, belching uneasiness which gradually resolves through Liszt's starkly modernist single notes (recalling Mazeppa's rise to life after his fall from his horse in an earlier *étude*), leading to absolute grandeur. The initial trees now come back as thirty-mile high thunderheads lit by Delacroix's blood-red sky. After the chords rise and pause, octaves imitate their rise. The depths are now as perturbed as the heights, the whole world whirling in color, like Van Gogh's starry night.

A flurry of octaves descends to a melody which is actually the simple, plaintive melody of the midsection transfigured into a cymbal crash of revelation: the rejected lover has found a way out of despair. Liszt's natural ebullience and nature's Lisztian exuberance triumph over melancholia. The falling note at the end of the theme is now a rising note. This is music clear as words. Composing had staved off hunger and depression for another day. Such remedies have succeeded for composers and writers throughout history. Mozart springs to mind. This frenzied natural spectacle takes over the whole range of the piano and, by inference, the world, eliminating all doubts with climax upon climax, leading to the same three-note theme as the midsection, now resolved and resigned.

Something has been proved. The sunset has taught us something, working through sadness into transfiguration,

really its theme, as much as Schoenberg's *Transfigured Night* and Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. Like many of Mahler's symphonies, a problematic world has been set up by the composer and solved. Liszt answers his own questions. A fifteen-year-old boy has created the world in notes, answered his own doubts about who he is and what the world is, and subsided into sleep. The world gradually loses its color, but not its structure, as clouds do, as the last rays slowly wind their way up into the clouds.

The final bells of night ring the truth and security we gain from knowing that the day's cycle is complete, and that the cycle will repeat dependably, although this was certainly the sunset to end all future sunsets. But if the secrets of the sunset can be described and decoded, then each day has been dealt with in the future, because each day will be the same. Taps at evening is in fact based on a similar rising and falling melody, the same salute to the day's battles, and a positive reassurance that the world is under control, at least momentarily, by a lone trumpet, substituting for the armies of the night. Here, the piano substitutes for the battalions of the soul, fighting the battles of adolescent identity.

In those last, fading chords is the same hard-won calm that Strauss finds momentarily in a Vienna blithely waltzing its way to destruction. The light is rung down and suddenly it is dark. Although the world has disappeared into night, a residue remains, the memory of sun. The transience of man is highlighted against the continuity of nature, as in Salvatore Quasimodo's poem:

Ognuno sta solo
sul un cuor della terra

trafitto da un raggio di sole
ed è subito sera

Alone, a man stands,
Fixed by a ring of light
On the curve of the land—
And it is, suddenly, night.

I do not have his poems available to me here in the bright Capri light, although any muscled club waiter sideslipping down the wet rocks could no doubt assemble its stony vowels; pardon my potentially faulty memory (although what is history but a misquote).

It is in identifying with the fragility of time and the resonance of the world that we take on its enduring qualities. By documenting the evening, Liszt has managed to fuse it, and himself, together in time.

10. *Frederick Chopin: Berceuse, Andante, Opus 57, 1843.*

The melody is very similar to the other two Chopin D flat pieces included here, as if to say that a sentence contains multiple anagrams, and no one strainer catches the river's only gold. The simple melody, essentially a theme and variations, is increasingly embroidered with *jeu perlé*, or pearly play, the filigreed necklace of ascending thirds, descending triplets, and broken sixths which get more and more frenetic until suddenly subsiding into the simple theme again, as Chopin uses his various techniques to impress, but more to cleanse, to assuage: the assuages of sin. In six years he would be dead, at thirty-nine.

As I mentioned a continent ago, Chopin has embroidered the tapestry of the melody out of the rug of the left hand accompaniment, the ultimate example of a left-handed compliment. Possibly a left-handed complement. You always wonder where melodies come from. Here is one example. Another, also mentioned before, is from the left hand of Copland or Brahms. No one will discuss this, but Brahms has more inspiration in his throwaway unheard left-hand accompaniment than dreamt of in our musicals. As Tom Lehrer sings, "When in doubt: plagiarize: let no one else's work escape your eyes," a song about Lobachevsky, a great mathematician himself accused of plagiarism, which song Lehrer admitted in his routine that he plagiarized from Danny Kaye's roulade about Stanislavsky, who himself felt that the best way to deal with a famous line was to think about a different line. I am reminded of the Dean of Boston College, who, in response to a plagiarism scandal, delivered an anti-plagiarism commencement address which he had plagiarized. Jason Epstein told me indignantly around that time that I couldn't rewrite *The*

Murder of Roger Ackroyd because it would be plagiarism, a month before his son's first novel was revealed to be plagiarized, justice thus revealing itself to be as much prosaic as poetic.

I've resisted the temptation to shove the increasingly frenetic trellis of the treble into the party-guest drone of the drab bass, thus choking off the lush cataract of its cascades and flutters: keeping the bass steady involves either slowing it down so the fleeting treble is allowed to radiate while turning the slower passages into lifeless monologues, or speeding up the slower parts until the humming treble tracks turn into a train wreck. The constant struggle between steady bass and a high melody (which adds more and more notes which you have to fit in to the allotted window) begs for rubato.

Rubato was Chopin's notion that you could take any liberties of tempo with the right hand as long as the left hand was steady, as long as everyone met at the end. This "pulling" of the melody is also a feature of Viennese music and is used to great satiric effect by Richard Strauss in mocking or tipping his hat to the waltzes of the unrelated Johann Strauss.

But in Chopin's day, rubato was perhaps the most effective technique to let music speak as people spoke, that is, to vary the speed based on audience feedback, the mood of the night. As a pianist, you can feel the crowd, and you know intuitively how to surprise it, or lull it. Without this freedom, music is like a tightly built house, brittle and infested with germs. Tempo, like a room, needs to breathe, to let in the world and the night.

The human heartbeat, that great arbiter of tempo, dictates that the slow beginning shouldn't be too slow,

nor the lyric tremolo sixths lose their shimmer to excess speed—that lingering glimpse of the fluttering curtain just before sleep should be thick and sparkling, like lethargy, not a thin-lipped, gated, fated rush of adrenaline, which would be the antithesis of somnolence. Marcel in *Combray* does not gallop to sleep, but slips drowsily into the anise of anesthesia.

After a while the simple melody comes back again, and then a strange note is introduced, almost alien to the calm of the piece. While not quite Mozart's subdominant note, used to signal the coming of the end, the effect is the same, Chopin's creative homage to Mozart. And so the lullaby subsides into silence.

The second-to-last note is held a long time to give the pianist time to follow Chopin's instructions, which are to let that chord fade away into the last chord. In order to do this, you simply lift up the pedal slowly, which fades the sound gradually, always risking that too dismissive a foot will let the note disappear completely at a time when it would ruin the calm you've worked towards, an example of how important pedaling is to the music, and how pedals might as well be stamens.

I try to keep the simple six-note accompaniment from getting lost underneath all of Chopin's luxuriate treble inventions, as it is the source, the Moldau, to Chopin's variations, and here at the end, the duple voices of the accompaniment and the melody itself merge into one chord, the third note from the end, and then, together at last, slide into night.

11. *Claude Debussy: Clair de Lune (Moonlight), 1890, reworked 1905.*

A BACKWARDS HISTORY

Proust, speaking of World War I, writes of the “unchanged antique splendor of a moon cruelly, mysteriously serene, which poured the useless beauty of its light on monuments that were still intact.” Note the similarity between this passage and Verlaine's poems below.

In 1905 the impetus to war was building, the tensions palpable, especially to artists. So in the glimmer of Debussy's mysterious moon, borrowed from Verlaine and shining on outmoded monuments, a passé scene which exists to this day in Paris, can be found death, meaninglessness, and implacable human hatred, all of it tucked neatly away behind the serenity of the statuesque chords and moonbeam arpeggios, rolling in the bass the way they slant similarly in the trees, as if arpeggios are Debussy's shorthand for night filtered through leaves.

Debussy is writing his old-fashioned harmonies in the face of Stravinsky, of armed juggernauts massing which will destroy the notion of universal good will, of national harmony, so it is no wonder that a catchy tune had become an anthem for drunken sailors in Viennese seraglios, not a truth which an intellectual could take seriously, as it had been earlier for Mozart, Liszt, Johann Strauss, and Brahms, who spent his young years playing background music in just those brothels. Later on, Bartók, Dvorak, and Smetana restored folk music to its position as the root of serious music, again in answer to the question, where do melodies begin?

My teacher used to say you had to play Scriabin to understand Mozart. That is, you had to know what chain

of diabolical creation Mozart inspired in order to understand what was, to the great minds that followed, silently obvious in his seemingly naive melodies. And so, suspecting what was coming, Debussy may have been aware that he was celebrating the past even as the world was losing it.

Certainly he was accused of being a recidivist, someone who was dredging up melodramatic overwrought ancient techniques out of fear of the modernity which surrounded him. Stravinsky was writing music that would change the world at the same time as Debussy was writing old-fashioned forms like Sarabandes.

Of course we now realize that Debussy's harmonies were unique, that geniuses often better the achievements of the past by redoing them with hindsight, and that a great macabre irony existed behind his music's childlike facade. You have to learn history and music backwards. Schubert's dances in his final sonatas, Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* are dances of death, as is Debussy's soft lunar wind stirring the trees of revolution, an emotion the French had after all invented.

Clair de Lune comes at the beginning of the maelstrom. It hides Boulez and Schönberg under its marble skirts.

Familiarity has overexposed Debussy's brief patch of moonlight like an infrared photograph, precisely because it is the premier example of silence in music, of the absolute stillness to be found in the pools of D flat starlight, its opening thirds surrounded as they are by the space and calm of balmy summer night.

Chords materialize out of the dark, that void which pre-existed existence, so that we are conscious of life before unconsciousness, the underpinnings of all life. As Richard II

says, "Nor I, nor any man that but man is, with nothing shall be pleased till he be eased with being nothing."

That is, until we understand the nature of the void, the abyss, the gulf, the chasm, until we are content with perfect silence, we cannot begin to understand what each drop of rain might add. It is like the short story by Algernon Blackwood, "The Reeds," where terrified hikers by the Danube try to make their minds a perfect blank so a monster cannot focus on their thoughts; they find it impossible.

Paul Roberts (see "Books") additionally feels that Debussy must have had the dark moonlit landscapes of Watteau in mind as a texture which music might suggest.

The chords hang in the void, clinging to each other for dear life, because there is nothing else. Debussy achieves this effect by linking the notes together by slurs and other tricks, such as shared "flags," the little lines that proceed blissfully up from the notes themselves. The notes begin to linger even after the next chord has entered. If you listen closely, you can hear a prior note suspended over a newer arrival. Chords linger beyond their musical notation, represented only by a single note tied by a slur line into the following measure.

The harmonies build until a small world of associations gathers like the shadows of dark branches on grey moonlit grass, and a crescendo is reached, but it is a reverse crescendo, because instead of a crashing climax, instead an immense, quiet, but vast octave echoes in the deep bass, afloat underneath the accumulated cumulus chords tip-toeing down from the sky, like lighthouses that silhouette the clouds: endless, soundless.

The subliminal and numinal structure of *Clair de Lune* creates in the assonances of music the dances between art

and nature which Baudelaire described in his 1845 poem, *Correspondances*.

Noam Chomsky, in his *Langugae and Mind*, has developed the principle that there is a mental system which enables us to verbalize what we feel. Leonard Bernstein in *The Unanswered Question* has extended that “universal grammar” to include music. There are underpinnings in music that tell a story, whether or not the piece is purely structural, such as a Bach fugue, or has a romantic “program,” that is, a hidden story which notes imitate onomatopoeically, such as a legend by Liszt.

Baudelaire wrote *Correspondances* several years after Chopin wrote this *Nocturnes*, but the relativity of all things was in the air. Liszt was writing his musical portraits, *The Transcendental Etudes*, at this time. Baudelaire felt that nature was a forest of symbols, which we traverse through poetry, which is composed of words which expand on already infinite objects. Mallarmé’s 1876 poem, *Afternoon of a Faun*, stressed the similarities between language and music, to the point that certain lines are there only for their music, not their sense. [See in Volume 18, “Music and Poetry Coupled,” which discusses the similarities of Debussy’s 1892 musical version to Mallarmé’s original poem.]

The abuse of free association in describing music linguistically led to austere German theories of pure form, such as Goethe’s novella, *Elective Affinities*, in which all judgmental descriptions were removed, leading to the French nouveau roman. We have continued to eviscerate the emotional roots of music, and developed performance practices which are frequently bowdlerized, censored of their compositional inspirations, a great loss.

As Mallarmé said, writers must take music away from the musicians and bring it back to its true source, the intellect. In Volume 11’s word fugues, I use the musical codes of repetition, inversion, and imitation in poems, so that words make a music sprung from sound, while maintaining a modicum of sense, just in case God is rational. As Claudius says, words without thoughts never to heaven go.

So Debussy’s chords, which remind me of Marcel Duchamp’s cubist *Nude Descending a Staircase*, photons and fragments of broken light scattered through trees which bump gently down the staircase of the sky, these chords are the sound of silence, the representation of what noiselessness might sound like.

The low bass octave, called a pedal point, stands in for Debussy’s primordial soup, for the first stirrings of life which have been invented by the phrases and cubist smatterings of noise which have come before, growing until they produce a real tone. Debussy has improvised something from nothing.

