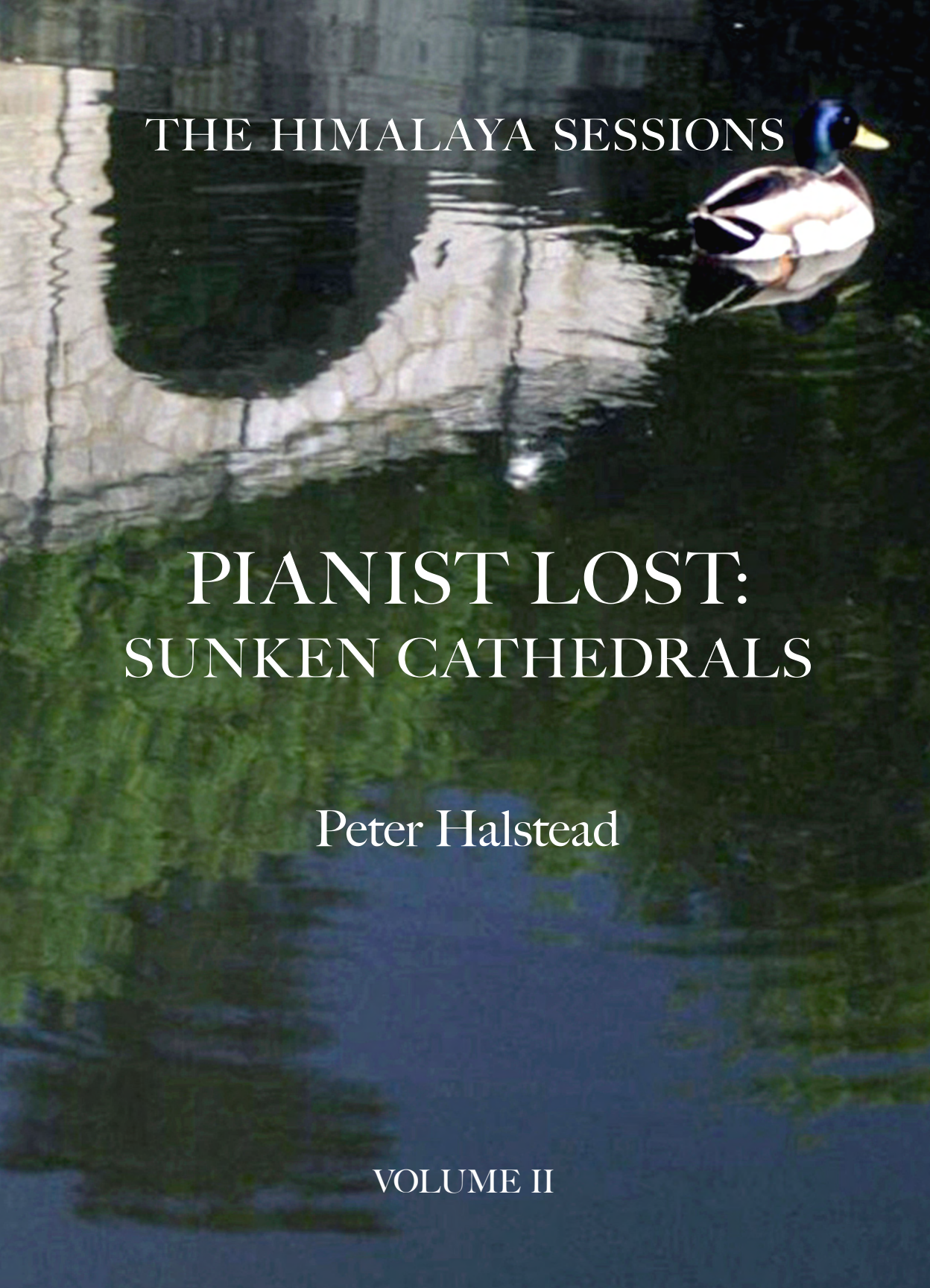
THE HIMALAYA SESSIONS
PIANIST LOST:
SUNKEN CATHEDRALS
Peter Halstead
VOLUME II

THE HIMALAYA SESSIONS

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PIANIST LOST: SUNKEN CATHEDRALS

