



THE HIMALAYA SESSIONS

PIANIST LOST:
EXCESSES AND EXCUSES

Peter Halstead

VOLUME I

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A NOTE ON THE HIMALAYA SESSIONS

When I was sixteen, I played a concert on a Bechstein in an embassy in Kathmandu. The next day, the roof, which was enclosed by an undrained balustrade, filled with water during a storm and collapsed, destroying the piano. It would have killed all of us if it had happened the day before.

In memory of that, I recorded these six albums at 9,000 feet in a Colorado barn surrounded by the New York Mountain Range of the Holy Cross Wilderness.

Cathy's father had just died, and I realized I might not play the piano for a while. It turned out to be four years, so I'm glad I snuck in, over four days, the pieces that were on my mind in 2006.

We had asked Ed Court, who had recently been the head of quality control at Steinway, to replace the clacking teflon bushings of our 1978 Steinway D. Over many years, Ed developed it into a decent instrument. It was in New York, then in a barn in Bedford, then in a room we built in Colorado, then in the tractor barn. It's now in Montana. A well-traveled clavier.

In this book to listen to the recorded pieces,
click on any underlined [red title](#) to hear that piece.

We had made a number of records with it, using Tom Frost and Judith Sherman as producers: of my teacher, Russell Sherman, who then was the head of the piano faculty at the New England Conservatory of Music; of Christopher O'Riley; and of David Deveau, who had both studied with Sherman the same time I did. Sherman's recording of Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes* was awarded one of the ten best recordings of the year by *The New York Times*.

I hooked up five Neumann M-50 omnidirectional tube mics to an eight-channel Grace mic pre-amp and ran it into my G5 Power Mac, where it was translated into the Sonic Solutions Pro program (which later became Pro Tools). Stone Age technology now.

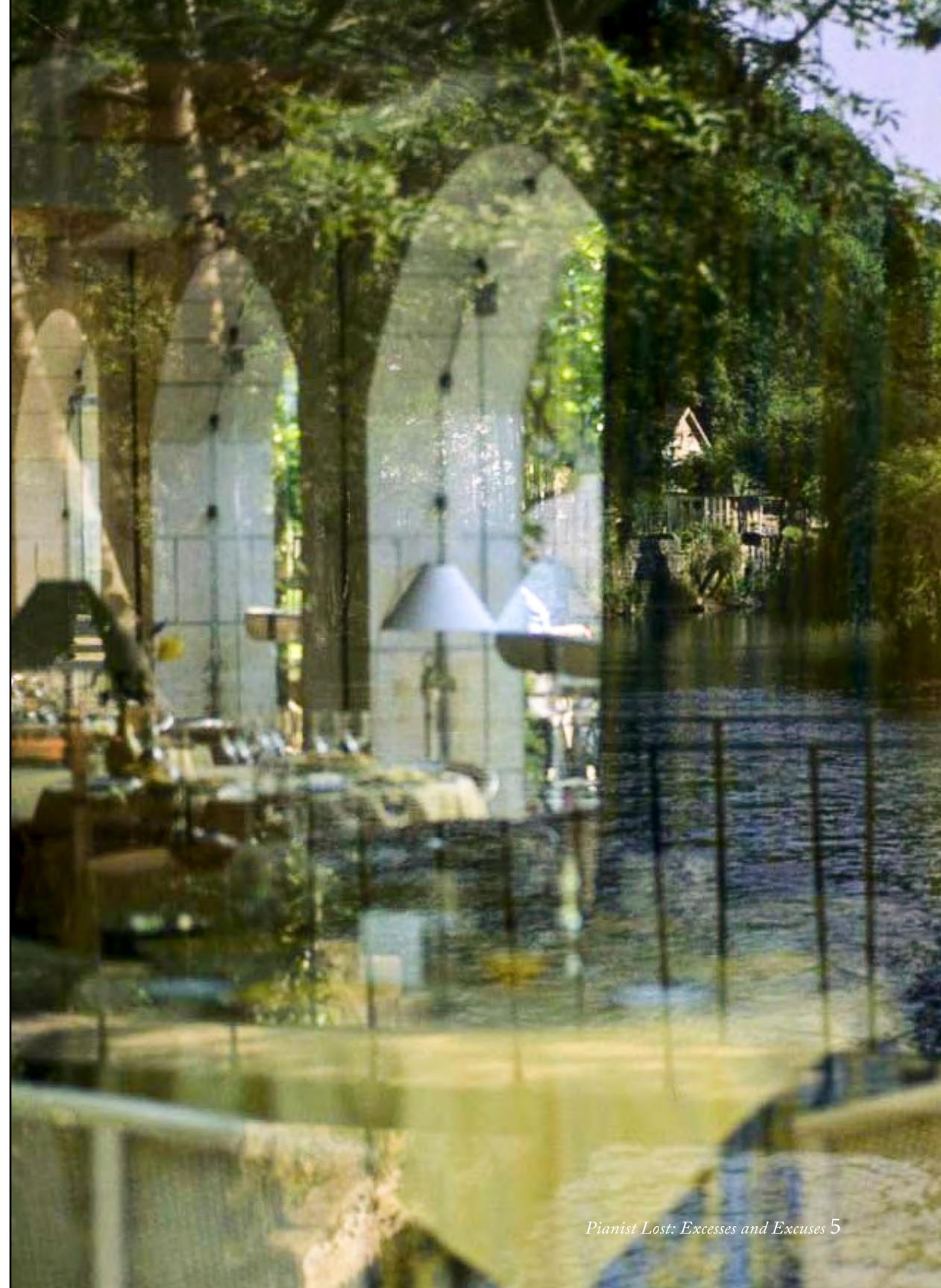
The pieces were originally released in the DAD format, mastered by Bob Ludwig of Gateway Mastering in Portland, Maine. The DAD format, a DVD with perks, had photos and a 24/96 stereo track.