When the drum strike of the bass sounds, the treble moon springs from it instantly, as if on the rebound, a kind of sprung rhythm, so the extreme bass seems to leap up into the heights, the high notes springing up from the low note, a kind of syncopation, where the second note follows the first too rapidly, as if part of it, Eve created from Adam’s rib, the whole reach of the piano linked together by the staggered rhythm of these two notes.

So two unique spaces, separated by the length of the piano, are joined together by time, by a kind of chronological slur, space and time in a pre-Einsteinian relativity, and indeed Debussy makes this clear by indicating that the

two notes are to be played out of the time signature of the piece. By writing the number “2” above them, he indicates that the two notes are to occupy the space of one note.

As the chords descend from the sky in groups of three, the way we trip downstairs, the last trip has a small skip in it, where the chord, instead of sinking down, leaps up briefly before going down to the next obvious note. The little skip up is like wind shaking the shadows on the ground, or like a sudden ripple on a pond, and Debussy indicates its presence again by writing the number 2 above two bracketed notes, lifting them out of the inevitable rhythm of the descent and creating a tiny cardiac arrhythmia, a small skip of a heartbeat. This skip has been present from the simple beginning, you might notice on re-listening, when about eight seconds in there is a little birdlike hop upwards.

Later, when bass arpeggios appear under the melody to strengthen it and emphasize that the moon has arrived at an identity, this same skip will appear again, now part of the main rhythm, not just a throwaway line, showing that, for Debussy as for Beethoven, a small overlooked motivic tic in the beginning of a piece can metamorphose into a full-blown incident within a page or two.

That is, music has a deep, unconscious structure which becomes more than a scaffolding on which the meaning of a piece is hung: the scaffolding dictates and becomes the meaning, as the accidental events of our lives often become elements which shape our ends. A haphazard kiss becomes a marriage, a gesture becomes a lawsuit, a flick of the wheel kills.

By describing such random coincidence musically, and by demonstrating how its importance emerges, music is telling us a story as much as any Greek drama: it is a par-

able from which we can derive our own rules, if we can only understand the language.

Rather than a tale told by an idiot, it is a clue hidden by a genius: these hints can change our lives, if we can find them. They pass in the music in a second, but the pianist has to memorize them and understand why the rhythm changes, so days may be spent on such transient detail, and we have to ask ourselves why Debussy should have written it that way, and gradually a philosophy unfolds, disguised over the years in simple notations, like a dead language discovered by children.

Note that when the piece seems to speed up and turn a bit harsh, it is because the key has changed briefly to E major, a more trumpet-like tonality, before disillusioned steely thirds sidle down the sky to come to rest on a quiet spot, maybe a pond, and the bass becomes soothing, a steady oscillation back and forth. The arpeggios diminish and the initial theme returns, this time with fragments of the arpeggios present, a reminder of its rippling days of dappled glory.

Richard Wilbur captures a similar moment at the end of his wonderful poem, *Walking To Sleep*:

Still, if you are in luck, you may be granted,
As, inland, one can sometimes smell the sea,
A moment's perfect carelessness, in which
To stumble a few steps and sink to sleep
In the same clearing where, in the old story,
A holy man discovered Vishnu sleeping,
Wrapped in his maya, dreaming by a pool
On whose calm face all images whatever
Lay clear, unfathomed, taken as they came.

The arpeggios return, really without a melody, until you realize that the harmony is the melody, that the cascading moonlight is the point, not the pathetic fallacy of love it falsely inspires: our joys and despairs have nothing to do with the calm workings of the wiser world. The fragments subside, and the simple chords reach poignantly for the sky, lost moon rays trying to beam up. Here the sense of sadness is most obvious, at least to me, and the swan song for lost love under the moonlight becomes almost articulate.

The notes rise and disappear: but one lone chord remains after the arpeggiated beams have dissipated as the moon sets. Something has been said, something has been created, something remains, as in the *Harmonies du Soir* (track 9).

I am reminded of Noam Chomsky's grammatical residue. That is, St. Paul said, "Do not fear that one of Thebes is damned, do not presume that one of Thebes is saved." Mathematically the negative statement cancels out the positive one, the verbs cancel, the adjectives cancel. So nothing has been said, strictly speaking; but of course, St. Paul has said that we should walk gingerly and hope humbly, a kind of golden mean.

So the river flows, the moon glows, and from harmony emerges humanity.

Debussy found Verlaine's poem, *Clair de Lune*, to be the verbal epitome of his composition, and so adopted its title. Here is the poem:

CLAIR DE LUNE

Votre âme est un paysage choisi
Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques
Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi
Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques.

Tout en chantant sur le mode mineur
L'amour vainqueur et la vie opportune,
Ils n'ont pas l'air de croire à leur bonheur
Et leur chanson se mêle au clair de lune,

Au calme clair de lune triste et beau
Qui fait rêver les oiseaux dans les arbres
Et sangloter d'extase les jets d'eau,
Les grands jets d'eau sveltes parmi les marbres.

A literal translation would be:

MOONLIGHT

Your soul is a chosen landscape
Where there are charming masks and masques
Playing the lute and dancing and half
Sad under their fantastical disguises.

All in chanting in the minor mode
Of conquering love and the fortunate life,
They don't have the air of believing in their happiness
And their song mingles with the moonlight,

With the calm light of the moon, sad and good,
Which makes the birds dream in the trees
And the fountains sob with ecstasy,
The huge, svelte fountains among the statues.

My own free translation:

HYDRANTS

Our whole life is a forged pastel
Of make-believe actors and grinning frauds
Humming and twisting with made-up broads
In their fake, fantastic Copa from hell,

Lip-syncing disco by Donna Summer
About safer sex and the happier hour,
Where beer is bitter and faces are sour,
And nothing matters as long as it's summer,

The long silent summer, sad and bright,
Which makes the squirrels dream in the trees
And the open hydrants hiss in the breeze,
The big public hydrants spraying moonlight.

This is my interpretation of the composer Debussy interpreting the poet Verlaine interpreting the painter Watteau, all presumably trying to capture the passion and pity of moonlight and the disaster of the love it inspires. The enormous passion in the repetition of the hydrants echoes Verlaine's repetition of the fountains, the jets d'eau, in his poem.

Ironically, Debussy originally named *Clair de Lune* after an earlier Verlaine poem, *Promenade sentimentale*, then decided Verlaine's *Moonlight* was more appropriate, the power of night light understandably erasing the more generalized night walk of the earlier poem. We can thus look at both poems and extract what seems to reflect on the music.

Here is *Promenade sentimentale* (Number 3 of *Paysages Tristes*, written around 1865, while America was having a Civil War, and Parisian poets were stalking pond lilies), a poem you will notice is almost a warm-up for *Clair de Lune*, with the same longing, moonlight, and stillness:

PROMENADE SENTIMENTALE

Le couchant dardait ses rayons suprêmes
Et le vent berçait les nénuphars blêmes;
Les grands nénuphars entre les roseaux
Tristement luisaient sur les calmes eaux.
Moi j'errais tout seul, promenant ma plaie
Au long de l'étang, parmi la saulaie
Où la brume vague évoquait un grand
Fantôme laiteux se désespérant
Et pleurant avec la voix des sarcelles
Qui se rappelaient en battant des ailes
Parmi la saulaie où j'errais tout seul
Promenant ma plaie; et l'épais linceul
Des ténèbres vint noyer les suprêmes
Rayons du couchant dans ses ondes blêmes
Et les nénuphars, parmi les roseaux,
Les grands nénuphars sur les calmes eaux.

I would translate this literally as:

A SENTIMENTAL WALK

Sunset darts its supreme rays
And wind rocks the pale lilies,
The huge lilies between the roses
Sadly shining on the calm waters.
Me, I wander alone, walking my wounds
Along the lagoon, among the willow groves
Where the vague fog evokes a huge
Milky phantom despairing
And weeping with the voice of the river ducks
Who remember it too while beating their wings
Among the willows where I wander alone
Walking my wound; and the thick shroud
Of the dark drowns the supreme
Rays of sunset in the pale waves
And the lilies, among the roses,
The huge lilies on the calm waters.

To translate this more in keeping with Verlaine's sounds while retaining its sense, as so much of the meaning comes from the sound:

LAGOON

As the last light
Cradles the night
On the enormous lagoon,
Pale night with the moon

On the glinting lagoon
In the moon where I stalk
With the world in my walk
The vague shadows creeping
On willow groves weeping
Like river ducks flying
As they flap away crying
The lilies' refrain,
Where shrouded in pain
And embalmed in the dark
I walk in the park
By lilies and roses
Where the full moon dozes
On the enormous lagoon,
The moon that encloses
Huge lilies and roses
On the enormous lagoon.

As the Gallimard edition notes, as with Mallarmé, many of Verlaine's words and rhymes are for sound, rather than sense, which also fits Debussy's ethos, where naming the moonlight is more important than explaining it away. This is the great weakness of reason: it rationalizes miracles into drab realities, it strips life of poetry. As Frost said, poetry is what is lost in translation. And you could add that life is what is lost in science. Paul Roberts notes that both Verlaine's poetry and Debussy's *Clair de Lune* float without emphasis or undue metric stress through the still night, as moonlight will, far from the Gershwin of traffic and business. Like falling snow, moonlight falls without competition, without strife, without the petty divisions and judgments of man.

What strikes me about Verlaine's *Clair de Lune*, written in 1867, maybe two years after the earlier *Promenade*, is its air of despair in the moonlight, sad buskers down on their luck in life dancing nonetheless beneath the birds, the statues, and the fountains.

Rather than subscribe to a literal translation of euphemisms, I've opted instead for the lurking cynicism and anger masked by Verlaine's bergamasques, on the theory that our modern vocabulary doesn't summon up Verlaine's veiled symbols.

The fun of it lies in comparing Verlaine's subtle, nature-imagined ironies with my more social, blatant explications, the landscape hidden in the moonlight. His *paysage choisi*, or choice landscape, or chosen countryside, really means "choice" in the sense of "That's really choice," "That's really rich," or, in fact, bogus: we don't really have much of a choice, those of us who dance homeless under the moon. The charming masks and masked balls are not so charming. Verlaine sees the pun between a mask and a bergamasque, or a ball. As Oscar Wilde said, "A mask tells us more than a face."

In fact, the dancers are miserable, "sad under their fantastical disguises." They sing in the minor key, not the major. (Debussy's piece is entirely in the major key, showing the futility of trying to relate it to its *ex post facto* tacked-on title.)

Love may vanquish cares, but it seems to have vanquished the lovers instead. The opportune life has the same double meaning it does in English, both fortunate and opportunistic. It's not so opportune in any case, as the dancers don't believe in their good fortune, or at least don't appreciate it, like so many of our own urban fortu-

nate. Verlaine's luteists may be wealthy Venetian party animals, but they are poor in spirit.

Their song and the moonlight mingle, so that the last stanza is a pathetic fallacy where people presume that nature imitates their emotions (Tony Christie's "tears are falling like rain"). Fountains sob with ecstasy, birds dream, while the people sob with loss and have no dreams left.

The beauty of nature underlines the sadness of beautiful people. There is nothing sadder than sorrow surrounded by beauty. Nature has no power to draw us out of our misery, or, if it does, depressed people cannot understand it. And it is precisely the beauty of the moonlight that draws pity out of us for the unperceptive dancers. The world is wonderful, but they can't see it, blinded by their own good fortune.

In my translation, I haven't deigned to grant my beautiful people the luxury of party clothes, marble statues, lutes, or fountains (I think of club kids at 4 a.m. by the 72nd Street reflection pool in New York). No birds or bergamasques dawn on New York's party girls, only squirrels, hydrants, discos.

Debussy's lute captures the beauty of moonlight. There isn't much ironic commentary on the dancers, but you can just about hear the sad birds in the trees, dreaming of distant happiness, in the way the central melody rises and falls, fading away finally to a mere sliver of a moon.

The modern folklorist must also substitute hissing for sobbing, a pastel for a landscape, twisting for dancing. It is in the space between the music and its interpretation by a contemporary audience that the poem has to function. According to Paul Roberts, Debussy by 1905 had become aware of the darker aspects of life and his own music (as

we all are by a certain age), so anger at the failed ideals of youth was a theme he felt his piece conveyed when he renamed and rewrote it. In a Proustian way, the very act of naming his failure was his path out of it (no one would publish the piece until after he became famous).

Debussy conveys that disillusionment subtly (as does Verlaine), swathing its wounds with moonlight, invoking the wistfulness of youthful hope and promise, and then letting the light sink or slink away, reminiscent of the end of Auden's poem, *as I walked out one evening*:

It was late, late in the evening,
The lovers, they were gone,
The clocks had ceased their chiming,
And the deep river ran on.

In Debussy's case the moon shines on, but Verlaine uses Auden's water metaphor in his sobbing fountains.

*12. Franz Liszt: Consolation No. 3, Lento placido, 1849,
Grove No. 172.*

The pianist here must be the child of Schoenberg, managing to turn a potentially sappy melody into a deeper inquisition into disjointed time which, in its rhythmic disfunction, acts as a deeper metaphor for our general alienation.

In 1830, Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve published a book of poems, *Consolations*. He never felt secure as a poet, and eventually became a literary critic, moving in a circle that included de Vigny, Hugo, and the Abbé Lamennais, all friends of Liszt. Sainte-Beuve's overblown melancholic poetry, his musical language, and his pre-Symbolist use of concrete things to suggest the human soul appealed to Liszt, who was going spiritedly through a dispiriting period.