SUNKEN CATHEDRALS — NOTE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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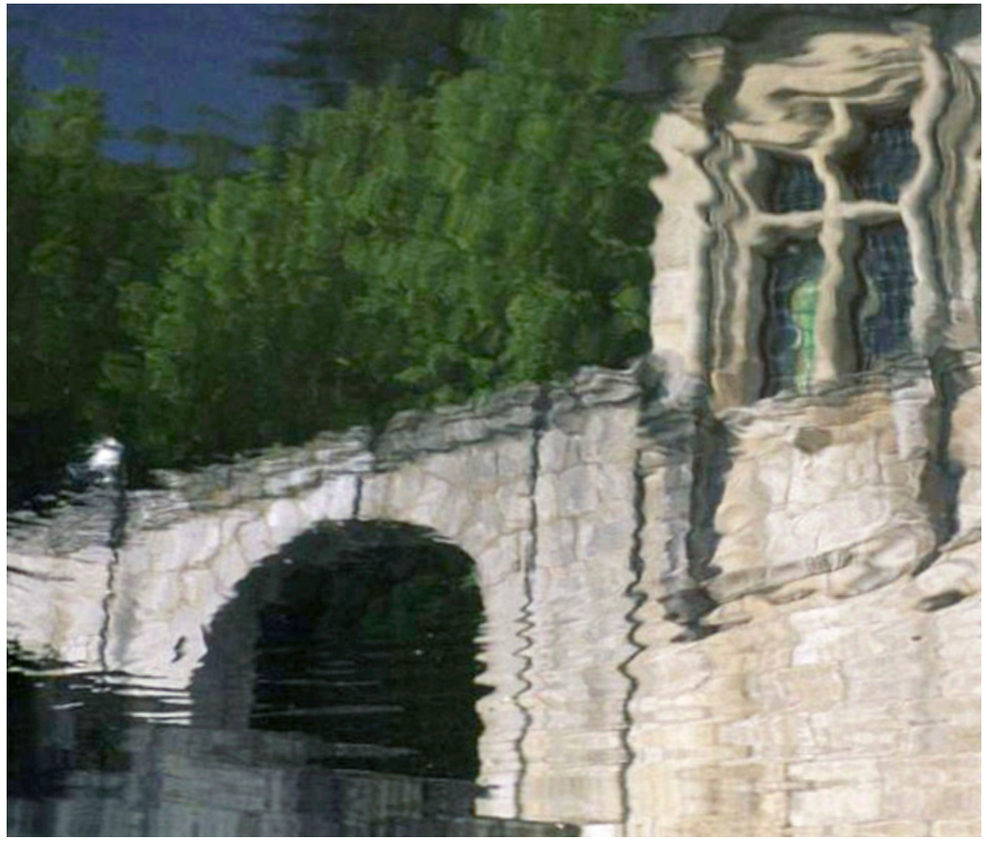


In simple tides lie the ebb and flow of galaxies.

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

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

Novas are imploded stars; music is a collapsed prism.

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

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

Around the edges of sinking ships floats treasure. Wormholes are windows into calmer worlds.

Music is a sandbar waiting to surface.

Hidden under any shoal is an island.

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

We only find what we know is there.

SUNKEN CATHEDRALS

On *The Sea of Ice*

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

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

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

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

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

THE MAGIC RECORD

To explain my explanations.

I had as a child a magic record where a different story was told each time the disc was played. Even lifting the needle and putting it down in exactly the same spot embroiled you in the middle of a totally different story than the grooves formerly held, like a time machine landing in the same town at the same hour but in a different parking lot.

Any record, as Schopenhauer said of music, contains more than it presents. Lured in my youth by my magic disc's haphazard stories, its built-in interruptions, I became in the end enamored of its movement alone, the jump of the needle, knowing that the real story was not the emotion, but the motion, the magic of the skip. The past, like poetry, lives in its leaps, the triumphs of the implied over the remembered.

The ultimate meaning, the real enthusiasm, is hidden in the folds of such spirals. Magic the moat, the high wall, the disguise. Also the loggia. In the center of this architectural hall of mirrors is, according to William James, an old glove. The reason for it all.

For me it is that unspoiled enthusiasm of a child, a garden without irony, which adults rediscover, I like to think, in love. Love in Renaissance paintings was normally surrounded by putti, by cherubs, symbols of the innocence of youth.

Love is assumed to be the search for lost time, or even its revelation. As in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, such truths are attained only by running the gamut of false magic, pious decoys and illusions. As the Schubert song goes, love beyond all magic: über allen Zauber, Liebe. Or to invoke another magician, Archibald MacLeish, talking about an approaching thunderstorm:

That sky could tell you there must be magic
Waiting as well as working to have miracles....

Like my magic record, a Möbius strip (a strip of paper twisted before it is taped together) has two stories or sides at any given point, but if a pencil is drawn along its surface only one continuous line will be found, covering both sides: momentum alone leads us out of entropy to other worlds. What is it about space that allows a twist to eliminate an entire dimension, to fly through the second dimension of height to the dark side of the paper without ever leaving the first dimension of the paper's one flat side that you are on? To step around the destiny which has stuck us in one dimension? Between the leap of the needle and its down-to-earth pencil point is a gap between the grooves, between the lines, a simile that defies one symmetry and yet produces another. As if there were a second, parallel universe.

So, thanks to some rogue record maker, I have always been drawn to the chasm between lines, the swaying bridge across

the gorge, that magic moment when you realize that you have bridged the abyss between stories, that you are yourself the record producer, in search of that lost link which will finally result in Nipper's perfect contentment in front of the Victrola.

Forgetting is simply cells taking the wrong trail to the hidden story, the parallel groove. By supplying that groove, we can redirect the cells back to the first moment, the poem, or even the moment before the poem was written: the irritant.