The next two discs were released by Albany Records in two formats, along with a book of notes. There was a 5-channel surround sound SACD, which used the Sony DSD format. There was also a 2-channel 24/96 PCM Blu-ray, which had room for the higher resolution as well as some 70 photos of the Himalaya. The disks were mastered by Gus Skinas of the Super Audio Center in Boulder, Colorado.

Without any reverberation or equalization added, the sound is the raw sound of what a Steinway sounded like in 1978 in a Colorado barn.

Monte Nickles at Tippet Rise has generously put my stereo mix online.

All of the pieces in Volume 1 are in D Flat, so you can hear the range of the key: night (the nocturne), rain (*Reflets*), countryside (*Paysage*), evening (*Harmonies du Soir*), and moonlight (*Clair de Lune*).



PIANIST LOST: EXCESSES AND EXCUSES

73:17

These pieces present a sampling of what the key of D Flat meant to various composers: rain, dance, countryside, evening, moonlight. Whatever else it is, D Flat is always soothing, excusing most (but maybe not all) pianistic excesses.

1. [Frédéric Chopin: Nocturne, Opus 27, No. 2, 1835](#) 6:55
Our bucolic dreams of night drop away from darker moments and crimes of passion.
2. [Frédéric Chopin: Prelude, Opus 28, No. 15, 1838](#) 5:33
Majorca's romantic damp locked in a death grip of betrayal, sugar-coated in D Flat euphemisms.
3. [Claude Debussy: Reflets dans l'Eau, Images, 1905](#) 5:49
Rain, wind, and drips shake and coat the Impressionist trees of a Paris park.
4. [Erik Satie: Sarabande No. 3, 1887](#) 4:36
A breathless, timeless suspension of rhythm in the midsummer woods, in which the pale evening hides.
5. [Sergei Rachmaninoff: Moment Musical, Opus 16, No. 5, 1896](#) 3:47
A rare and unlikely Spanish barcarolle slowly twirls around Andalusian leaves far away from the desolate steppes: only the very end contains a nod to the major-minor meme of the Kazaks.
6. [Franz Liszt: Paysage, Transcendental Etudes, No. 3, 1837](#) 6:36
The undulating countryside of F Major contains a bucolic center in D Flat, an eclogue to the summer glades sweltering around Paris in 1826, when Liszt was 15.
7. [Aaron Copland: Down a Country Lane, F and D Flat, 1962](#) 2:42
The F Major country lanes of Bedford, near where Copland lived, and where I grew up, lead to a high, open, transparent world in D Flat.
8. [Franz Liszt: Un Sospiro, Concert Etude No. 3, 1848](#) 6:47
An eidolon, a phantom, rises out of its accompanying breezes but eventually subsides again in the rusting glades of night.
9. [Franz Liszt: Harmonies du Soir, Transcendental Etude No. 11, 1837](#) 13:12
The day builds up to a fulgorant sunset, immense chords made of clouds, a dark made of colors.
10. [Frédéric Chopin: Berceuse, Opus 57, 1843](#) 5:50
Here a cradle song rises out of the placid left hand accompaniment, to rock the listener to sleep as softly as any nocturne.
11. [Claude Debussy: Clair de Lune, 3rd Movement from Suite bergamasque, 1890](#) 6:04
Moonlight falls on alabaster statues in the haunted Tuilleries after closing.
12. [Franz Liszt: Consolation in D Flat S. 172 No. 3, 1850](#) 5:10
Liszt needed his own excuses for his early passions, and here the world is put to bed with Liszt's own prayer for the night, which continues with or without us.