Chopin had just died, and Liszt, who had never touched the forms which Chopin made immortal, now began to write his own versions in homage, perhaps to keep Chopin alive. Liszt's lover, Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, was chronically ill, suffering from hideous boils and cankers which covered her skin. In leaving her husband, she had forfeited her own enormous fortune, which was being pillaged by her vindictive ex-husband and the Russian crown, as a result of which no one in Weimar would speak to her.

Liszt had to spirit Wagner into eleven years of exile to save his life, as Wagner had unwisely taken part in the unsuccessful Dresden Uprising. There was no money for the enormous concert schedule which Liszt nonetheless conducted in Weimar.

He must have known somewhere in his unconscious

how many enemies he had, many of them, like the Schumanns, exploiting his friendship.

The book he was writing about Chopin was taken over by the Princess and turned into a mediocrity, causing many recriminations between them.

Orchestras everywhere were schmaltzing up Liszt's compositions, assuring him of ignominy.

In the midst of all of this, Liszt was a pillar of strength, proselytizing the Schumanns as they vilified him behind his back, conducting Wagner when all of Germany was terrified of being associated with the political exile, sticking with the bankrupt Weimar Court out of loyalty to his friend the Duke (until the Duke turned against him), and more or less forsaking the piano after he had invented the concept of the modern pianist. As the Duke said of Liszt, "The world usually judges wrongly what it cannot comprehend."

So what Alan Walker calls the "secret sorrow" of this piece is no longer so secret from us, and its constant reference to Chopin's D flat *Nocturne* (track number 1) must have been a source of revitalization for Liszt.

How blithely, how unbitingly Liszt coasted through tragedies which would have crushed anyone less sure of his immortality. Liszt's need for truth led him to become an Abbé later in life, and to simplify his compositions to the point that he is rightly the father, not only of modern music, but of minimalism, he who was its direct antithesis for much of his life.

So it is a great consolation to me that if such a piece could console a genius with a searing vision of the world around him, who must have seen hypocrisy and tragedy so blindingly, then it must provide at least some comfort for those of us who face lesser problems.

For all its seeming Romanticism, the piece is structurally quite modern, requiring two different time zones, one for the Venetian boat song of the bass accompaniment, which is itself a melody, and the other for the slower, out-of-synch top melody. Only occasionally do the two zones coincide, causing notes to sound in unison.

Mostly, the two hands cannot agree, and battle each other delicately until the very end, when descending thirds end in unison, and you realize that what has sounded like one melody is in fact both together, and there has after all been resolution, subtle and so even more affecting, because it only dawns on you after the piece has faded away.

In keeping the timings separate, I have sacrificed easy lyricism to a more difficult, inconsolable segregation of the voices, so that the piece may seem at first quite unromantic, until the final resolution. It is, I feel, similar in spirit to Charles Ives' modern composition, *The Unanswered Question*, where themes war similarly, leading to an uneasy and possibly only temporary peace.

TIME

I would like to discuss four bezels of the same diamond: tempo; the need to slow down to include inner voices; repeating pieces for greater comprehension; and slowness.

TEMPO

Like rays of light from a stylized bronze sun, tempi all start the same and end up in wholly different countries. A tempo tells us as much about a piece as its notes. In varying tempi every few seconds, Bernstein, for instance, in *West Side Story*, gives us the scattered nature of modern society.

Elliott Carter is even more notorious for complex rhythmic changes. If we move backwards from our own fragmented world of techno, where a disk jockey collaborates with the record itself to provide even more spontaneous rhythmic changes, we can see the presence of such hesitations in Mozart's operas, in Schubert's hesitant fatalistic dances, in Chopin's rubato, in the pulled bittersweet three-quarter waltzes of the Strausses.

As Christa Ludwig, the mezzo-soprano, said of Bernstein:

. . . with every other performance he was different. And you know the same thing Karajan made also. He said: "If I make always the same tempo, you are in a routine after two or three performances." And so they do it on purpose, to be different. Also it has something to do with their constitution, how they feel when they wake up in the morning! It is the question of how is the weather, how is the pulse; so they are never the same. It is always different from the last performance.

We spend our time trying to catch up to the future when all along, as Proust felt, what we are chasing is behind us. We need to slow down to see it or hear it, the way children, lacking adult worries, have the freedom to be excited by

falling snow. We have inherited a tradition of speed started for good reason by Toscanini and later, Casals, to erase the sentimentalism of lugubrious salon music. Slow tempi can nonetheless be gimmicks, attempts at grandstanding.

But in fact changed tempi are ways of strangifying familiar pieces in order to hear them freshly. Slowness creates space in which the magic of a piece can function, it gives the mind time to make associations, it provides a meditative environment in which nuances of tone and touch stand out. Virtuoso displays leave us feeling cheated, our lowest instincts exploited, while moments of great silence and beauty are what we feel, what we remember.

When we play a piece for the first time, we take it slowly, astonishing ourselves as we hear absolute newness unfold under our uncertain fingers. We even play passages over and over, wondering at their structure, their revelations, their unexpected turns, their quirks.

Later, once we've memorized the piece, we're bored by the easily grasped tempo through which we learned it, and the only challenge becomes to play it faster, while retaining much of that initial information and dramatic unfolding. But, alas, we are habituated to it, and we fail. What seems apparent to a jaded performer, contemptuous with familiarity, is, however, uncharted territory to our listeners, who are baffled by hearing so much, so fast.

In this way music is lost forever, driven by performance clichés. Bach's *Partita* in E major is played by everyone as a virtuoso piece, when in fact it is simple and lovely, so to play it fast is like teaching a turtle to run. In the self-conscious panic of that speed, all the detail that attracts musicians to it is lost. It is like Ralph Fiennes rushing through *Hamlet* to simulate energy with haste.

As Bernstein said of Glenn Gould:

I admired . . . his constant inquiry into a new angle or a new possibility of the truth of a score. That's why he made so many experimental changes of tempi. He would play the same Mozart sonata-movement adagio one time and presto the next, when actually it's supposed to be neither. He was not trying to attract attention, but looking for the truth. I loved that in him.

Pianists, when they are alone, will play for themselves, to move themselves. Pianists in the presence of a tuner, a producer, an engineer will play to protect their reputation and the legend of their technique, and the music disappears, veiled in defenses. This is why Gould tried to empty the room of listeners. Only then can the audience hear what the musician hears, oxymoronically, when there is no audience.

INNER VOICES

The other advantage of accommodating tempi to the complexity of the music is that it allows time for inner voices to be heard and understood. In the rush to impress the top-most melody of a piece on an audience in a concert hall, inner voices must be sacrificed, as they are hard to hear in such large rooms. But what made Horowitz so wonderful as he aged was his insistence on those voices, which made his interpretations so fresh, so exciting. It wasn't just the sudden power, the dynamics. It was the detail.

Glenn Gould was a constant advocate of the need to vary tempi, reverse emphases, make new accents, and generally surprise oneself, in order to revitalize music, to keep it new. Gould found he had to retire from the stage to follow his own inner voice, to exclude the inner voices

of others, as concerts tempt us to reach the rafters. Such revolutionary playing is easier to understand on a disc at home, where it can be played over and over, than in the last chance saloon of a concert hall. Gould always disparaged the “non-take-twoness” of the stage.

REPETITION

Much music from the classical era involves repeating long sections, which can be either boring or stimulating, depending on how the repeats are played. I once asked a well-known pianist why he played the repeats differently.

“Never bathe in dirty water” was his answer, one I found to be lacking insight. To me, a repeat is a chance to bring out elements in the music which couldn't be included the first time around. It is an opportunity to deepen our perception of the music. Music contains more than it can present. Not only must the pianist be given several chances to reveal intricacies which often happen too rapidly to appreciate, but listeners must be allowed to familiarize themselves gradually with the themes and their variations.

One piece in its timing serves many masters: changing melodies flow from similar notes as marble cities are issued from the same dark quarry. A film depends as much on its audience as on its director, even though the projection remains the same. Some films improve with viewing, because our perceptions change with familiarity. Experience is the constant shimmy of chaos over order, like changing light in a meadow.

As we each take something different away from anything that happens, we should be able to loop a melody in live performance time in the same way that we set a stereo to repeat our favorite song endlessly.

Sir Walter Raleigh, when he was imprisoned in the Tower of London, saw a fight break out in the courtyard below his aerie. When he asked about it at lunch, every witness told him a story different from what he had himself seen. (This phenomenon can be repeated if you've ever seen an event in real life which is later distorted by television reportage.)

Raleigh went upstairs and burnt *The History of the World, Part II*. To this day, we only have Part I. Mere observation is no guarantee of truth. As Wittgenstein said to his students, although we know the earth goes around the sun, what would it have looked like if the opposite were true? It would have looked the same.

When musicians perform, the music changes with the angle, the seat, the hall, the prior steak, or the cognac to come. When you build a Steinway, nothing is certain: each piano turns out entirely different. The same process produces beauty as it does beauticians. As in the making of Burgundy, regularity is sacrificed to the possibility of sporadic bliss. To set a piece in stone is to lose the mobility of it, to abandon the suddenness and strangification that comes from sublime ignorance. Composers in the classical era put repeat marks around their music, as Dickens says, to do the police in different voices, to give the patient a second opinion. The only way to do that today, in an era without second chances, is to play the piece twice. I used to listen to the disk jockey Watson each night on WNCN. One morning at around 2 a.m. a woman called up to complain that the Bach *B Minor Mass* was too long. "Well, madame, obviously you weren't listening," he said, and played the entire piece again.

However, too much repetition dulls the mind. The rote

of practicing often results in rote playing, or reductive role playing. It loses the spontaneity of discovering the piece for the first time. There should be a thousand first times. Roland Barthes feels that only practicing retains the surprise of initial discovery. Performance never achieves that element of virginity.

My friend Peter Van Etten, after hearing a master class at the Aspen Music Festival, said it was vastly superior to performance, and maybe pieces were heard best when explained phrase by phrase rather than performed in a rush.

The same is true for memorizing. Rather than allowing the sudden lurch of a note into prominence, the quick slip of a rhythm into a demilitarized zone, a zombieland of anarchy where no time rules and no note leads, memory feels the need to solve its problems, to fit the complexities of time and space into neat cubbyholes of prearranged parries, of solved puzzles, so that what emerges from the petrified stage-fraught mind is a child's dinner of connected dots, an alphabet soup where most of the elusive, bobbing letters are hidden under a consistent, bland tomato broth.

The great Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard hated memorizing, as well as the concept of virtuosity. Both defeat the ability of music to breathe, to be human, rather than superhuman. He speaks out against such braggadocio in three of his novels: *The Loser*, *Old Master*, and *Wittgenstein's Nephew*.

Richard Wilbur says the same about naming things. Once a bear becomes an easily-named noun called a "bear," the wonderful uncategorizable monstrousness of the apparition has been categorized, fit into its round hole and defanged.

Memorizing a piece, or over-practicing it, names it.

SLOWNESS

“Lente lente currite noctis equi,” said Faust. What he meant was: I gave my soul in order to sin without any consequence but one: my soul goes to hell at midnight. And so, slow down, nightmares; hold your horses.

In the Himalayas, where dreams are as sluggish as yaks, where sleep is reluctant and waking always incomplete, where time flows no faster than rocks fall or streams freeze, music merges with the revolution of the earth to ignore the arbitrary past of cities. The sky whirls in retrograde motion, and our sins and failures seem distant, seen through the wrong end of the telescope.

As Lukas Foss said to W. W. Burton about Bernstein’s tempi at the end of his life:

[It] came from Lenny’s desire to really pump the most out of the music, to milk it, to get everything out of it that was in it. Sometimes he would do that by driving home the point, by being totally emphatic about every detail. I think that is how the tempi became slower. . . . If you want to make sure that people hear the detail in a piece then you slow things down.

Or as John Mauceri said of acoustic reasons for Bernstein’s tempi:

I think there is something here with Lenny that is rarely discussed and that is that Lenny in a recording studio and Lenny in a concert hall were two very different people. Very different in the sense of how to use the room and also the medium. Lenny in the studio tended to be slower, because, like all of us, he wanted to hear everything. It also depended, obviously, on the acoustics of the room and the microphone placement; if the room was dry he tended to conduct faster; if the room was reverberant he tended to conduct slower.

Brendel notes that the *Hammerklavier Sonata* was marked too fast by Beethoven. All meaning, detail, emotion is lost

by that tempo. Yet times dictate such mechanical speeds as proof of passage: they want to get there, but not be anywhere while they’re going.

It happens to each of us at some time. We are sitting quietly in a playroom, ordinary children, perhaps watching *Million Dollar Movie* or *The Lone Ranger*, with their soundbite echoes of faded afternoon glories (Rhett Butler, William Tell), which have become, before there is elevator music, the cheapened rhythms of a daily suburban routine, the beats that sustain the emotional anguish sprung from the cookie-cutter households and family sitcoms which were the opiate of the time, the *Truman Show* projections which curtailed off the engines of the Krell, *The Matrix* which kept our dreams in check, and suddenly, into that snowglobe of contained frenzy, intrudes a slow murmur, the shaded grove, the open window of Dvorak.