I used to cut trails in the woods abutting our house in Bedford. I believed I knew every tree, every twist of the path, every bush. These were my people.

One day I came across someone else's trail and my illusions were shattered. I was not alone. I was not unique. These were not my woods. My selfish sanctuary was ruined. After a few minutes the world reassembled itself and I realized I had broken through onto my own trail. I had gone in a circle. I had met my own line even while passing into another dimension of belief. I was a dupe. But I was my own dupe. The philosopher king returned; accompanied, however, by his fool.

In my youthful poems, even I was duped, left breathlessly in the lurch, on the wrong side of the groove, by my own forgotten subtexts. Something clever had happened, but what? Middle-aged forgetfulness had murdered clever youth. I wrote poems to freeze-dry that youth, but I was writing in the sky with vapor. I had my metaphors mixed. The point was not hieroglyphics, but their translations. Ciphers are useful only when deciphered. I was private, even from myself. From my own memory.

Although Talleyrand (and Henry Ford's publicist) said, "Never explain," that was only because they had something to hide. When something is hidden long enough, there is nothing to find.

And so I was led by a deficient memory into the humility of explanation. The swagger of careless words reduced by age to tying fortune-cookie fortunes to trees, to tagging the plants in my absentminded garden.

It is proof of ancient conspiracy that "god," "see," and "tree" have similar roots in Greek. Gods making trees exclusively, trees falling unseen in forests—such statements are linguistic redundancies. They are sentences made up of the same word. A primeval magic record. Any one word summons up the others.

My explications therefore are intended to provide that one word, the point of triangulation which steadies the world, a leg I myself can brace against to summon up roots in a tangled forest. But let me repeat to the impatient child I was that the music is only one part of the spy's tripod. The first part is the notes; the second part is the hidden parallel world, and the third part is the needled, trigger-happy observer.

How To Listen To Peter Halstead's Recordings.

Please click on the **RED TITLES 1** through **9**

PIANIST LOST: SUNKEN CATHEDRALS
50:25

As the mythical cathedral of Ys sinks into the sea, its steeple continues to toll long after it sinks. That bell is music, buried in the ages, hidden in the blood, the vibration underlying the cosmic trellis of existence.

1. Charles-Valentin Alkan: Barcarolle, Opus 65, No. 6, Trente Chants, Troisiéme Suite, G Minor, 1844, edition G. Schirmer, ed. Lewenthal 4:25

We poor drowning species, suspended in the rising waters, trapped in the deaths like Ondine, but also rising like waves, lapping up and down like arpeggios.

2. Felix Mendelssohn: Venetian Boat-Song No. 1, Opus 19, No. 6, G Minor, 1830 2:14

What more can we offer to the harmony of worlds than the tilt and ride of a gondola, the song of the boatman?

3. Felix Mendelssohn: Venetian Boat-Song No. 2, Opus 30, No. 6, F Sharp Minor, 1834 3:50

Music is frozen sky, pulled down to lagoons by lightning, galaxies of frequency made flesh by the gravity of tide.

4. Felix Mendelssohn: Venetian Boat-Song No. 3, Opus 62, No. 5, A Minor, 1844 3:32

Potemkin villages of reflected colors, unisons coming together in the oily mirrors of the lagoon, where our portraits are painted.

5. Felix Mendelssohn: Boat-Song (Posthumous), Opus 102, No. 7, A Major, 1845 3:46

Phosphorescent phantoms sprung from the invisible rainbows of a Venetian lagoon, dripping with Verlaine's moonlight.

6. Fryderyka Chopina: Barcarolle, Opus 60, F Sharp Major, 1845–1846, Edition Instytut Fryderyka Chopina XI, ed. Paderewski 12:53

Caspar David Friedrich's *Sea of Ice,* where broken spars are coat ed with rime, where human monsters rise from lost polar expeditions, from the dazzling phosphorescent shoal of the singing sea's black hole. Rhythms surge like riptides and eddy around the shipwreck of the sea. Motifs fizzle in all directions from ancient worlds, as the waves bend and distort expectations like funhouse mirrors.

The gondola rocks, and around it swirl the eddies and currents of the canal, faces and windows reflected in the lagoon the way the lights on a Christmas tree combine their chaos around the mast of the trunk.

Tectonic faults create mountains. From fragmentation comes Cubism. Weaknesses in our core force us to coat the world in rhyme.

At the end, rather than shouting at the top of his voice, or drowning in the crash of the sea, the evening grows dark with winds and birds.

7. Claude Debussy: "La cathédrale engloutie," from *Préludes*, Premier Livre, No. X, C Major, 1910 6:16

Monet painted without his glasses, as Debussy composed. This is Monet's church sunken in mist, in haze, in sunset, in colors (and, as a side thought, in water). The echoes of epiph any are like Liszt's *St. Francis Walking on the Water.* Something vast is rising out of the depths. Its strange high overtones re mind me of footprints in the snow, the next piece. The steeples of faith submerge and emerge like Krakens, dragging us down into dark eternities, the only place the gargoyles of the piano can live, in the wormhole of music.