1.
Frederick Chopin: Nocturne, Opus 27, No. 2,
Lento sostenuto, 1835

NIGHT MUSIC

When I think of Chopin's Nocturnes I think of that despairing Paris photo 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 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 failure which surround us even today, glistening in the rain, on the run from the night, like Aznavour in Shoot the Piano Player, that ballade to nightclub pianists everywhere, angels 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 film noir 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 the homeless 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, aiming at tenderness despite the sniggers of the heartbroken, strangifying and strangling the walking dumb, the busted, the learned disgusted with their own slickness, 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, and Sartre, all did), too late as always: well, here's Chopin's rain again, washing out sores, and let's hope it scours all of us.



In this most naked of nocturnal confessions levitating over the masking river of endless certainty, where the resolution of the right hand is as affirming as the left, what moves me are

the 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, the left hand anchoring itself just in time in the flow, gossips at cocktail parties never descending into clichés, the right hand 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 movement, too universal to be a digression.

Chopin was never part of a school, a group, which explains perhaps his inability to be explained, uncovered, espoused, exposed, exhumed.

Chopin's chords are as indefinable as clouds, too airy to be earthy.

Tonality defies reduction—to clarify it is to ruin it, the way roads destroy the wild 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 the mind's purpose is to distract the player so the body can go about its routine without second-guessing. So we by indirections, by distractions, find directions out. By puttering around, we arrive where we're going more directly. As Albee said in *The Zoo Story*, sometimes the quickest way isn't straight across the park: sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly. This may be a metaphor, but every New Yorker has lived through it.

But the opposite is also true. What if thinking about baseball during a nocturne actually turns notes into scores, baseball scores? What if Marilyn Monroe, using Lee Strasberg's method acting, while pretending to be a peach to forget her fear, actually became a peach? Pianists tend to play what they're thinking. Pianos can read your mind. They tend to reveal your daydreams. The challenge, I think, is to play not distractions, not inner tennis, but dreams.

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.

Snow swirls like filigree, like Chopin's *jeu perlé*, the notes glistening like pearls, the sky closes in, and, in the last few notes, the village sleeps.

2.

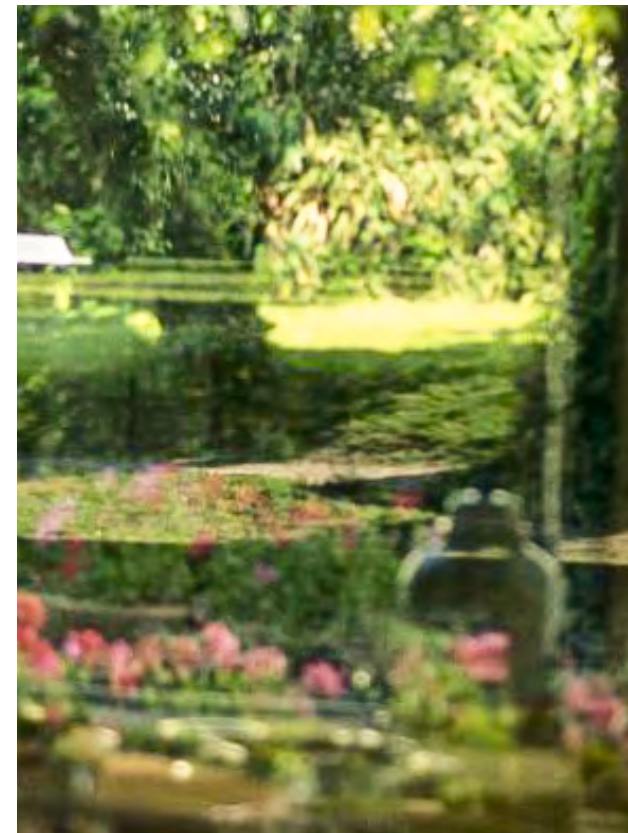
Frédéric Chopin: Prélude, Opus 28, No. 15, Sostenuto, c. 1838

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 won't sound, ruining the constant gentle hammering of the hammers. If, however, as happens in concert, you play it safe and play the notes louder, the thrumming of the rain becomes somewhat incessant, ruining the reverie. The drizzle of repetition ideally becomes a drumming on the tin roof in the prelude's midsection, and then subsides into drips.

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 at Nohant. Although Sand claimed the piece was mimetic, imitating Majorcan rain, in fact, Chopin wrote all the preludes before he went to Majorca, according to Gutmann, Liszt, and Niecks, and tinkered with them later in Majorca.