The blood freezes, the pulse pauses, and suddenly these perky, theme-park, fountain-foaming fireworks of the Muzak maelstrom fall aside in front of the movement of the modern mind, the child unleashed from stodgy Victorian roles into the benign evening with its slow, brilliant, blood-tinged clouds.

If velocity were the fluttering pennant of authenticity, then the fastest performances would be the best. When Rubinstein asked Lhévinne why he played a piece so fast, Lhévinne replied simply, “Because I can.”

A pianist I knew heard a friend play the Schumann *Toc-cata* faster than anyone he had ever heard.

“Why did you play it so fast?” my friend asked.

“Oh,” said his friend, “I can play it faster than that.”

We find ourselves eavesdropping enviously on previous decades, wondering what distinguishes them from our

digitally perfect discs, and the answer is, often enough, that our forebears took time with the music. Just because we are digital doesn't mean we are alarm clocks.

Every age suffers from what Liszt called:

a fruitless virtuosity, . . . a soulless, senseless delivery of masterworks, which for sheer thumping and thrashing cannot be comprehended.

It is more difficult to learn a new language when a native speaker races through it, and music is a new language for much of its audience, even for musicians. We learn the notes slowly, with a sense of awe and discovery, and then as soon as we can, we throw away the great spaces that moved us, to flaunt our airtight polish.

Rapidity has never been a trait associated with romance: we court in slow motion. Girls distrust the whirlwind romance, rightly. A performer is charged with recomposing the music, and the revelations of creation are not subways, but pastures. Cows ruminate effectively; road-runners do not. Sarabandes, not polkas, give us pause. As my teacher once said, music is fastidious contemplation. (Although no sooner spoken, this particular improvised illumination fled his repertoire. Music and language did better, he believed, without the spotlight of immortality. Pianists played better when they weren't recorded. The pressure of a sudden inspiration's having to remain fresh forever contradicted the entire point of repartee, of a quick thrust of the sword before flight. Occasional wit isn't meant to be repeated. As the poet Archibald MacLeish wrote, "They also live who swerve and vanish in the river.")

I feel a Quixote-like obligation to free meter from the metronome, to cut space loose from its Einsteinian slavery to time, which after all is a man-made division of a rather

more flowing universe. Deadlines are a recent metaphor, a new opiate, a clever oppression. Music needs time to think. The fast lane has overridden time, and with it all the artifacts of leisure, such as family, or Frisbee golf. Our musicians are businessmen, striding briskly down the corridors of Chopin.

The world can never go home again, probably, but that is what certain meditative artists, such as Proust and Nabokov, attempt: to revisit lost worlds, and I think it might be a good time to locate, in the coves of our frenzied cortex, those musical madeleines, fragrant with our former innocence.

The idea is not to drag race a piece, but to convey it without becoming occupied in the day-to-day struggle of the notes. To become a statesman, not a showman or a politician. I'm reminded of the woman who approached the great pianist Paderewski.

"Are you the great Paderewski?"

"I am, madame."

"And aren't you Prime Minister of Poland?"

"Indeed I am."

"And weren't you a pianist?"

"Yes, madame" (getting impatient).

". . . What a comedown!"

Someone else said to a film star, "Didn't you used to be James Garner?" I'm sure I have the wrong star, but the right quadrant.

To lose oneself in the battle of the notes is to become a commando, a Rambo. Mere speed is suitable only for the well-barricaded race track of the low road, pandering to our Circus Maximus instincts.

We are all susceptible to the sheer electricity of a

Horowitz or a Volodos. Both musicians know, to their credit, how to amaze the public in order to prepare them for a moment or two of quiet truth, the author's message. Perhaps we must earn the right, with noise, to be peaceful. But if I only had one chord to play, it wouldn't be the first chord of the Tchaikovsky *First Piano Concerto*.

WASOWSKI

In Andrzej Wasowski's recording of the Chopin *Nocturnes*, an innocent, introductory, almost naive tempo lets the struggle of first acquaintance and the ganglions of first love grow, because, after all, an audience is composed not of composers, but occasional listeners who, even though they might know the melodies, may often have never actually discovered the music note by note the way a pianist does, and in fact cannot absorb information at the blistering rate of lackadaisical virtuosity.

The beat of the heart is the tempo of absorption; stress test pulses usually have little fibrillating time for love or listening. In our natural tendency to be seduced by speed, we have reduced emotion to a race. Certainly speed is an easy way to differentiate performances, although its mere presence allows no time for the deeper subtleties which are less easy to quantify, thus making it harder to discriminate between performers, a questionable hobby in any case.

Wasowski plays a passage at the tempo it needs to become beautiful. He doesn't figure it out mathematically so each part is in perfect ratio with every other part, as if it were an algebraic equation. So you would think the piece would then sound disproportionate, when in fact it sounds human. A friend of mine, to give the other side its due, says

that he gets anxiety attacks just waiting for Wasowski to finally play a note.

Perhaps the influence of the mathematically-based serialists, who have reduced sound to equations, has given the metronome undue influence in conservatory training, turning out generations of technicians who have had no exposure to older music-making. The new mathematicians have created a new form of lethargy: the laziness of precision. Breathing, conversational rhythms, instinct have been left to popular music, which has consequently flourished, once classical artists abandoned the patently human ingredients of music.

The intelligence which writes notes and gives a general idea of their movement also knows that notes are just Platonic icons symbolizing the more genuine essences hiding in the shadows, which depend on the fire of the moment to succeed.

Getting carried away by the notes means missing the music. It is as if I pointed at something and my friend looked at my fingertip, not in the direction it was indicating. I went with a friend once to see a neighbor's outdoor Christmas tree, but, before they turned on its lights, my friend mistook the reflection in the window of the brightly lit indoor tree for the outside one and praised it effusively. Focusing too much on the tyranny of notes is myopic: scores are just outlines for the imagination.

NIKOLAYEVA

The marvelous Russian teacher, Tatiana Nikolayeva, played the way we breathe, with the same pauses which we take to convey emotion, or the sense of a phrase when

reading or acting. This gives each note a chance to develop a symphony of nuance and tone, so that some notes can be flutes and some oboes. Such layering necessitates taking time: we mustn't throw the orchestra to the wind and take off like Toad of Toad Hall in his jalopy, scarf flying, on his way to his next accident, brash young frogs that we want to be. Rather, notes must be allowed to have lives of their own: they are clues to cataclysms.

Tempo is the great enemy of emotion, which by definition is a break in the heartbeat, a skip in the blood, a moment out of the race, a *trou Gascon*, when all good Musketeers pause between courses to let the sauce sink in.

THE PARABLE OF THE MICROPHONES

Hearing two very individual performers play at the Aspen Music Festival in 1997, I marveled at the privateness of their music: it was like hearing music that artists play for themselves when no one is around to criticize them; it is only then that music listens. Returning to hear the duo two nights later, the situation had changed. The concert this time was being broadcast live to an urban audience far away. In order to impress the invisible city with their competence, speed, and professionalism, the musicians threw their personal approach out the window and played it the way they felt people expected to hear it, that is, just like every CD on the market. This is the microphone effect, and it paralyzes soloists into parodies of perfectionism. It robs us of reality, reducing it to the lowest common denominator.

Recordings are made on the run, in churches between

midnight and the first morning mass. The goal isn't to capture an ideal moment, but simply to get all the notes down without motorcycle and airplane noise so they can be spliced into a "perfect" performance, one whose timings were never actually even performed. A piece plays off itself, off values discovered by chance during performance, off especially beautiful notes on a particular piano on a particular day, and little of that comes through on modern recordings, because there isn't time to encounter those aleatory moments which suspend the music in space.

KEYS

Every pianist grows up with a sixth sense, an inculcated suspicion that various keys might be guilty of certain crimes, certain assumed identities, masks hand-tooled by composers who have already decided on the disguises for their own pieces in those keys, but disguises which are possibly intrinsic to the keys themselves. Whether a composition determines the nature of the key, or the key of the composition, the result seems to be the same, that most pieces in the same key share an uncanny number of facial resemblances and family memories.

The instinct that made Chopin write a cradle song in D flat is the same premonition which makes a pianist know intuitively that D flat is a somnolent lullaby of a key, partly because he is aware of that *Berceuse* and other similar pieces in D flat, but mainly because D flat would lend itself to such harmonies of the evening even without Liszt's *Harmonies du Soir* to argue its stained-glass case.

D FLAT

Having colored hearing, or synesthesia, both Nabokov and his wife Véra experienced tastes and colors at the sounds of letters (“steely x, thundercloud z, and huckleberry k . . . , creamy d, bright-golden y, . . . the drab shoelace of h . . .”). Nabokov was as sensitive to spaces as to colors, note “the green drawing room (where an odor of fir, hot wax and tangerines would linger long after Christmas had gone).”

Such syntheses color the musician’s mind. Each piece you play takes on the scents and sights of its rustling audience, rusting salon, roasting dusk, the dripping post-rain trees and rumbling summer evening creeping in around the notes through the valanced mahogany muntins, every hasty trill, balanced leap, and improvised sforzando immortalized in its own amber light, to be brought up precisely before the note in question is repeated again, limber enough to be resurrected thirty years later from the throng of similar aspirants waiting in the plush lounge of hindsight to be called in at will, not by premeditation, but out of whimsy, instinct, folly.

As well as the lighting, many musicians have productive associations with various keys, from the overeager, juvenile, bushy-tailed C to the voluptuous velour seraglio of G flat. C sharp is almost dedicated to Rachmaninoff and Scriabin in its fury and aggression. D flat involves exactly the same notes on the keyboard as C sharp, but the tones are produced by the calming flat, not the hair-raising sharp, creating a drowsy lushness, an overgrown ravine hidden in the rolling countryside, enveloped by glades and bosks, by Constable and Corot, the fallen apple midsummer before a warm caramel storm. A smug sunset leads to the Jane Austen inevitability of dinner and love on the moors.

I’ve chosen these pieces because to me they cling to that nocturnal trellis that lives only in the world of D flat. The dreams they provoke are not accidental. The moods they inspire must be similar to the same moods that brought them into the world. That is, they re-create themselves easily, assuming the pianist doesn’t trip over them, but has the foresight instead to slip into the hedges and wait for thunder.

C MAJOR

Each key has its calling card. The key of C is a plain Jane planet, bland and juvenile, lending itself to the things of childhood, such as Mozart’s *Sonata*, his *Rondo*, Debussy’s *Dr. Gradus Ad Parnassum*, and Prokofiev’s gleeful kindergarten romp of a *concerto*. Why such simplicity? C major, being the easiest key, because it has none of those finger-tripping, eye-stopping sharps or flats, is the first any pianist or composer learns, and thus identifies with the naive memories of first love, those awkward arpeggios, banal beauties, and comforting chords we learn with the light slanting depressingly through our grandparents’ Victorian blinds, every detail of those rooms as branded on our lives as those deficient compositions themselves, certain scales recalling for no reason the fuzz on the grim rug, the grime on the ivories, every nonmusical event memorized, along with its equally dubious musical themes, so that our practice sessions throb and strum with their own movie motifs in our blotter-like indiscriminate burgeoning blackboards of blank baby brains.

But even without those first efforts in C, so hard to memorize, so impossible to forget, which still run through our heads like the Certs commercial or the Castro Con-

vertible theme, even without that initial repertoire which condemns C forever to the role and rote of its puerile prison, C emerges harshly in the white glare of the keyboard, without the gaslamp halo of softening flats, or the character-building punches of aggressive sharps.

C is the Wonderbread key, completely colorless, la-la-la forever on one note, a white-sale, sail-white monotone that agglomerates such a flatland landscape of similar whiteout nonevents drawn like filings around its magnetic void as to discourage the great grotesque cathedrals of sharpened gargoyles and flatted buttresses which call out mockingly to the groggy composer, bedded cozily down in his domestic little downy sea of C.

C MINOR

C minor, on the other hand, seems to involve two entirely different hands than C major. Witness Beethoven's *Pathétique Sonata*, his *Sonata (Opus 111)*, his *Third Piano Concerto*, his *C Minor Variations*. Or Chopin's *Prélude* and Bach's *Pas-sacaglia*. The simple addition of two flats flips a flippant bit into an obituary, a thread into a threnody.

More sharps or flats lead naturally to trouble. In the case of D flat, which uses four flats, the extra flats pillow the notes, which fall like feathers into the keybeds between the headrests. D flat is the county of fallen hopes, falling leaves, falling cadences, like the falling left hand in both the *Nocturne* (track 1) and the *Consolation* (track 12), like the rise and fall of baby breath in the *Berceuse* (track 10), or the frenetically rising and falling sigh of *Un Sospiro* (track 8).

C SHARP MINOR

But take C in all its simplemindedness, give it four sharps, and Rachmaninoff's lurking *Prélude*, his coruscating, foreboding *Etudes-Tableaux* emerge naked from the bath. C sharp minor is a Russian thing, foreign to Mozart and Haydn. It is bells, hammers, and ice: milder European climates do not engender it. Just because it shares its C with that Caribbean child, the sea of C, furnishes it with no similarities. To reach C sharp from C, one must endure an endless Lewis Carroll progression like his symbolic logic, where dust is changed to frog in four steps, a linguistic version of six degrees of separation, where all people on earth are only six acquaintances away. In the same way that words and people can morph quickly into distant relatives, for example, T. S. Eliot into toilets, so chords can undergo similar changes. The intermediary stages which are required are known as great circles, like the great circle routes which are in fact straight lines turned into arcs by the curve of the world.