8. Claude Debussy: "Des pas sur la neige," Préludes, Premier Livre, No. VI, D Minor, 1910 4:18

Here is another water piece, footprints like fingers whose grips are swirled in snow devils, lost in blizzards, as the mind loses perspective in a whiteout, on the white of the ivories. Feet trudge lethargically towards salvation, fingers fight the tabula rasa of the keyboard.

This is Frankenstein's monster escaping onto the ice floes. Snow leopard footprints leading to nothingness off a high ridge. Brinkerhoff's prints, leading into history. Devi was so terrified by the cliff that her hair turned white. Before the apocalypse in the tent.

As Brinkerhoff's footprints merge on the horizon, just before the cliff, kingdoms vanish in the converging tracks of myth, audio tracks that no one will ever hear.

Music is only a passing moment, a gesture in a room, a foot print in the snow, the absence, the trek into tonal ambiguity, the *not*, the *pas*, the muffled footprints of snow leopards and pianists who have played their last concert.

9. Gabriel Fauré: Barcarolle No. 1 in A Minor, Opus 26, 1880 9:11

Flurries of shadows imitate themselves, mirrored upside down in the evening light, sounds from a bandstand in the park echoing on Seine, in this postcard from Monet. I rewrote the ending. I couldn't accept its complacent amen. I will never be forgiven.

The midsection is a lawn in the park, where children dance in the setting evening, as their lives whirl into the coming wars. Like the Schumann Romanze or a Brahms Waltz, it the last gasp of a fading empire, of a Sunday that was too perfect to let go. Time must be stopped on such summer nights.

As the notes swirl, you hear Ivanovich's *Waves of the Danube*, very Moldau.

Charles-Valentin Alkan: Barcarolle, Op. 65, No. 6, from Troisième recueil de chants, G minor, 1844; G. Schirmer, ed. Raymond Lewenthal

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

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

These invasions parallel ethnic melismas, and seem to thumb their nose at the traditional tonalities of the rest of the piece. Alkan suffered under the antisemitism prevalent in European society in general to this day, and had enough money to squirrel himself away from society, as Glenn Gould did in his day. Genius rarely knows enough to protect itself against outside society, which is its natural enemy. Hawthorne's short story "The Artist of the Beautiful" is a classic example of genius abused by mediocrity, as is John Hersey's novel *The Child Buyer*.

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

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

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

Helen Vendler, in *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire*, talks about the first and second orders in Wallace Stevens, where the poet hides his firsthand experience behind a higher and more distant level of language, or a more acceptable experience.

The urge to write a boat song may be as simple as a love of sea air, a love of the whack of rigging against the sails, a love of the wash of tide against the belly of a scull. But the melancholy ebb and flow of a gondola song is more of a resignation to a tragic life, interspersed with polluted sparkles from the Venetian sewers. Hidden behind its timeworn vocabulary of lovelorn Italian pathos is a deeper ocean of anxiety, dread, and dislocation. Its more frightening vocabulary is an attempt to map the emotions, rather than Venice or Naples. As Stevens says, in "Description Without Place":

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

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

All his politicking had come to nothing, and he was passed over as director of the piano department of the Paris Conservatoire for a man he despised. Now that Chopin was dead, Liszt and Alkan were the greatest composers in Paris. Although Alkan had many friends (George Sand, Liszt, Hiller, Ambroise Thomas, Delacroix, Victor Hugo), Alkan's nemesis (Marmontel, now head of the Conservatoire) had one friend: Auber, who was enough for the nomination. In any case, Alkan never maintained his friendships, and had no temperament for dependable appearances in public. Marmontel went on to teach Bizet and Debussy (had Alkan taught them, both composers would have turned out differently).

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

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

Alkan was ultimately crushed by his bookcase while reaching for the Talmud, which by custom must have no other books above it, and thus had to be the highest on the shelf. William Great artists know what they have to do in a short period of time. A novelist knows which books he or she will write, a poet

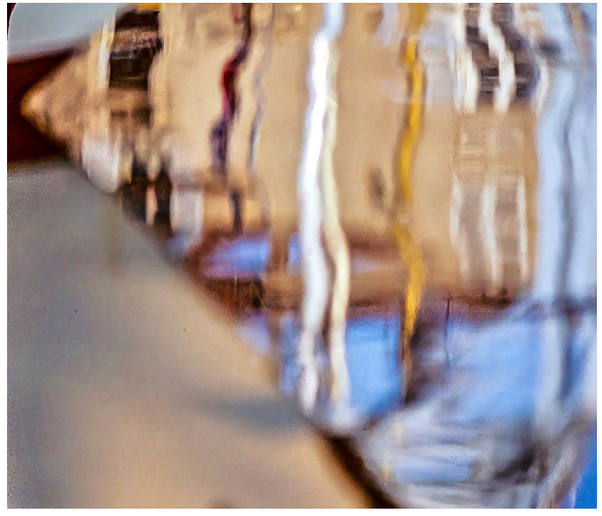
knows how many poems must be written and corrected before night, a painter instinctively knows when the painting will stop. His operas written, Rossini relaxed into evenings of cards and days of banal piano miniatures; he outlived his gift.