Although it was Chopin's presence, composing at Nohant, which has kept it on the map. At the time, it had over 600 acres, and gorgeous gardens, which explain the bucolic nature of the Préludes. Sand's emotionalism in trying to reduce such a spider's web of sadness to a simple tagline, the "raindrops," 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. Chopin's using the metronome of rain to turn his innovative form into something easily identifiable may be true, although Chopin and Liszt denied it. The great motifs in music have often been borrowed from folks songs, in the case of Liszt and Mozart. Bernstein borrowed from everyone, especially Mahler. Fritz Loewe got his melodies from left hand accompaniments in Brahms and Copland. One of Brahms's intermezzos was borrowed from a Scottish folk song.



Nocturne (track 1), the melody is just the accompaniment turned upside down.

The Prelude's mid-section, in C sharp minor, is made from the same notes as the more bucolic key of D flat which surrounds the middle. D Flat is benign, but C Sharp, which shares the same notes, is demonic.

The midsection thus becomes the opposite of. D flat: although nothing has really changed, everything is different—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 dreams of their D flat major teens: different generations and two keys like two households locked together unto death in harmonic cacophony.

The midsection storm exists so its aftermath calms: this is an emotional plot, despair redeemed by forgiveness, rage sprung from drizzle then transmuted into mist, Sand's venality excused by Chopin's grace: as with Mozart, out of unfair suffering emerges a phoenix of equal grandeur, contracts that are only recognized looking back from the safety of the suburbs.



3.

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

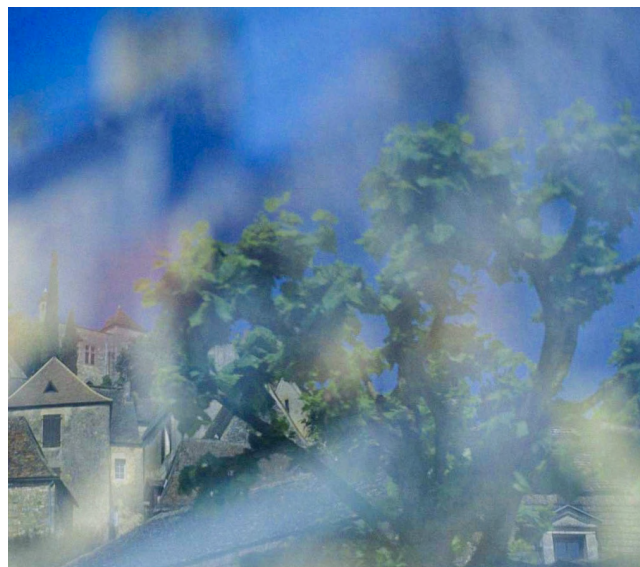
This is not just an onomatopoeic water piece; Debussy is interested in imitating not just water sounds, but reflections on water: pictures that float, which don't necessarily make noises, so the challenge is greater than mere burbles, trickles, and rain-drops. Such sounds in nature conjure up a picture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

Debussy was inspired to imitate painting by Baudelaire's poem, *Correspondances*, which held that forests were only symbols of human emotion. This poem created Symbolism in both music and painting, later known as Impressionism. Music was freed to imitate nature, transcending the structural goals of the Baroque age. The strict Bach became the dreaming Debussy, which became the anxious Schönberg. Each time, music reflected a new world.

Debussy paints pictures with sounds, even the more subtle echoes of winds which move and ripple on the water. In his *Sunken Cathedral*, monsters of the id rise from the deep, and sounds stand in for religion, myth, and philosophy. Music is transformed into meaning. Judgements are handed down, and the modern world is set in motion. The Cascades's "Listen to the rhythm of the falling rain," or Little Anthony's "Tears on My Pillow," wouldn't exist without Baudelaire or Debussy.

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 crisis is reached, painting in tones that are discordant, pitting key against key, 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 the reassuring *luxé, calme, and volupté* of nature. The same drips which ask the questions answer them.

The sad joy of winter's unexpected 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 Shakespeare play expands on the initial themes of the first scene, so that the entire play is present in its beginning - as a Beethoven sonata is also entirely latent in its first few measures, or as we can potentially 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.

LOVE AMONG THE PARTICLES

As with Liszt's *Un Sospiro* (track 8), hands overlap here as well, as notes crisscross themselves like diamond sparkles on ripples. Roberts (in *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*) quotes the great piano teacher Marguerite Long: 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, as trunks grow outwardly in rings.