These great circles travel in packs of four and five, wherein notes progress, not one after another in single file like obedient children, but instead by jumping many intervals at a time, until every note in the scale has been gradually played.

Ironically, you have to play lapfrog or leapdog with these progressions, and work your way through all the sharp keys, before you get to the flat keys. So even though the black keys on a piano represent both a flat and a sharp, they are far removed from each other in the leapfrog world, which is why D flat and C sharp sound so different: they are not Siamese twins, but only distant fifth cousins. Harmonically, they have no genes in common.

D MAJOR

The key of D, so distantly close, is a reveille, a military wake-up filled with trumpets, loudspeaker announcements, radio broadcasts, school buzzers, and bombs, whether Beethoven is using it for his ascending Mannheim Rocket scale, Mozart for his four-hand sonata fanfare, or Schubert for his *Marche Militaire*. No matter how far afield Beethoven digs into the dirt of related keys, no matter what zephyrs harmonic progressions may stir in the idyllic meadows of the sonata's middle, the stigma of brittle D sticks, and must be returned to at the end of the day when the bell sounds, the lyre hanging limply like a dog's chastened tail between the piano legs.

D MINOR

D minor, on the other hand, introduces the tense scale of D major to its two mysterious minor cousins, sloe-eyed nymphs out for trouble, and suddenly the high-collar, button-down formal dress of D is flirting with the disaster of D minor. Speaking like a graphic designer, the change is a visual one. On the printed page, the sharps have simply been replaced with one lone mellow, melancholy flat, whose D minor despair is enough to cancel out those bouncing Bobbsey twins, the two sharps of D major.

Mozart and Rachmaninoff's great *Concerti*, Chopin's final *Prélude*, Bach's phantasmic *Toccata and Fugue*, all dig deep into the dank D minor well of death for their immense structure, as if that lone flat demands darkness, desolation, and who among us dare fly in the face of such a depressing tradition. Happiness is simply not tonally possible in a minor key, and definitely not in D minor. The resonance of history cries out for blood.

MEMORY

One of the greatest dangers of altitude is sluggishness and the inability to summon up otherwise easily accessed memories. Nothing can be learned or retained at much above 9,000 feet, and the spontaneous retrieval system which is required for musicians to translate thousands of prompts into various motor actions is sorely lacking at any altitude. I have seen well-known musicians flounder on the stage at Aspen, to which they have just flown for a high-altitude concert, becoming reduced to infantile stabbings at the keys, their music bled of sophistication and subtlety and even notes by the invisible hand of atmosphere.

It is quite possible that, had I been lucky enough to have recorded these pieces at sea level, the performances might have been faster and more aggressive, although there seems to me to be a virtue in their easily absorbed flow, in their human rhythm, and the addition of performance clichés in a sea-level spasm of oxygenated exuberance might have led to juvenile excess, or to interpretations based on the fear of critics or audiences with expectations of imitative repetitions, of xeroxed CD sounds, or insecure mimings of ancient insights.

CHESS

The enormous backlit headlight highway of synapse and neuron interfering with logic to produce spasms of error and quirk which we call genius is the same path through the Krummholz of the brain, the stunted lightning-struck gothic funland of notes that make music, not the metronomic, gnomic, metered-out metropolis of mediocrity, but the erratic, Socratic tic of random arrhythmic photons

of warmth and will that counted as human nature before the diligent logarithms of rhythm co-opted the sonics of the gin-and-tonic heart.

PIANOS

Pianos are not idealized, airbrushed supermodel icons, Photoshopped iron maidens. Pianos are jangly, breathy behemoths, ebony mammoths trapped in tar pits of heat and Haydn.

Inhuman, possibly marsupial, standards of grooming apply to pianos as well as people in our stylish age. Hair is character. We are only as good as our brands. Big hair is out, as are big felts, that sheep's hair padding which determines whether a piano is luscious and much-photographed, or mousy and unheard in noisy rooms.

In Rubinstein's day, the merino sheep's wool which was selected to gird the wooden knobs of the piano hammers was beaten into a thick pad, each section of which weighed twenty-four pounds. In the 1970's, economy and corporate committees decided size didn't matter, and thinner pelts could be settled for, so the weight of the wool sank to around seventeen pounds, which produced an expectably thinner sound, obvious to anyone who compares the paltry 1980 CD sound to the lush Gina Lollabrigida vinyls recorded in the 50's.

At the moment, unnatural smoothness of tone is considered the performance norm, as if every piece were parceled out of an organ grinder's music box by a crank, despite the plosive, explosive, propulsive, percussive nature of the modern mind.

Insistence on the untouched tone proceeding from the

beaten string and hammered hammer is an impoverished dream that has led to a false polish where nightmares are lost.

Glenn Gould, as always, was a beacon of sanity. Rather than a soft-spoken, well-behaved Steinway, Gould preferred a well-played, broken-down, untuned conservatory piano, as it was closer to a young musician's everyday world.

The perfect piano detracts from the cubist cataract of half-seen harmonies and unperfected chords, just as mathematics needs to become closer to the disobedient fractals of chaos to predict what really happens.

Only then can you start to tune it. And only after it is in perfect tune can you voice it, that is, file, needle, juice, and shape the hammers until each note sounds the way you want it. And then, you have to work on the *una corda* pedal, that is, the soft pedal, which moves the entire action over until the hammer hits only one string (in reality, two strings), instead of the usual three. If it so much as brushes the third string, it sounds fuzzy and loses its gentleness, and you have to shape the hammer, reposition it, and maybe even reposition bits and pieces of the action itself until each note hits just two strings evenly.

Until I turned thirty, I never went anywhere where I couldn't spend at least four hours a day on a piano, 365 days a year. Not that it made things any better. The most satisfying compliment my teacher ever paid me was, "But your mistakes, Peter . . . are so musical." Finally, love inveigled me to Sardinia for a bleached, burnt ocher, pianoless summer. My playing improved with absence, and from then on I felt that ignoring the piano was a service to music in general. Barthès inveighs against practicing, in that "it destroys the

delicate bloom of ignorance,” to quote Wilde. The great Austrian writer, Thomas Bernhard, says in his short novel, *Alte Meister*, that we should never finish a book or learn a piece, because too much knowledge replaces invention with oppressive responsibility. If you haven’t read a book, you’re always making it up from the few pages you have read. The poet Dylan Thomas had only read the first page of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, but it gave him enough to imagine the rest and discuss it passionately. Had he read any more, it might have outweighed him into silence. People who claim to have an education can never remember any of it, but turn pompous at the mere memory, disguising ineptitude with attitude. The people for whom knowledge continues are the people who missed it and who are always trying to make up for it.

A piano isn’t a *prim momento mori*, a nagging reminder of routines, an object of rote, a masochistic icon of proper behavior and empty technique. It’s a compendium of every exasperation, dream, and sin of every pianist who’s played it. Pianos aren’t assemblages of splints and bushings, keys and pedals. Pianos are biographies. You can’t separate the piano from the pianist. We live our lives in them and through them, and, like pets, they are miniatures of ourselves, and pick up the magnetic resonances of our spirits in passing. Here are a few pianos, then. The rest loiter about in later volumes.

THE CHICKERING

Poor dead Chickering, long gone from even my subconscious, but enormous in my conscience nonetheless. If our conscious selves ache for a lost opportunity which has long been erased from our ids, what does that say about

the power of art, which we manufacture every second, over the seething, lurking libido, the ingrained cervical cortex of inexorable genetic fate?

The Chickering was many things to me. It was a punching bag on which I took out my frustrations, my emerging and yet always damaged and damaging technique. It was negative space, known for the festivities it replaced, the sports it discouraged, the fumbblings it forbade. Baseball became Beethoven, first base became the first chord position, friends were swapped for intense discussions with Rachmaninoff, whose camaraderie remains ineffable and amiable even today. So I have no regrets for the savagery I missed. Every time I emerged from my pent-up playpen of ivories and felts it was to memorably mundane experiences.

I remember my one baseball game, when my strong wrists and microscopic ocular accuracy, both ingrained from years of finger placement and polyphonic voicing on the Chickering, provided me with a home run my first (and last) time at bat.

One of the large adults of my youth, head wreathed in disguising clouds, far above the plains on which I lived my myopic life, decided he would hold me at bay with his marsupial palm until the ball could be retrieved from the ornate copse where it would have been acceptably occupied, I felt at the time, with sinuous vines and sensual bracts. So I was obliged to excuse myself from this alien display of hierarchical restraint, from this hand *ex machina*, with a complementary display of independence, some manmade fire stolen from the repressive gods, directed humanely at his stomach. Although I brought in the team, cinched the homer, respectably suburban intimations of well-being

and normalcy, I was immediately banned from further appearances, and so was obliged to forge my unsatisfyingly liberated way through long twilit lawns and obsessive groves of Magritte shadows under the still blue skies back to the adult calm of the Chickering, the sanctuary of Chopin superimposed over the absurd charades of savagery we impose on adolescents in the name of normal Norm, that conquering cliché from the plains of Hastings whose bloody mace still reigns over our rebellious if fleeting spasms of divinity.

The Chickering sat by chummily, losing character by the fistful at every childish attack, witness to my expanding arpeggios, my uneven scales, my unbending digital importunity, my callous and calloused jabs at its discolored ivories, until the flattened hammers struck bone and thoned instead of clinked. Bangs replaced bongos. The erudite master I never had would have simply swapped out actions and hammers for newer versions.

Several galaxies later I returned home from school, set down my satchel, which contained that day two vast volumes from the *Oxford English Dictionary, Sound and Sense* by Perrine, *Frontiers of Astronomy* by Fred Hoyle, and *The Gift* by Nabokov, and went rotely to the bench. In front of me the fractured ivories had now turned into a smooth if grooved and discolored desktop. The ess-shaped maple of the frame had been selectively chain-sawed into straight mahogany sides, the thick tapering legs of the lumbering beauty were now shaky ebony Bambi spindles, and soundboard and action and lyre had been vaporized, so that what emerged from the miasma of sunset's slanting mote-filled spotlight was a particularly Victorian and cantankerous desk, the vivisection of soul and office effected

by the Satan of a wooden carpenter, the fait-accomplé of my father the chatelaine lording it over the frozen future of his suddenly untethered tenant, me. In an instant I went from master of symphonic events to a wandering minstrel, a gypsy vagabond, a priest without a church, a sheet without a script, blundering from room to room into the darkness of a newly godless adolescence.

Nubile bushes and waving fronds were replaced with Greenwich Village coffee shops, asphalt nights, tin can rhymes, meaningless human encounters (grinning twins in stark apartments in forgotten boroughs), drunken upside-down midnight runs in the subway, booming bearded pseudo poets, motherly British professorial crushes, classes in perception which involved removing your socks and smelling your feet, or blindfold treks through drugdrop parks in the bland uncolored city evening, where nothing is evened, no equinoxes unearthed, no nodes precessed. The world had turned its last. Music left the spheres, and whatever vestiges of family had leered at me out of leaded dormer windows were forgotten in the anxiety of surviving another coffee on the sardonic benches of my dwindling landless boho world.

Some pompous chesty atonal singer wheezed out Irish songs to erotic purrings from putative dates. Hermano Mermano, the perfumed and coifed virtuoso, purled out notey rippings to the adulation of freshmen, and I was arrested for being the only person in my depressing yellow joss house dorm who was not on drugs when the campus police raided our tasteless floor, but was instead found insubordinately naked with a bag of Cheese Doodles and a malternative.

So the Chickering took down its surroundings, includ-

ing me, with it. Pianos are not just mechanical cages, but peripheries. They reverberate with not just notes, but lives inside them, running like skeins through our torn lives, unraveled by Ravel. Pianos are not those unmusical one-night stands scarred by their Ferrari-fiber carapaces or the cracks running down their ebonized music boxes, and I deny any association with them, despite that dim flash-lit iPhone photo on Facebook, although I do remember a quite nice small Bechstein at the Post Hotel in Klosters where diners sent irate notes to the maitre d'hôtel over the clangor of Chopin during hors d'oeuvres, where I was subsequently forced to yield the field to the bland doodlings of an apparently more appropriate dinner musician. I also played, at the Centre Chopin in Paris, a beautiful, even-acted Grotrian Steinweg, only seven feet long, which had nonetheless a special fire and amiability to it. Pianos Magne in Paris had once a lovely small Steingraber, fast, responsive, and lively.

My first real piano was a ringing seven-foot Steinway B from 1928, and I regret selling it simply because I needed to lift weights just to press the keys down. I initially thought it would toughen my fingers to have such a recalcitrant action, but I could never work anything up to speed.

I later learned that a great technician can lighten almost any action, so it would have made sense just to have had my old Steinway worked on, as few modern Steinways have the bell-like clarity of the older Steinways from around 1885 to 1940. Some pianists feel it was the actual solid-iron bell beneath the piano which added to the tonality until it was eliminated, but it was also the heaviness of the 24-pound felts, the hammers, and the aging of the soundboards. I've played a few older concert Mason & Hamblins,

Chickerings, and Baldwins, and they also have that patina, an almost Stradivarius veneer to their soundboards and their cases.

Once unleashed from my ideal piano, I wandered the world like Jungen Werther, Melmoth the Wanderer, or René, Chateaubriand's unanchored anchorite.