Assuming you waste your life until you amass enough experience to make writing meaningful, and begin at 40, live to 70, you have 30 years of 50 poems a year, or 1,500 poems you can successfully chaperone, while you lead society a merry chase, while you cheat death on the highway, in the bars, in the alleys. You are being protected, you know, for the work. There is a pact between you and death that a certain number must be achieved, certain revelations must be pinned down before you will be let go to play cards. As Hélène Grimaud says of Gould in *Wild Harmonies*: ". . . no time to stop, no time to breathe, *presto*, forging ahead, even faster, the desire to prematurely reach the end...."

Alkan's music is as antisocial and quirky as the man. It was symptomatic of his reclusive nature, disinclined to cater to his audience, which made it possible for Alkan to achieve what he had to, and yet his achievement took on the color of his defense, whereas Mozart disguised his struggles with absolute joy, as the best revenge against the hand he was dealt (a short life, poverty). As my friend Tony says, the odds are good; but the goods are odd.

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

Grimaud says you see yourself before a concert, all flaws exposed. And often you don't like what you see. Alkan was a Toulouse-Lautrec, small, hunchbacked, ugly, petty, who determined to remake himself into another man. Often pianists look in the mirror and see Brahms. Or we read Nabokov's arch judgments and imagine we ourselves will be spared. But the moment comes, as it did for Andrew Field when, as his biographer, you realize he despises you, as all artists must despise their mirrors, because they remove the soft lighting, the baby spots.



Alkan's music is in this way tortured with musical forms of self-contradiction, begging for censure. This gives him the courage to open up a harmonic world where he knew no one would follow, before Wagner and Schoenberg. It's not an obedient conservatory student étude world. It's in your face.

It took an equally rebellious genius, Raymond Lewenthal, to spend the decades necessary learning and proselytizing this impossible music, years that must have been drenched with doubt, thus making Lewenthal a "little Alkan," self-contradicting enough to represent the music.

All music may demand similar sacrifices, but if it suits us, we don't question it, if we see ourselves as Brahms, as Grimaud does. The great Brahms pianist *is* Brahms. Gould comes to mind: equally baffled by the concept of sex, equally hermetic, vacuum-packed.

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

His Barcarolle, however, is one of the few pieces he wrote with almost nothing outlandish in it. The only unusual harmonies are the "minor seventh" chords, which we interpret with a modern ear as Gershwin, or even rock and roll, whose traditional walking bass hits the minor seventh on the fifth note. "Greased Lightnin'" from the musical *Grease* is a familiar example, parodying as it does the same progression, hitting a minor seventh on the word "burning": "Go, greased lightnin', you're burning up the quarter mile." Note how the phrase hits a high note (the minor seventh) on "burning," and then goes backwards from that high note, playing in reverse order the same notes it used to get to the high note.

Alkan does the same thing with his minor seventh, not a note heard in the Italian convention of a gondola song. When the minor seventh note is reached, it is held, and thus stressed, while the *moto perpetuo* flows around it. This is not virtuosic music, but notes in service of an ideal. As elated as the song becomes, going as far away from the beginning note as possible (12 tones out of a possible 13), it must always acknowledge its root, the disgruntled G minor.

Alkan later introduces another harmony entirely. From G Minor, the piece suddenly transitions into A-flat, which is only a half note higher. This "neighbor-note" relationship is used in Rachmaninoff, and in tonal clusters by Gershwin; it's a kind of science fiction theme used to suggest that something is in another dimension, like someone who has returned from outer space whose thumbs are on backwards. It is meant to be shocking, to rip us out of our predictable, lulling, rolling Venetian gondola and throw us into the world of Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre* or Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*.

We are used to such music, to Hans Zimmer and Danny Elfman, so we don't notice how strange this Vulcan boat song must have been at the time.

Tunings in earlier days, before Alkan, were ill-tempered, and many notes stood significantly apart from the well-mannered harmonies of the Romantics, so that certain chords were called "the devil in music." The *diabolus in musica*, also called the tritone, jangled horribly (it still does). Paul Hindemith called it an "unstable" harmony. And so there was a tradition of things that nice composers didn't write. Liszt and Wagner led the way to Schoenberg and the anarchist composers who broke down the ivied walls of socially accepted harmony. In my youth, it was Elvis who threatened the social order, and then the Beatles and the Stones. If you grew up in the south, you had the blues and boogie-woogie, which lured socialites onto the wrong side of the tracks.