I imagine the notes swirling like mist or smoke from the melody as atoms in an atom chamber, dust mites at sunset filling the air, as overtones ring from each note, even though we can't hear most of them, as the frequencies rapidly climb beyond the limited range of our ears. A note is an irritant, and around it grows a lightshow of nacre, pearl sprung from dirt, jewels extruded out of soil.

Their overlapping ripples are like the Cantor sets described creatively in Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, mirrors in mirrors, which replicate themselves to infinity. A Beethoven Sonata is a similar widening gyre around the center of its beginning. If you extrapolate its fate from the way it expands on the page, it will grow, to quote Richard Wilbur,

...like boundless Ygdrasil,
That has the stars for fruit.

The Norse imagined that all objects in the sky hung from the tree of life. Pythagoras proposed that the galaxy was

sustained by the music its rotations created, like a chord, held in suspended animation by a universe that prized structure.

Cantor sets are caused by the fact that particles interact, as notes in music respond to one another. 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.

A 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. This is known as energy exchange. The fact that twins sometimes have simultaneous thoughts might arise from their shared atoms at birth.

And so there may be a reasonable basis for attempting to draw parallels between notes. If you think of how Debussy picks, out of billions of frequencies swirling around space like gamma rays, just a few notes for his melody, there is a correspondence with the way a half particle reacts only with its specific other half. That is, there is a celestial affinity where only a certain particle has a rapport with another. As John Donne wrote,
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.

The alchemy which arises quite scientifically from Debussy's reflections is a universe filled with cascading rays, out of which chaos kindred notes arrange themselves into a melody.

4.

Erik Satie: Sarabande No. 3, 1887

Satie was essentially a Dadaist, a witty nihilist, who believed that the world meant nothing at all, that there were no lessons to be learned from rocks, and who set about proving this in witty pieces which quote from other composers, which turn familiar music upside down, giving nonsensical instructions to the player, thus creating a sort of music which exists between the road directions and the road, emotions which can never be performed and which can only exist in the mind, thus creating a kind of subliminal "program music," that is, music with a hidden agenda.

The psychological quirk of program music is that forced imaginings distract pianists long enough to let their 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 midsummer reverie, a 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, the enchanted summer gardens of the 17th century 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. Or the way we stop, breathless, to watch the sun emerge from behind the moon during an eclipse. Everything that slows us down to the beat of a breath hints at what sort of tempo you need for a trance. Some pieces don't live in the bustling routine of the office, but procrastinate in the forest at sunset. Playing such pieces too fast loses their contemplative feeling. As Sherman used to say, not every piece needs to be pretty. And not every piece needs to be a race.

A hesitant chord begins the Sarabande. Then silence. A falling theme emerges out of the stillness, repeated twice more with different notes, getting more insistent.

Static chords, entwined with flowers, contribute to the moonlit suspension of time, and the falling notes repeat again, maybe somehow inspired or woken by the fanfare that calls us to the dance. The chords repeat again, but this time fading away, as a hallucinatory theme leads to the deep bass. Loud dramatic clarion calls to action in turn provoke the initial illusive chord into sound, this time more emphatically.

So some progress has been made towards getting out of bed. The same chord sounds again, this time calmer, 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 neurosis, sadness, intangible things.

Satie's notes create a Malthusian reaction in the pianist which changes the sound of the following notes, and a virtuous circle

is created. Seemingly shallow, Satie's waters run deep, and the conversation he is staging between his polite voices question the traditions of music which we take for granted.

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 like Biely called strangification, where in familiar things are described as if being seen for the first time by someone unfamiliar with all their usual meanings, so a surreal world is created. As if a Martian were dropped in Montana.

The scale this time leads to a discordant bass note, which invokes a more insistent trumpet call to the dance, leading to the same initial, androgynous, ambivalent chord. Let's wait and see.

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

Now the longest musical 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 it simply repeats, giving the pianist a chance to deepen the conversation, to generate 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 Fortinbras handing out popcorn after Hamlet dies.



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, jailing the twisted boughs of apple orchards inside crowd-pleasing cages.

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 until it grows on you like vines. A listener, often hearing it for the first time in concert, is at a disadvantage, so I recommend the same obsessive repetition for growing into the piece. I play it slowly, inner melodies spilling profusely down its walls like bougainvillea.

Just before this self-effacing *Musical Moment* ends, it thickens the air with the traditional Russian trick of turning a major key into a minor key. Mozart does this by using a chord, called

the subdominant, to signal the beginning of the end. Nabokov signals approaching death and dénouement with mentions of butterflies, often in other languages. Before Humbert kills Quilty in Nabokov's *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.

This fluttering flirtation with death passes after only one note and turns major. All is forgiven, all sambas back into the contentment of the major key. This is a dance, not a dirge. The 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 afternoon's interlude 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.]