A beautiful ringing Bechstein in Kathmandu stands out in my Leporello list of conquests, as a short while after I played it the roof collapsed and the Bechstein ended its reign filled with water, incidentally taking with it up the prayer ladders to lost horizons a young Rai who had been dusting it at the time, in whose innocent memory we must now lower our heads and listen to the winds in the steep valleys summon up ancient angry voices.

Old Bechsteins are fast and brilliant, like Steinways without psychological problems, but more recently their actions are sluggish and their tones muffled. Bösendorfer Imperials are generally thin-sounding, in my experience. Their expense almost guarantees purchasers who are too rich to know if they are in tune, so no one bothers to prepare them. The one Garrick Ohlsson used for his recent complete Chopin is, however, wonderful, and sounds like an American Steinway.

Viennese pianos in general, such as Feurichs, Ibachs, and Grotrian Steinwegs, tend to be more old-fashioned in their tone, unable to stand up against the eighty-eight-players in a modern orchestra (one player for every piano key). But there are exceptions. I have played brilliant old Blüthners.

I had a Hamburg Steinway C for three years, but found that its tones, while rounded and Haydnesque, weren't as neurotic as the more David & Lisa New York Steinway D's.

I had in Paris a 1997 Yamaha Concert Grand which, despite Yamaha's early failures at copying the Steinway D, was a faster, more fluent, yowling monster, although it was made for public brilliance and had trouble calming down for private showings. Yamahas have thicker hammer handles (called shanks) in the high register than Steinways, which can make hammer sound dominate the more fragile short-string sound in the high notes, so Daniel Magne in Paris shaved the shank. Richter and Gould both played the Yamaha, among other pianos (Gould also played old Chickering and Baldwins. His trouble with the Steinway Company is documented in *A Romance on Three Legs: Glenn Gould's Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Piano*, by Katie Hafner). Kauai concert grands are getting better and better, and may eventually approach the Yamaha.

THE YAMAHA

Daniel Magne had moved the hammers down their handles to hit the strings closer to the pianist, thus giving the monster more power, but making it impossible to improve, as the hammers were in the middle of their shank, not at the end where longstanding Japanese equations could be applied to their tone.

You have a free tuning, do you know? He asked me, arching his eyebrows.

Oh, yes, could you come over this week?

This was the opening he was waiting for.

But it cannot be more, the tuning. C'est . . . LE MAXIMUM. LE maxi-MOOM!

And it was. He'd freaked over it for months, trying to hide whatever wayward water main had waylaid it. He had obviously poured shellac, or varnish, or lacquer thinner,

on the hammers, and inadvertently created a beauty of a monster without even recognizing it. Everyone I ever met in Paris shook their head and said, "Oh, THAT piano. . . ." It had a past, but its past blinded everyone to what it had become, to its power, speed, and sheer rise.

Rise is what a piano has when the sonorities build like a tidal wave, suddenly and unexpectedly. Notes which before have been just notes turn suddenly into tsunamis, fumaroles, maelstroms. Scales fly into themselves, notes tripping over their own toes because suddenly there's nothing in the way. As fast as you can think it, you can play it. You're always getting out of control, going faster and faster, because . . . you can. Once or twice in a lifetime, if you play a lot of pianos, you meet something that turns you into a hero, into a virtuoso out of the past, a piano whose voiced chords make you sob with recognition: this is what the real thing sounds like, in the best halls, played by the greats. This is what you never hear anywhere else. No stereo can touch it. No cheap hall. This is Horowitz in Carnegie. Mere people are not allowed to touch such instruments, let alone own them.

It was maybe partly the room: high elaborate ceilings, elegant moldings, Murano glass chandeliers, French windows, Hermès drapes, Baroque mirrors over the carved fireplace with the Lafayette mantel. Heavy doors everywhere, four foot thick walls of imperial plaster, floorboards and paneling with a Stradivarius veneer, hundreds of years old, hallways and rooms off rooms that spread the sound around like a labyrinth. The way food tastes better in Paris, pianos sound better, too.

And even at Magne's hôtel particulier in the Marais, the piano had been, suspiciously, now that I think of it, in an

alcove where the low ceiling magnified its power. Perhaps any good piano in those settings would have sounded as impressive. This, though, was the deus-ex-machina, the devil in the device, which began the chain of events that led to all of it, to the Daibutsu in Kathmandu, the Everest View, a hotel without guests, all the things that fell like dominos once it started.

The Steinways in Paris are Hamburg Steinways, shallow and superficial, without the depth of the American instruments, but there is generally not a lot of German soul-searching going on among the clever French. I've never had much luck finding good French Pleyels, Erards, or Gaveaux.

Santi Falcone built his own design, with lovely inner casework, starting in 1984, which took 700 hours. I never felt the pianos were adequately tuned or prepared, which explained their disappointing sales. The company was sold to Mason & Hamlin, after which the factory had two fires in a row. The Falcone is now only made by special order, as are concert Blüthners and Bechsteins. Falcone lives in Carlisle, Mass, where he owns Dante Confections, which makes chocolates. Everything may change by the time you read this, of course. Pianos come from living people, now and then, rather than factories.

The Borgato is an elegant Italian nine-footer which takes some two to three thousand hours to make. They make three or four a year on demand. Radu Lupu, one of the great living pianists, has one in London.

Horowitz's piano was so unevenly voiced that notes leapt unexpectedly out at you, making every piece a novel experience, with inner melodies suggesting themselves at every turn: a very Romantic kind of voicing, which Glenn Gould

also seemed to favor. The bass was so heavily voiced that a fly landing on a key would sound like Horowitz. The treble was "juiced" with lacquer thinner until it was brilliant, even shrill. The action was so light your fingers tended to fly out of control. You turned into Horowitz. I once asked Irma Wolpe how a Horowitz concert went, and she said, "Ach, terri-full. He vaz dryink to be Chorovitz."

I played in Paris Arthur Rubinstein's Steinway as it was traveling around with him years ago, the one that Israel had had specially prepared for him, and its tone was rounded beyond belief, immensely voluptuous. I've heard that Rubinstein's hammers were hardened with shellac, rather than the lacquer thinner Steinway now uses, and that his felts were considerably heavier and thicker at twenty-three pounds than the nineteen- to twenty-pound weights used by Steinway in the 80's and 90's. Recently, Steinway has begun using heavier felts again. A felt is the soft material padding the hammer which makes the tone, based on how much it is shaped, needled, grooved, filed, or aligned flush with the strings.

As large as it is, a nine-foot piano can play about four times softer than an upright piano or a smaller grand. It has all the voices, including the most important voice, silence. But not all Steinways are created equal, and the most successful examples are understandably offered to great artists and orchestras. It's true for many types of instruments: cellos, violins, guitars; although they are all made according to the same formula, they all come out differently.

You have to play many pianos over many years before a great one presents itself. Even then, some are bright and perfect for Chopin and Liszt, some are iron-laden and Schubertian, some are mellow and singing for Mozart,

and some are deep and inner for Beethoven, to pick a few examples.

A pianist is reviewed based on his sound, which is heavily dependent on the piano he chooses, and then on how the technician voices it. A piano that sounds effervescent in Chopin may sound shallow in Bach.

Sometimes it's the hall, not the piano. For example, Richard Goode hated the house Chickering at a Maine festival and flew up a Steinway he loved from Steinert's in Boston, but when it was put in the hall, he ended up playing the Chickering.

I have to tell Franz Mohr's story, which he has written up in *My Life with the Great Pianists*. Tuning for Horowitz, Mohr "juiced" the felts with lacquer thinner more and more to achieve the increasing brilliance Horowitz felt he needed as he got older; Horowitz's medications had made it hard for him to hear milder frequencies, and the piano eventually sounded as if it had thumbtacks driven into the felts

So, during one of Horowitz's long concert hiatuses, during which the piano just sat in the Steinway basement on 57th Street, Mohr removed the tinny hammers and put on new ones, which he voiced for many months, juicing, needling, and shaping them until he felt they were perfect.

He then called up Horowitz and said, "Volodny! You'll never believe it, but a miracle has happened to your piano! Maybe it's because nobody played it for a year, but you have to hear it!"

So Horowitz came down to the Steinway basement and was very nervous someone else had played it. No, no, Mohr insisted, no one. Horowitz played for a minute or so, and then turned to Mohr: "This is the sound I've been asking you about for years, Franz. Now, why can't YOU do this!"

The two Steinway branches in New York and Hamburg were initially competitive. Germany used hammers, felts, and actions made by Renner. The German felts are very brilliant initially, but get compressed to a tinny sound if they're played intensely. So in a normal home, they might stay brilliant for years, but in a concert situation the hammers get shrill very quickly.

American hammers get better and better as the felts start looser, and are shaped by playing. The German actions were faster and smoother, so many pianists sought out German Steinways. After New York switched to Renner actions around 1990, the New York piano became the equal of the German, with the advantage of deeper-sounding felts. It has improved since then, and now there are usually quite a few you could love forever when you walk into the showroom, which never used to be the case. It used to take decades to find a good one.

Ultimately, it's the technician who does the after-market work who deserves credit for what a piano becomes over time. Although every Steinway is made the same way, in the past only a few have had that concert quality, and then fewer turned out to be exceptional instruments, as the work is still very individual. You need a master craftsman for every step, and there are few left. And it isn't fast. It takes years, even if the technician comes every other week.

In the last few years, Steinway has realized that there should be more individual work on a piano and its hammers, creating hundreds of extraordinary D's which are creating a new standard of focused and explosive tone for brilliant young pianists like Yuja Wang, whose palette takes full advantage of the new colors suddenly available.

During recordings, pianos need to be retuned after every big piece, and often during long pieces. And then

pianos need to be played extensively to break them in. After many decades, of course, the playing will wear down the bearings, and the soundboard will begin to sag, losing its energy. But for half a lifetime, a well-prepared instrument will produce a great tone and a supple action very dependably. Pianos from the 20's often need work on their older and frozen up actions, but the tone is often intact and incredible, like old wine.

Ideally one would like a different piano for every piece, the way golfers have different irons. There should be a piano caddy who would drive a golf cart out onto stage dragging a piano behind it, decouple it, hook up the old one, and motor off.

Piano rebuilders are an equally rarefied group. Peter Mohr, son of Horowitz's tuner Franz Mohr, worked for Falcone for a while, then started his own rebuilding company with a few Falcone people. After Franz Mohr retired from Steinway, he crafted his own idealized pianos out of rebuilt Steinways, fast, yowling things with glistening trebles, one of which I eventually acquired from Klavierhaus in New York, whose Rolodex of dexterous excess will be the subject of later perforated piano rolls.

Faust pianos in Irvington, New York, uses Canadian custom strings when they rebuild Steinways. Sara Faust feels the old cast-iron plates, hand-poured in Steinway's own foundry until around 1944, were the secret, along with the soundboards.

During World War II, Steinway wood was impounded to make military gliders; afterwards, they couldn't afford to age the wood for seven years or so outside, so new boards lacked the old lush, Guarneri sound.

Ideally you find a nine-foot Steinway or Mason and

Hamlin from around 1927 or 1928 and replace everything except the board, the rim, the plate, the lyre, the bell. Everything else can be new and supple. It's the mysterious older parts which make the difference. Each Steinway concert grand is made the same way by the same people, to be the best piano possible, and yet every piano is completely different.

Owning a piano is just the beginning of a lifelong project to improve the action, the repetitions, the felts, the strings, to replace everything, build up the felts with juice, needle them back down, and juice them up again, not on top or even on the shoulders, but first down in their bases, where the "reinforcement" area gives the hammer its clout.

The Yamaha had its own lonely death at the hands of a tuner to whom I lent its apartment in Paris. I have a vision of him at the hammers, one hand on a bottle of Corton, the other hand filing a key, on and on for a week, until the felts were gone and the accidents and spills and cheating and juicing which had produced its sound were in a pile of fuzz on the splintered parquet.

I replaced the hammers with new ones, to no avail. I had experts from London and Tokyo work on the new hammers. But the sound was gone. My life in Paris was over. Somehow it had all been about the sound of that piano, without my realizing it.

And yet I found it hard, foie gras in the cafés, unmarked Burgundies in long-since closed wine stores, storm light in the Luxembourg, enveloped in Restoration lintels and leaded glass, protected by turrets and chimney pots, not to want to stay and dispense my disembodied Chopin out past the brocaded drapes onto the cobbled alleys. Not that anyone ever applauded such displays. Some twisted neigh-

bor would in fact play the same piece I played immediately afterwards, at a different tempo, as a jangly critique.

I returned to the Yamaha after a long absence for one last try to resuscitate it. Weak repeated notes issued from a clavichord on the floor below. Outmoded jazz from some densely-buried atelier mixed with tangos from the nearby dance studio. I had found the source of all Yamaha expertise, who had trained a generation of concert tuners, through my London tuner. The legendary teacher was a charming man who, with his wife, had worked diligently over the last year to rebuild the sound in the new hammers, which, after weeks of false leads, obstructions, and even lies, I had discovered in California. The technicians in charge of the secret stash of genuine CF3 hammers were strangely protective of their location.

After the tuners had worked silently for two days on the hammers, I risked playing the piano for half an hour to see where it was. After such deep massage it can take a week of playing to settle the tone into the felts, but the piano echoed through our antique building so monstrously that I never played in the morning or evening out of courtesy to our neighbors, who in fact only asked that I play more.