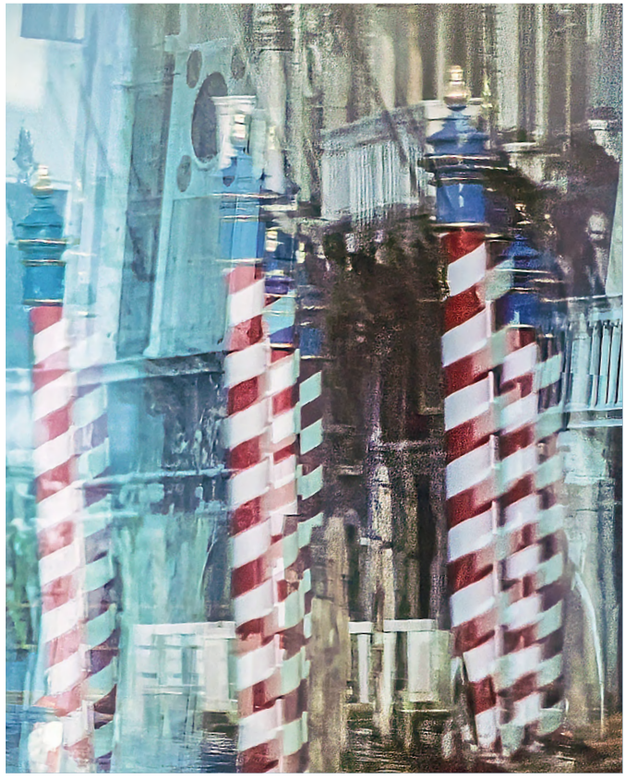
But French society was much stuffier in 1844. You didn't play those notes, you didn't make those abrupt harmonic switches. You spent a lot of time morphing from one accepted harmony to another, from A to B, and then from B to C, and so on, until you reached G. But you didn't go directly to G.

So the modern ear doesn't hear the seditious undertones of this seemingly tasteful boat song. It is a hymn sung by a courtesan. It's Venice of the bordellos, of the opium den, the sallow-skinned hashishim, the cabals, the dacoits, the souk, the Hindustani, the Mughals, the Thugee, all of which were regarded by the NAP-NAPs as snake charmers, necromancers, sun worshipers, card sharps, and assassins.

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

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

a currach, the slip and glide of a coracle in the chop and riffle of the *calle*, the traditional *rifacimento* of Mendelssohn's gondola songs, could be conjured up without any syncopation at all, simply by the steady flow of notes, is a significant achievement.



Later examples of the typical rhythm were written by Schubert, Liszt, Verdi, Offenbach, Heller, Paisiello, Rossini, Donizetti, Poulenc, Rorem, Bernstein and Sondheim, and an entire industry of Italian popular song sprung up around the sometimes inspired displays by the barber-poled, sailor-shirted tenors at loose on the louche waves of Venice, where tourism's mandatory adiabasis into the lowlands of high architecture creates exactly that dichotomy, that push and pull between the heights and the depths that fires fission, as warm and cold winds move like electrons between levels in the atmosphere, a constant exchange that creates the motion of tides, winds, rains, and snows that sustain the world.

As Grimaud writes in her wonderful *Wild Harmonies*:

> ". . . [E]bb and flow is the movement of struggle. Far from simplifying everything and allowing one side to gain the upper hand—day or night, war or peace—this struggle constantly enriches each side by its opposing of the other. . . . the perfect equilibrium arising from this confrontation that defines what is constant."

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

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

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

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

My spell checker insists that these are Bat Songs. Fluttering nocturnally around the blood-red waves of moonlit, vampiric arteries.

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

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

Wealth has provided more than time; its heirs have been able to use that time to produce music, sculpture, philosophy, poetry: Browning, Byron, Proust, Merrill, Frost, Tolstoy, Wittgenstein, Mann. The loss of wealth has produced wonderful catalogues of lost kingdoms: Mann, Nabokov, Rachmaninoff. Shakespeare, but that's another story.

Mendelssohn studied with Ludwig Berger, who had studied with Clementi, author of the *Gradus ad Parnassum*, those drab steps to the heights, and composer as well of a variety of charming light sonatinas, in which tradition Mendelssohn continued, adding an excellent technique which turned otherwise light concepts into more challenging virtuosic vehicles, such as his two piano concertos. Mendelssohn's transcendent gift was melody, of which his *Songs without Words* are the prime examples, not relying on technique to disguise their simple gifts, like many of his other works. They are songs without artifice, without the need for excesses or excuses. They are not pianistic, or virtuosic, but require the musician to forget about the piano and sing. As Hélène Grimaud says, "The piano is an incomparable instrument when it is touched by a musician in whom nothing of the pianist remains."

Rachmaninoff, whose veiled barcarolle is in the first volume of *The Himalaya Sessions*, felt that melody was the reason to compose, and technique simply the lure. Rachmaninoff rarely had the nerve to pare his music down to essentials, except in that barcarolle, in his songs, in the beginning of the Third Concerto, in the famous 16th variation of the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* (1934), one of the few successful pieces written after his flight from Russia in 1917. He wrote it at the Villa Senar in Switzerland, which he built in imitation of his Russian estate, Ivanovka. It brought back some of his early identity. But he abandoned it in 1939 with the onslaught of World War II. After Rachmaninoff left Russia, he wrote three successful pieces in Switzerland, and three rootless pieces in the States, before he died. He reworked many of his earlier pieces, to varying effects. It runs against the grain to write solitary music in public places, to invoke the vast forests of Russia under the palms and striped awnings of Beverly Hills.