Embedded in the most 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 lowing, 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*.

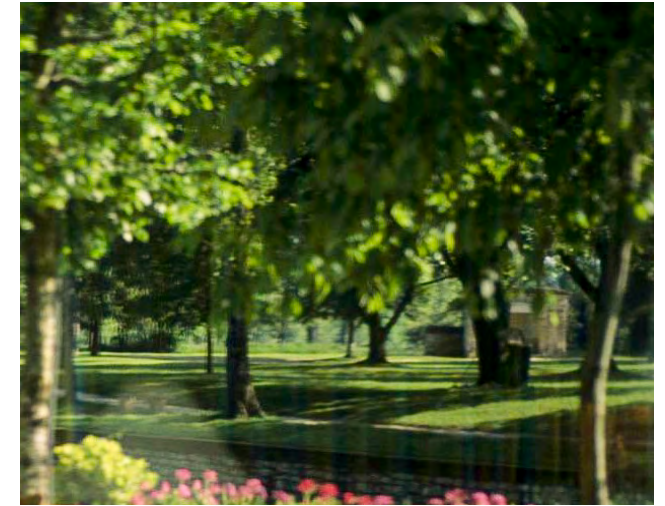
Copland adapted the so-called noble motif from the film, a passage imitating the high spirits with which refugees and natives celebrate the harvest at a country fair, a familiar Copland subject, as it has been for those of us lucky enough to have grown up surrounded by peace and plenty during the 1950's, when America was a country re-inventing itself after the trauma of the second World War.

We can look back on brown and orange Charlie Brown pumpkin-patch Thanksgivings, leaves off the trees and smelling of rot around the streets of the town, turning drab alleys into mysterious deep woods by the smell alone, school corridors plastered with Grandma Moses crayonings of corn and turkeys, 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*, the only printed matter in our house (not counting my very different books upstairs).

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 karate, forcing scales rather than ninjas into the front of my mind.

I was surprised one day to run across, sandwiched between pictures of war brides and antic animal capers, two pages that unstapled in the middle (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 think back to cool summer afternoons under the shade of the now blighted and long-since uprooted oaks, or spreading but dead chestnut trees, or fragile, dying dogwoods, whose lost stillness you hear at the start of Copland's calm country afternoon. I used to walk down our street looking up at the branch-strewn sky, and it's here, preserved forever in F Major.

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 unstable, unstapled pages as they bent like trees on the piano stand.

The parched Victorian back road to our haunted hamlet was, I always felt, in D Flat, like the middle of Copland's piece. The sun would make, when I walked contentedly along our street, oblivious to its never-to-be-repeated peace, halos in the leaves. Everything was always bathed in dust in the summertime.

I remember kicking a rock, not as the cursory passing incident it becomes in retrospect, but as an endless pursuit, replete with architected angles and shadows.

it impossible to retrieve from the French sun that chiaroscuro of smoke and sadness among the personal ruins of Europe that I felt so intensely as a child. We lose with old age only first love.

After a while, I would forget about the crisp sky, the brisk fall afternoon in the skips, limps, feints, and tricks required to negotiate the riverstone of the cobbles, which take on an anthropomorphic outline. Trees fold over the road, protecting the grasping 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 an 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, the air filled with hay, 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 a morning hayfield, like the reflection of sky in a sprinkler puddle.

Although the piece begins in the military key of F Major, which you will notice is brassier and more determined than the more pensive, distracted, and expansive key of D Flat, after a minute the bardo of D Flat is reached. You can hear the air clear and the evening settle in before a crescendo returns the 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 together transfix the enfolded 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. Into D flat.

8.

Franz Liszt: Concert Etude No. 2: "Un Sospiro," c. 1848, Grove No. 144

The exhalation of breath, or even its opposite, a 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 tentative 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 newly 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 nots and half-nots.

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 played in sections) 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 proven. 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 com-

poser 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

Fixed by a ring of light, we stand alone on the curve of the land – and it is, suddenly, night.

In combining the fragility of time with the resonance of the world that we preserve its deeper qualities. By documenting the evening, Liszt has managed to condense a century of sunsets into a few minutes.

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

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 (far 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, Russell Sherman, 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 preexisted 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 (in his book, *Images*) 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 tiptoeing 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 his *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 syn-copation, 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 parable 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:

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.

Debussy is 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), 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.