But tonight there was a knock on the door. The lovely woman from downstairs was there, whom I knew, as we were always flooding her apartment; she and her husband were always understanding about it.

Can you not play? she asked. I thought there was something wrong with my French.

When would you like me to not play?

When my son plays. He is a genius.

(Yes, those were his three notes I had heard as I came in, repeated without a goal, without meaning.)

And when does your son play?

Oh, in the morning. And in the evening. And all day long. Effectivement. He says your Rachmaninoff destroys his genius. He cannot think of notes when he hears the horrible old-fashioned dances of Chopin. The German mistakes of Brahms.

I must point out here the irony of the complaint. I hadn't been in Paris for more than ten months, and hadn't been playing at all because of the tuning. So this was the first time I had disturbed the delicate, vibrating continuum of the neighborhood in ages, and for only half an hour, out of concern that it was slightly past six at night. I usually played only in the afternoons, when even the French were at work, or out shopping.

So you're saying . . . that I should play . . . (I struggled for the conditional tenses, at a moment of life-changing tension, acted out in another language, half unclear.)

Yes, she said. That's right. . . . Probably not very much. (Trailing off at the outrageousness of it all.)

Isn't that a lot to ask? Music is why I'm here. To squeeze history out of the air. To put Debussy back into the street. What reason would I have to live in Paris without music? So that's what you're asking, isn't it, really? It's him or me. . . .

Oh no, no, I'm sure we can work something out. . . .

She drifted off uncertainly again.

Well, you know, I told her, my grammar warming with outrage, Beethoven lived in a building with many other musicians. All he heard was other people's music. And he wrote . . . Beethoven. It didn't stop him, other people's sounds, other people's souls.

But he was deaf. . . .

The poor woman was looking to be kind in the horror of the hallway.

He was deaf only later. And Mozart lived among musi-

cians. The walls were a lot thinner where he lived, in a poor district. And maybe it fed him. It doesn't seem to have killed his music. It was other people's sounds that MADE him Mozart.

Vocabulary gets very straightforward at moments like this.

But my son is genius, she repeated empty.

Unlike Mozart?

It was so sad, this lovely woman with her three-note son suddenly materialized in her life, and in mine.

But I thanked her and closed the door. Down below, the piano was now imitating the tuning which had just taken place in the amber afternoon. Her son was hitting notes repeatedly, as my tuner had. He was mocking my dilemma, celebrating his victory. How could there be any freedom of sound, any exploration or interpretation, with a deranged child listening jealously through his ceiling, ready to send his mother into battle?

It was a trumpet call from below, from the second floor, but maybe from lower than that. It was meant to be.

And from here, where? The limbo of some palmate inferno where rum and beach winds turn pianists into pirates, where mistrals turn rootless flâneurs into minstrels, playing Bartók in girl bars while tourists with distracted faces spill Mai Tais on the strings?

THE DREAM

I have this recurring dream. I enter the bedroom. But something won't let me turn right, to where I intend to sleep, on the right side of the bed. At first it isn't serious. It's like there's a light breeze, which I have to exert a certain force to fight. But then it's as if the wind has shifted,

and it's sucking at my back, pulling me back. This isn't a wind, or an attitude. This is a spirit. A thing. I'm moving backwards, and it's out of control. My life. My body. Nothing seems familiar. I don't recognize the room. It's vaguely Oriental, somehow, I don't know how. Little things. Maybe a smell of incense. A curtain that's just too silky and thin for a Western room.

But what controls me is behind me. I have to face it. I push myself, and with great exertion I turn against these invisible magnets and look out the door of the room, into a seraglio. Pillars, blowing veils. A hookah. None of this makes sense. And there's something in that vast amphitheater, something intangible, billowing, a little like a white shadow, an airbrushing. But it moves. It's been in my room. And now it doesn't want me in there. Small hairs stand up on my neck. This is absurd. Not real.

But what if it is? I scream at the wraith. What Art Thou? This is very strange. Maybe monsters are all medieval. Maybe I'm Hamlet. I'm mixing my metaphors. I'm an Elizabethan prince in a harem. Surrounded by swirling veils, threatened by a piece of smoke. It isn't friendly. It doesn't want me alive. I'm screaming at it.

But then I'm awake. Sweating. In a hotel room. I don't know where. I can't place the country. It doesn't seem safe. For at least an hour I continue to live the dream. I'm drugged with dreams. I can't pull myself back. Every movement of my body scares me. Every layer of dimness is fraught with meaning, with dread. I'm fighting for the future, against the trance of the past. And I have a suspicion the future will be worse. Part of me wants to stay where I am.

And then there are the hideous, indescribable morphing dreams, where deformed sexual parts destroy my flesh

as I fly into other worlds even more horrible and the vast organs seize me again. I can't even begin to put into words how disgusting these images are, and they never stop. They bombard me with metamorphosis. I fly from one sky world into a worse one, from hell to hell. Not metaphoric worlds, but vast skies of gore in real time, real places that don't leave me when I wake.

My life is nightmares. And their opposite, music. Like Prince Tamino looking for his identity in a labyrinth of deception, projections of hell surrounded by glorious music. Who is real? His mother, who may be a witch who wants him in hell? His father, who may be his jailer? Nothing is what it seems.

But then there is the piano. That's all. No family, no friends. Just Reece, some relative forgotten in real time, who now emerges in the morning and the evening, and around whose apparition routines swirl. Reece is real enough, but he comes and goes like a ghost, certainly. He is a phantom in my world. He has no place in it.

My world is that conveyor belt of keys, that myopic stamp of veneer, of reflected fingers and hints of oil lamps in the periphery, the way a mountain materializes out of the mists, much higher than anything should be. As mountains do in the Himalayan mists. Why these images come to me, I don't know. My world is only the emblem, the blazon, the painted face in the locket, the small vaseline-smear aperture ringed with fire, the center of the mandala, through which those distended piano keys extrude, phantasms, vapors, not fixed in place, but always slinking, like the scales of a snake, hands moving in ways hands can't move.

And the periphery. I've gone outside. I've tried to escape. But everywhere, in front, in back, on both sides,

is this putrid green, this miasma of leaves and vines, this darkened grove of matted fiber. I don't have the botany for it. I hated botany when I was young. But I was a prisoner of it. Endless avenues of trees which no longer exist. Chestnuts. Dogwoods. Elms. Woods that aren't real anymore, just figments of my night horrors. Or maybe the current world is the nightmare, without those dripping tendrils, the fading sun turning bracts and nodes red with hell.

One day I just left. I pushed my way through the thickets, the gorse, the grottos, whatever you want to call them. I made my way over endless lawns, the smell of cut grass fresh around me. I moved towards distant clumps of hundred-year-old oaks, if there are such things. I passed the willows with their hollow trunks where I used to hide. I entered into the swamp, wound my way around the ponds, busy with frogs and beaver dams. I climbed the hills which I had only seen as the horizon all my life. And then, on the other side of the hills, the world turning to color like *The Wizard of Oz*, was a series of valleys just like the one I had left.

But I continued. I walked until I couldn't see anymore. In the morning I continued, past dells and glades, nooks, shaded lawns cosseted, enfolded by giant chestnut trees, their leaves splayed against the Constable sky, scudding clouds painted with ironic edges of storm light, films of blown clouds bright with future lightning changing protons in their endless air palace.

On the third day, I came to a small village, out of the Cotswolds. I knew this only from books. I had no idea what country I was in. I was a child.

The family on whose door I knocked were surprised, to say the least. They seemed even a bit scared. A gnarled

tree of a man, his wife who hid herself in what might have been a kitchen or a cupboard. Two big-eyed Cabbage Patch kids, whom I may have imagined.

I remember the large mugs, the hay on the floor, the scythe and other wooden mallets in the corner, but not much else. A BBC special.

But within an hour, the door burst open, and it was Reece and several large men, who spoke to the frightened family with great kindness, it seemed to me, before they put their arms around my shoulders and lifted me into the waiting carriage. There were no cars in my world, only cabriolets, broughams, phaetons. I might have been in a Danish fairytale.

As we clattered off back to prison, I watched my idyllic sanctuary diminish in the growing dark, smoke wafting from cottages, maybe about twelve small crofts in all. Not a person was to be seen, but I felt they were there.

The house filled the horizon, like a mountain range, fortified like Tintagel, against what I don't know, maybe against me. I never discovered how many rooms were hidden behind the raw granite blocks. Like the forests, the house was too much of a maze for a child. There were refectories, greenhouses, armories, rooms with threatening medieval themes. There was that seraglio courtyard, filled with fountains, but no giggling girls. Only silence. Which was why my life was spent, prised by the leaded glass in the French dormers, in the music room.

It was an unimportant childhood.

Some people have big childhoods. Things happen to them. Baseball games, cars packed for vacations, splashing around happily at some mysterious beach. Light slants across the dappled fields.

I could invent childhood friends. There could be Bruce, with whom I conducted black masses with the help of the athletic and pliable Susie, an import from a neighbor, a Dutch farmer's daughter from a crumbling assemblage of barns down by the Hudson, now a girl's school. Bruce, whom I chased with a scythe over idyllic lawns, putting an end to our brief imaginary antics.

But in reality I only had the piano. That was my childhood.

Pianos are magnets that pull in the world around them like iron filings. They have microclimates. Their own ecosystems. An offspring, those hidden chaconnes just over the curved horizon.

A piano isn't free-standing, no matter what it appears to be. It's the afternoon outside, safely impaled under glass. Amber orchards misted around the keys like an audience. It's all the sports and friends and classes that will never happen, because that sonata there is vastly more compelling.

A piano stretches out through time until it gathers depth. It's my father closing the lid on my fingers. It's the books lining the walls around it. It's the setting sun on the long black undersky of the top. It's my prison and my palace. My loggia and my library. It's a summer house of memories. Every note in a thousand pieces over a dozen years is frozen in its meat locker, and instantaneously summoned from its cryogenic depths by the whim of a finger.

A piano has a youth, a middle age, and a death. Only it isn't always the same piano. It should be, in an ideal world, one person, one piano always and solely in our lives.

But the pounding, the rage over lost notes, the need to invent octaves for the first time, the nightmares of impos-

sible quavers ensure that no piano can survive the growth of a pianist.

I should have fallen in love with its hammers, with the sound pulsing out of its spruced-up parts, but in fact it lost its crown, its innards flattened with age, its patina gone, or maybe stolen by Beethoven, its spirit exorcised by punched crescendos, its pedals stamped to death.

Ultimately, there was nothing left to love. And so the brute moves on, like the rain, like the silence, our past and our destiny.

BOOKS

I would like to mention in passing, before capturing the Queen, wonderful, funny reminiscences like Gary Graffman's *I Really Should Be Practicing*; Arthur Rubinstein's *My Young Years* and *My Many Years*; Oscar Levant's *A Smattering of Ignorance* and *The Memoirs of an Amnesiac*; or fine biographies such as David Dubal's *Evenings with Horowitz*, *Remembering Horowitz*, and *Reflections from the Keyboard*; as well as Joseph Horowitz's fine books *The Ivory Trade* and *Toscanini*; and Harold Schonberg's exciting works, which first intrigued me with music, *The Great Pianists*, *The Lives of the Great Composers*, *The Glorious Ones*, *The Great Conductors*, and *Horowitz*, but below are the books pertinent to the text.

Angilette, Elizabeth. *Philosopher at the Keyboard: Glenn Gould*. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992.

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Much firsthand commentary on Bernstein's destruction by the critics and on the validity of his slow tempi.

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Hofstadter, Douglas. *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. New York: Basic Books, 1979.

Slow going, and worth every second.

Kazdin, Andrew. *Glenn Gould at Work: Creative Lying*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989.

A fascinating confession of how Gould masterminded his own recordings.

Lebrecht, Norman. *Who Killed Classical Music?: Maestros, Managers, and Corporate Politics*. Secaucus, NJ: Birch Lane Press / Carol Publishing Group, 1997.

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- Marcus, Adele. *Great Pianists Speak*. Neptune, NJ: Paganiana Publications / T.F.H. Publications, 1979.
- Mohr, Franz. *My Life with the Great Pianists: Horowitz, Cliburn, Rubinstein & Others*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak Memory*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, rev. ed., 1966.
- Nabokov discusses synesthesia, or audition colorée, although he has proclaimed himself tone-deaf, mainly I suspect to evade comment on modernist composers, such as his cousin, Nicholas Nabokov. The most brilliant autobiography ever written. Each paragraph contains as much of old Russia in it as all of Dr. Zhivago.
- Newman, William S. *Beethoven on Beethoven: Playing His Piano Music His Way*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988.
- Niecks, Frederick. *Frederick Chopin as a Man and Musician*. 2 vols. London, 1888.
- Page, Tim, ed. *The Glenn Gould Reader*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.
- Payzant, Geoffrey. *Glenn Gould, Music and Mind*. Toronto: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1978.
- Perényi, Eleanor. *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*. Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1974.
- A witty incursion into the entire age.
- Peyser, Joan. *Bernstein, A Biography*. New York: Billboard Books, 1987. Revised and Updated, 1998.
- Peyser maintains that Tom Cothran supplied the bulk of the ideas for Bernstein's Norton Lectures, and discusses how Bernstein's harassment by the critical establishment vitiated his creative life.