Alkan played Mendelssohn's boat songs in his infrequent concerts, and was obviously inspired by them to write his own

insidious version, included here. As Alkan was the master of the seditious modal shift, Mendelssohn is his mirror opposite, the bankerly bulwark up against which Alkan throws his fury. Mendelssohn would never have had a note out of place, an ungroomed strand, or any cadence but the most likely. Rossini said once to Saint-Saëns about a piece, "It smells of Mendelssohn," which annoyed Saint-Saëns, although he ultimately saw the humor of it.

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

Mendelssohn's low notes in the gondola songs provide an anchor in the heaviness of the dark, polluted, heaving deep, set against the lightness of the colors (a gondolier's shirt, gondola posts), against the weightless corklike bob of the gondola itself, which are all represented in the flowing accompaniment in the right hand, until the song of the gondolier floats above the Taoist shade and sun of the water, to integrate the anchor, the colors, and the song into the Italian heat weaving off the waves, the way a summer day creates a thermal shimmer off the pavement on a desert road. Venice was the great dissipator of summer's inferno before air conditioning: like the rock beaches of Capri, or the Ancona coast, the overheated hinterland would flock to Venice in the summer for the cool of the waters.

Italian popular music is like the tarantella, frenzied in its need to forget the heat, to out-sing the temperature building up on the cobbles confined by labyrinthine city walls. Out of which frenzy springs the hearty *moto perpetuo* of songs like "Funiculi Funicula," or "Gondoli Gondola." But Venetian songs are cooler, slower, patterned on a rowing or a rocking motion, maybe because the frenzy is calmed by the canals. Venice is at the end of the world, and at the beginning of the Adriatic, vast metaphor of Odysseus and Godard in *Contempt*.

Rather than a busking accordionate finish, the "sol-do" of Louis Prima songs, these earlier, bucolic Venetian odes to inescapable heat just fade away into summer's pale, lapping horizon.

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

Although this should be a simple boat song, Chopin turns it into a novel, a monstrance, with spokes radiating in all directions like godbeams.

These spokes are footnotes, shanghais, detours, kibbitzes, chat rooms where the ambiance, the connotations, the miasma of meanings that swirl around each note and every chord can be parsed, explained, deconstructed, in real time, while the barque maintains its forward momentum along the timeline of the bass motif which holds its wanderings, its sideslips, together.

Before I go into the details of this vertical and horizontal painting, I'd like to praise the concept of "shipwreck," evoked by the Caspar David Friedrich painting "The Sea of Ice," looking very much like a science fiction scene in *Oblivion* or *Edge of Tomorrow*.

The photos of Shackleton's ship, the *Endurance*, grappled in ice, by Frank Hurley, convey the chaos of dysfunctional spars and rigging, the fractal dismemberment of familiar elements, which we see in Cubist paintings.

It is this fragmented sense of the dichotomy of an object, at once pattern and bedlam, that I think Chopin reaches for in his complex boat song. The note is followed by his commentary on the note. Both exist together in a living, rhythmic polarity, the way Hegel said the human mind was capable of holding both an idea and its opposite at the same time, which he called systematic pluralism.

Chopin's Barcarolle is systematically plural; it analyzes the vertical elements of its composition at the same time that it plunges headlong into the gale of its horizontal momentum.

For instance, in Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, horizontal motion is broken up into its microtones, its freeze-frame components, like a film run more slowly or even backwards, so the stitches between its scenes can be appreciated. Godard wrote that he always tried to watch for Hitchcock's seams, but Hitchcock's films were too compelling to be analyzed; you are swept up in its drives, and you just have to watch.

It may be the performer's job to hold his pieces together; but everyone does that. It is a more dangerous job (because it isn't normal) to pull the pieces apart, and stop just short of total Armageddon.

And so the Barcarolle celebrates not just a successful voyage, but also its opposite, the shipwreck. I find the shipwreck more Gothic. William F. Buckley said that nothing ever happened on a successful sail; the great stories come from the disasters.

As Julius Caesar says, "Our fate lies not in our stars, but in our selves…." So a dis-aster, when the stars are thwarted by human intervention, when the social conventions are disrupted by aleatory events, black swans, and other forms of truths, are in fact the most cosmically accurate events. In a shipwreck, all the shortcuts of the boatyard are revealed, and bosuns confess to their innermost thoughts. Why should we want a fairytale procession of the royal barge, when we can have a disaster film?