LAGOON

As the last ray Cradles the day On the enormous lagoon, Pale
night on the lake With the glinting lagoon In its wake where I
light With the world in my sight The vague shadows creeping
On willow groves seeping Like river ducks flying As they flap
away crying Like lilies in pain, Where shrouded in rain And
embalmed in the dark I walk in the park By lilies and roses On
the lagoon, Where the full moon dozes, The moon that enclos-
es Its lilies and roses With the reflecting 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. As Frost said, poetry is
what is lost in translation.

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 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.

Debussy's lute captures the beauty of moonlight. There isn't
much ironic commentary on Verlaine's 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.

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 walk-
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.

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 unbitterly 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.

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, outof-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.



A PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC

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

But settling into the middle earth of real life, none of the febrile filmed Aznavour achievements, the fatal James Mason machismo, the insecure Deborah Kerr octaves, the howling trebles of a Dirk Bogarde youth spent in preparation for music prison, none of the scales or chords or speed which seem

such obvious goals for so many decades, give any satisfaction to any nomad who has been induced by simple, harmless gifts to squander his mellifluous youth on monstrous notes, on dial tones gone wild.

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

"Oh yes, Ron, I was required to play the Tchaikovsky Piano concerto during my nude scene. But wait, there's more! I spent three weeks practicing my nudity, umm, and it was really down to the wire, right, so I had to learn how to play the piano just a few minutes before we shot the scene. And it was almost nearly bad, Ron! But the director, who is really and truly a great guy, told me in the sauna to do it right the first time. And not one note of mine had to be dubbed by some weirdo. But seriously, folks. I think this whole piano thing is just so much fun. By the way, Ron, I think I am in love with you."

Unlike coordinated, well-proportioned people, we slave most of our lives over velocity, power, strength, lift, and lilt, to be able to achieve the monolithic, irreducible simplicities of love and loss through a syzygy of myriad complexities. Simple gifts, like breezes, leaves in autumn, the lagoon green of sandy bays, a long ago look under the banyan, almost anything said by a three-year-old—these are the goals of music. Along with penury, ostracism, death.

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

I once spent three months traveling to music libraries in bad neighborhoods to hear every version ever recorded of Schumann's *Arabesque*. This was before the web, now you can do it on YouTube in an hour. I then booked the Casa Italiana (furnished with stolen antiques gifted from Mussolini) at Columbia, rented cheap microphones and a Norelco reel-to-reel tape recorder, and recorded my own *Arabesque*, trying to shove all my square voices into the round holes of the iron piano plate. I then wrote a 60-page paper about what I was doing (of which this must be the even longer-winded heir). 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 60 versions on disc. I was late to the concert, having driven across four states to get to it, and only heard the piece through the double doors of a crumbling auditorium while being forcibly restrained by security guards, whose mandate was keeping classical music safe from students. Safe from everyone, really.

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

But to reprise, as we are trained to: my teacher was advised by his teacher, Steuermann, to go out there and "play it straight." Steuermann felt that once you've learned a piece properly, secreting the melody in the scales, the echoes of the goblin night in the voicings—then the braininess, the introspection, is built in, and if you can just forget everything, the scaffolding will emerge in one flawless camera pan, the years of febrile days and sleepless nights seamlessly embedded in the disarmingly harmless narrative. The only way to keep from being forced, artificial, effete, is to forget. The accent will remain. Anything more is pushy. As Bunny Mellon said, nothing should be noticed. She was talking about fields, but it's also true of things farther afield.

My teacher Sherman never believed what Steuermann taught him. I remember quite well the color of the light steaming in through lace and mottling the keys one frozen spring afternoon (4:32 PM, for those of you who are having me followed) in his cluttered and vaguely Victorian living room when I spared myself having to play by tricking him into conversation, where he insisted, "No, no, Steuermann was wrong. It isn't so. You have to think every second you're playing. Only if you're thinking will it all make sense. If you forget about it, it turns to mush. Even when you practice, if you forget the echoes a

scale contains, it'll be fixed like that in your memory, and you'll never be able to get back to what it means.”

You can't just trust your instincts. You can't put all that work into it and then throw it away. Sherman's insistence on recomposing, on reliving Scriabin's religious agony, his need for a world view in every note, his obsession that fate fall from every fingering, and that any interpretation you give to a seemingly meaningless note in the beginning will have enormous consequences on how you have to interpret vast passages in the final



movement (a musical Butterfly Effect), this instinct and agenda often got my teacher in enormous trouble. He got so far afield in one concert at Grace Rainey Rogers Hall in New York, one intonation leading to a new direction, which in turn produced a highway of inferences, that finally he was lost in the labyrinth and had to start over, which was regarded as a flaw by the critics, but in fact was a voyage into dark meadows unlike anything that might have come from a map.

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, grim chess master, runs the risk of forgetting yourself, forgetting the piece, and ending up in a dead-end alley, the rest of the evening blocked by the bushes you just planted.