- Pollack, Howard. *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man*. New York: Henry Holt, 1999.
- Roberts, Paul. *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*. Portland, OR: Amadeus, 1996.
- Paul Roberts has both recorded and written about Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau* so incisively that I must agree entirely with him, and can only urge you to read his book.
- Roberts quotes the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch as saying: "Nature is not only that which is visible to the eye—it also presents the inner picture of the soul—the pictures on the reverse side of the eye."
- I would add to this Goethe's paintings which he meant to be stared at, and then, when the eyes were closed, the real picture would appear as a retinal image.
- Roberts sees as well that Debussy's reflections are not on the surface, but deep within the water, deep within us. If the pianist cannot decompose the piece the way Monet does light, then the depths have been sacrificed to mere sheen.
- As well, Roberts discusses synesthesia, colored hearing and Impressionism, essential to the understanding of Debussy.
- Schafer, R. Murray. *The Tuning of the World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf/Random House, 1977.
- Sherman, Russell. *Piano Pieces*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996.
- Brilliant discourses on the role each finger plays in pianism.
- Sullivan, Anita T. *The Seventh Dragon: The Riddle of Equal Temperament*. Lake Oswego, OR: Metamorphous Press, 1985.
- Theroux, Alexander. *The Primary Colors: Three Essays*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994.
- Discusses synesthesia, that is, colored hearing.
- . *The Secondary Colors*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996.

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Walker, Alan. *Franz Liszt*. 3 vols. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983–1996.

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——, ed. *The Chopin Companion*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973.

Wilde, Oscar. *Intentions* (1891), from *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Authorized Edition, Ross, Robert ed., Bigelow, Brown & Co., New York, 1909.

If you're going to read one brilliant book in your life, this should be it.

EDITIONS

All Chopin: Instytut Fryderyka Chopina, Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, Editors: Ignaz Paderewski, Ludwik Bronarski, Joseph Turczynski, 1949; all Liszt: Editio Musica Budapest, Bärenreiter Kassel, Editors: Zoltán Gárdonyi, István Széleányi, 1970; Debussy: Oeuvres complètes de Claude Debussy, Editors: Roy Howat, Claude Helffer, Paris: Durand-Costallat, 1985–91; Copland: *Life Magazine*, republished Boosey & Hawkes, Editor: Leo Smit, 1981. Rachmaninoff: International Music Company, New York.

FURTHER READING AND LISTENING

The Himalaya Sessions in 6 volumes and 12 discs. The complete concert series, Albany Records.

This is the first of the 6 volumes.

The Himalaya Sessions: The Day in D Flat, by Adrian Brinkerhoff (pseud.), Albany Records, ASIN: B00002

AFWG, TROY 358, 13 pieces, 100 photographs, 675 pages of text.

This is the same concert as Volume 1, but performed on an American Steinway. The concert on the discs in this book was performed on a Hamburg Steinway. The sound and the interpretations are slightly different. The text is hyperlinked to the music, so that verbal descriptions can be clicked on to hear the sounds they discuss. Mastered by Bob Ludwig to show his mastery of the burgeoning technology, Tower Records had no idea where to put it, as it was the first classical album to use the DVD format without being a film. Ahead of its time, and known now as a DAD, it is forgotten as a format, but still playable. A DVD player which has 24/96 capability brings out its good qualities, which otherwise default to the once-celebrated and now antiquated Dolby Digital.

Sea Sun, Uncollected Works, Volume 1, Kailua, Paris: The Adrian Brinkerhoff Company, 2003, Library of Congress Control Number 2003098201, ISBN 0-9747165-0-2 (poetry).

Blinds, Uncollected Works, Volume 17, Kailua, Seattle: The Adrian Brinkerhoff Company, 2009, Library of Congress Control Number 2009900576, ISBN 978-0-9747165-1-0 (poetry).

Into the Window, Uncollected Works, Volume 16: Saint-Tropez (photography, poetry), Blurb.com.

Monstrous Moraines, Last Photos: A Companion to The Himalaya Sessions, Uncollected Works, Volume 13, Blurb.com.

Poems, Warnings, & Excuses (3 volumes), in production: poetry and explanations.

PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC

Beginning with one-note children's pieces, with their complex chordal modulations morphing from a C chord to a reasonably nearby stave where the trembling young person's composer can stretch his copyrighted crayon, requiring that fingers which wanted to stick straight up into the air be sadistically crooked into some equally weighted assault on gravity, like wire work in a martial arts film, and then progressing on to the arpeggiated lavishness of schlocky seasonal homages with titles like *Autumn Leaves* and very little to commend those limp leaves other than their tolerance for the pedantic multi-fingered rippling accompaniment, the wind over their grave, the gravitational root of all those otherwise unmotivated motifs, but, to repeat myself, (must I always), after enduring this belittling initiation, finally the hormone-shedding adolescent (currently doing business as you or me) is licensed to pound Rachmaninoff *Préludes*, harvest Norwegian cadenzas, even dole out equality to pushy tones in Mozart concerti.

But, settling into midlife or old age, none of the febrile achievements, the voiced machismo, the insecure octaves, the howling trebles of a youth spent in preparation for musical mud wrestling, none of the scales or chords or airs which seem such obvious goals for so many decades give any satisfaction at all to the rotund beast who has been duped by simple gifts to squander his mellifluous wits on mere notes, on dial tones gone wild.

In fact, only the simple notes, Rachmaninoff's *raison d'être* (he disguised the melodies he wanted to play with octaves out of a finely honed appreciation of mass markets), the agonizing truths that happen to be conveyed by the palm, only the human voices made flesh now and then with

strings and felts can ultimately reward the effort necessary to acquire the technique to play them. As someone said of Schnabel, music was only the start of it. As fishing is an excuse to stand in a river without being thought slow, as golf is an excuse to walk on short grass, so music is an excuse for sitting and thinking. It is philosophy in heavy black drag.

I am always outraged by starlets in interviews with fashion web sites: "Oh yes, Ron, I was required to play the Tchaikovsky *Piano Concerto (No. 1)* during my nude scene. I spent three weeks practicing my nudity, Ron, and it was really down to the wire, so I had to learn how to play the piano a few minutes before we shot the scene. Thank god it was a no-brainer."

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 coagulation of myriad complexities. As Pope said, simplicity is the mean between ostentation and rusticity. Simple gifts, like breezes, leaves in autumn, the translucent green of sandy-bottomed bays, a quick glance under the banyan, almost anything said by a three-year-old—these are the goals on which we expend so much money and time—all that education, penury, ostracism, violence sometimes, absorbed, papered over, smoothed out to produce a single note of Bach, to have the right to sit by the people we love under the full moon. To achieve rest, shattered acceptance of our static selves. To look beyond the pawn shop of the atavistic vistas which hormones delude us into fancying.

Or to reach the same alley through another door, instead you can do the homework and then not turn it in, as Bob

Dylan suggested: “I’d like to be able to play the guitar like Leadbelly, and then not.”

I once spent six months flying to different music libraries around the country to hear every version of Schumann’s *Arabesque* ever recorded. This was before the web. I then booked the Casa Italiana at Columbia, rented bad microphones and a Norelco reel-to-reel tape recorder, and performed the *Arabesque* singlehandedly, trying to be as clever as anyone and shove all the square voices into the round holes. I then wrote a sixty-page paper about what I was doing (of which this current project 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 over six states to get to it, and only heard the piece through the double doors of a college hall while being restrained by security guards, who were going to keep music safe from suspicious enthusiasts like me.

And so I was a day late with the paper, and my professor flunked me. Him and his big university. It’s the parable of man and the piano: you will spend sixty years carrying a large instrument to a small room, and then one day a single stranger will erase you.

But reverting to the theme, as we are trained to: my teacher, as neurotic a mind as ever set foot to pedal, was advised at his *début* 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 vampire night in the voicings, then the braininess, the introspection are built in, and if you just forget everything you know, the details of

construction will emerge in one flawless camera pan, years of febrile planning and dark nights seamlessly embedded in the disarmingly suave narrative. The only way to keep from being forced, artificial, and effete is to forget. The accent will remain. Anything more is pushy.

But my teacher said to me, “No, no, it isn’t so. You have to think every second you’re playing. Only with thinking will it happen. If you forget about it, it turns to mush. Even when you practice, if you forget what a scale means, 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.

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.

My teacher’s insistence on recomposing, of intuiting Scriabin’s religious agony, his need for a world view in every note, his obsession that fate falls from every footstep, the Butterfly Effect as applied to music, namely, that the first few measures of a Beethoven sonata contain the skeleton of the entire piece, and 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.

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, as in Nabokov's *The Defense*, 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 shrubbery.

I remember my teacher, again, surrounded by invidious critics, plotting pedants, clueless students who had been lured in with free tickets at Juilliard ("papering"), preening patrons desperate to buy some identity (what Shaw called "the ethical nuisances of the world of art"), and, here and there, what might be termed a general, nebulous audience, those hard-to-poll blank spots on the seating plan who appear out of nowhere, enjoy themselves, and fade back into their radios at midnight, and so, in the midst of this hodgepodge human muesli, my teacher 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.

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 audi-

ence seemed to find a damning lapse of brain power, social training, and structural civility, I 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 supertexts, 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 else transfigured by a false fork which turned out to be the real one [presaging the rope in the Himalayas that led nowhere—*Ed.*], 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 indescribable, ineffable, accidental, who could still be summoned by belief (and stealthy 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."

Ever since then I haven't been able to find it in me to play anything that doesn't reveal, at least to me, immense subterranean depths, H. Rider Haggard horrors, Caribbean corals, Arctic snows. It has to be Frankenstein, or Christmas, deep-rooted, and ethnic, completely medieval, to tempt me to waste my receding memory, my ripped fingers, on it.

I could just record Chopin. Another one of a long line of teachers (not to infer that I was kicked around like a soccer ball among belligerent Buddhas, but that, as I like to think, I wanted a second opinion), Irma Wolpe in

New York, 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, and yet I could toss off warhorses without thinking. Another idiot savant threatening the kingdom of Dharma. These triumphs of Chopinzee spandex didn’t survive the crevasses of time; they became trophy tunes, paling insecure waltzes dyed platinum, complaining about cellulite and taxes. Gould felt the same way about the Mozart sonatas, too tainted by adolescent trauma to mature into opera. So now all that really matters is the inept but personally touched note, uncorrupted by performance tradition, critical posturing, or the buffer of polished technique, dying to resolve into suburban neighborhoods, and forever outside them.

I knew a very eccentric pianist when I was young 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. Rather, the pianist 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 Matrix, the so-called reality that drugs us into shopping. The Truman Show. The human show.

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

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 in us, the anarchy which couches the sidewalk in a higher scaffolding, lit by the last embers of the focused sun, out of sight to random pedestrians.

Hubermann: “You always had a very clever way of talking everyone out of realizing that you couldn’t really pray a single mote . . . [the squiggles fading on various scraps (hotel envelopes, bill backs, the insides of candy wrappers) in the pianist’s knapsack are not always clear, and so I have taken the minor liberty of imposing here and there chaste nouns over suspicious verbs . . .—*Ed.*].”

PIANO MAKER

Walking through the woods one day in Bedford, edified by the moldering smell of the endless raw material available, not only for forest growth and animal life, but for my more suspect metaphors, I thought of Camus' statement in *L'Étranger* that a day in the world was enough for a life of memory in jail. To be in the woods is metaphorically to be lost, but also to be found. No long hilltop views are necessary for a panorama: one small enclosed valley discloses the length and distance of the mind.

We turn the odd leaf or branch to our own uses: to make a fire, to fuel a poem; wood points both up and down. Buckminster Fuller told the critic Hugh Kenner that fire is simply soaked-up sunlight unwinding from a log. We derive a piano soundboard from a woodpile, or eliminate rock from sculptures, the way some people unearth identity from the land, the way the mythic giants drew their strength from touching the earth, as any mountaineer will understand.

Poems and pianos are woodworks. Soundboard, key bed, chord and cord, ebony dies, key ivories, maple soundboard crowns, and glue mix with human limbs, fingers, bed and board, growth and sound, to deepen the collusion of tree body and human body, piano wood and forest wood, body shape and piano shape, so that the hands of both Gepettos are heard together on the bark of the soundboard and the sounding board of the bark.

Surds are used in the logarithmic calculations of the well-tempered piano tuning system which underpins the piano's tuning pins, asserting order over otherwise disjointed frequencies. There were dozens of tuning systems, many of which produced unpleasant chords

and godless harmonies, before the more polite and pious current system was espoused in the West.

Although the poem is superficially a sonnet, when read, more conversational and pagan mid-rhymes and meters dominate the visual classicism of the shape, as a craftsman or a pianist hopes to rise beyond complex structures in nature or in music to unleash primordial roots.

Gnarls and boles, whatever woodwork words
Can turn or blur to use, to glue, to growth
Of board or bed, I know: I use their surds
And darkened boughs like fingers, so that both

Our hands are heard together on the keyboard
Bark; no sounds but branches rise
To leaf through breezes in the scattered cord
Of sheaves and limbs, inking in the dyes,

The ivories of silence on the evening's rose
And shade; twisting up the wires of a day's
Old sun and funneling the body's splay
Of music into crowns of maple and god knows,

I wind up nature's miniature keys
To play out, on a bed of vines,
The tune of my own trees.

Pianist Lost: Excesses and Excuses

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