I remember Sherman, again, surrounded by grubby critics, nodding pedants, squirrel-quick students who had been lured in by leaving free tickets at Juilliard (“papering”), dying patrons desperate to buy some posterity, and, here and there, what might be termed an actual, if clueless, audience, those hard-to-poll black swans who appear out of nowhere, enjoy themselves, and are captured exactly at midnight.

In the midst of this human muesli, Sherman 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, creating and slaying Grendels in every cave, converting chords into countries, inner voices screaming at the top of their lungs to make a left turn, when it

all collapsed and Sherman 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 meter. Rather than being embarrassed at what the audience seemed to find damning, I myself felt that we'd seen Adorno poking his head through the curtains. If we never saw him again, we knew he was there, we knew what could be achieved with subtexts and hypertexts, I don't know why I say we, I'm possibly hoping that I wasn't the only one, that there might have been someone else transfigured by a false fork which turned out to be the real one, maybe presaging a rope somewhere in the Himalayas that led nowhere, but I saw for myself how pure willpower could change the landscape completely, even if most of the room only saw the dead end of the fun room mirrors.

It proved that there was something indescribable, ineffable, accidental, which could still be summoned by belief, or forgetfulness. A comedy of mistaken doors needs a backstage of flies and trap doors, particularly if you believe the disclaimer that "no pianists have been harmed in the making of this waltz (by Strauss)."

And so any concert became for Sherman a trial by fire, a fight to the death. You couldn't play the cliché, mimic the accepted CD, the perfect Serkin evening. It had to be the agony of pouring your inadequate life into each phrase, and then drilling down in a Schenkerian frenzy, casting aside the decorative

icing, to individual truths, where a slur or a staccato isn't just a marking, but a life sentence. Pianists who play a hundred concerts a year lose the fear of the newborn, the strangification of encountering each note for the first time, in the reassuring casualness, the familiarity of the experience. But it is terror, panic, the death and reincarnation that each transition recreates, that makes an evening or even an instant unique, and which we hear only from the starving and the desperate—not from the suave, wrist-wringing stuntman.



We need to summon up horrors to dispel the daylight, to contradict the normalcy of the hour. Nothing should be normal. The dark at the edge of the stage should be a chasm, every spotlight a stroke of lightning.

Ever since that distant night I haven't been able to find it in me to play anything that doesn't reveal the immense subterranean depths of King Solomon's mines, caribbean corals, Arctic wastes.

It has to be oneiric or chthonic, dream-rooted, anabasic, Druidical, "to bring the lightning down and the green flashes," as MacLeish wrote.

Another one of a long line my benign but austere Svengali, Irma Wolpe, who was also teaching Garrick Ohlsson and

Peter Serkin, said to me, in horror, “The Heroic Polonaise, it’s your best piece . . . !?”



I could toss off warhorses, pieces that didn’t require thinking, without thinking. Gould felt the same way about the Mozart sonatas: too tainted by adolescent trauma to mature into opera. The sonatas were cursed with being easy to play. Only the sonatas which escaped could be approached with surprise and discovery as an adult.

So that now what really matters to me is the unsolved. For example, the unresolved repentance of Brahms for his abandonment of the only woman he ever loved, of the woman who never stopped loving him, Clara Schumann.

Or water music, whose ripples move constantly in different directions depending on the light, on the wind, on the mood the breeze has acquired in its long journey to the sigh of its arrival.

I once had a friend who liked to demonstrate his august distance from the mere technique of his repertoire that, speaking of sighs, when he was performing Liszt’s sigh, *Un Sospiro*, he would spiral and loop with his right hand, as if it were a Bradley aerobat stunt plane doing a barrel roll, before it would land on just the right note in the nick of time. The entire process was too slick, too cocky, too gimmicky. It was a circus act.

The death spiral should be of a pianist who is a desperate captive, uncertain of escape, fighting to get the codes back to headquarters. Every measure is a fight to the finish, staving off annihilation, a prisoner struggling to escape the illusion of the Möbius strip, that drugs us into believing in our dimension alone.

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Peter Halstead is a pianist, photographer, novelist, and poet. He studied piano with Russell Sherman in Boston, Irma Wolpe in New York, and organ with Charles Courboin at St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York.

Peter and his wife, Cathy, are trustees of the Sidney E. Frank Foundation, the Tippet Rise Foundation, and the Adrian Brinkerhoff Poetry Foundation. They are founders of the Sidney Frank Digital Lab in the Rockefeller Library at Brown University, and of Tippet Rise Art Center.

A partial list of publications:

POETRY

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BOOKS

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