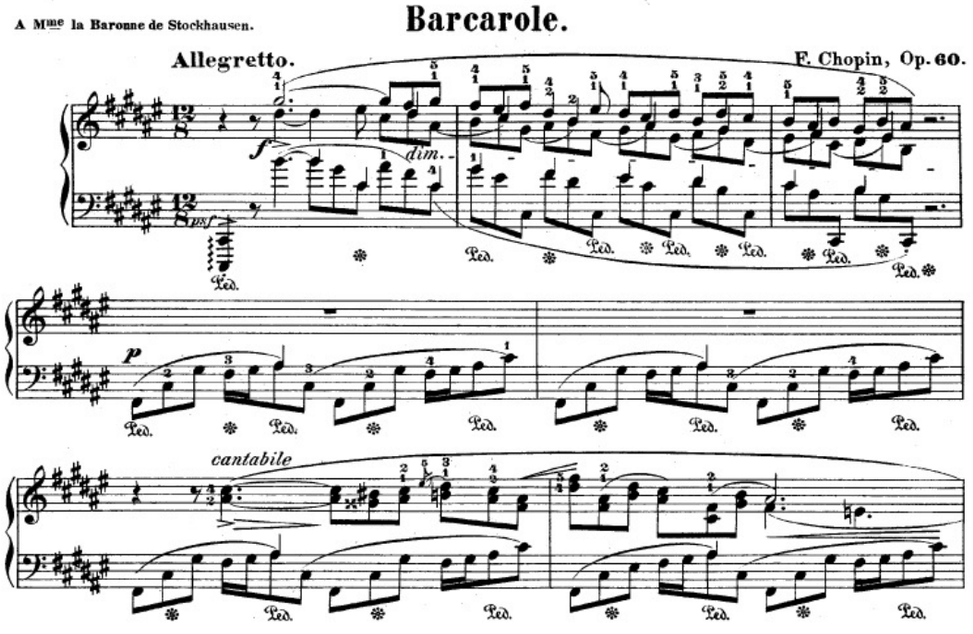
So the missteps, the erasures, the first drafts that go into a work all make up the finished product, and the sidesteps, the deflections, the aberrations, what Joyce called a "commodius vicus of recirculation," are the raw materials, the fissile elements, out of which great fables are made.

The way a leaf floats to the ground, or the way waves lap without structure, so Chopin gets into the gondola. Although the result sounds like the fractal confusion of water flowing out of a faucet, there is an insidious order to the seiche, as every facet and flume of a seismic wave can be traced ultimately to the reef which creates it, coupled with the fetch (that is, the distance the wind has traveled over the water), atmospheric currents, longshore drift. There are a lot of equations for a wave which is itself impossible to measure, but everything will ultimately compute at the end, as does this musical seiche

which begins Chopin's monumental ode to Venetian canals, to their dapples, their drifts, their laps, their colors, their reflections.

After the sudden chill of the first low octave, Chopin organizes his chaotic fall into the boat simply by using key after key, descending down the piano. It is an onomatopoeia, an envisioning of a stumble (or a woman's elegant reclining into the boat), translated into notes on a piano. It is a *Nude Descending a Staircase* (number 3).

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



Chopin sets out on the waves with a mind uncluttered with keys, in a boat without a country, the lagoon a blank page. The opening modulates constantly downwards through the keys. By being open to where the boat will take him, Chopin captures the mind of a composer setting out on a journey, with no clue of where it's going to take him. My life in a nutshell. (As Hamlet said, "I could be bounded in a nutshell, but that I have bad dreams.")

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

But if you look more closely, this is simply an imitation of confusion; its apparent mindlessness is highly planned. The top notes represent a beautiful sighing melody which repeats in seven different keys. If you play it by itself you have a low note, a high note, and the note in between the two. This is a kind of turn, or appoggiatura, constantly used by Bach. Bach was the only influence Chopin ever wanted to acknowledge. Chopin has adapted this turn into the most romantic of phrases. Possibly Chopin is thinking of the Bridge of Sighs in Venice.

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

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

The first octave, the dramatic foreshadowing of the rider's fear at getting into the boat, is also the initial intake of breath

before the first sigh. The two "falling" notes in the treble right after the octave make up the three-note "sigh" pattern.

So in fact there are eight sighs, as there are eight notes in the scale. Chopin is setting up what Schoenberg would call a tone row, a template for the entire gondola ride. These eight phrases happen in only three measures, and yet every later development in this monumental composition is present in these three measures. (This sort of predictive structure was also used by Beethoven. Entire sonatas morph out of the first few measures.)

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

Despite the apparently random, improvised nature of this Schoenbergian "tone row," its parameters are in fact as thoroughly planned as a Bach fugue. They sound natural, like a human sigh without any artifice, but they are all artifice. The French for "fireworks" is *feu d'artifice*, artificial fire, flares created by artifice. And like a perfect watch, the clockwork with which this timepiece is made meshes so effortlessly in its gears that a solar wind is simulated, and without anyone realizing it, the time is told: palaces pass by, the current begins to flow, the boatman rows, and the planets hum in their assigned orbits.

Its transitions are seamless. This most erudite homage to Bach sounds instead like the most unpremeditated imitation of a completely idle day, a whim, in which a composer is deciding what to do with his life, with his song. That seeming idleness is in fact a deep decision the creator has made about the nature of water, the lapping of waves, the climbing of tides, and the "descant," the ebb and flow, the building and falling notes of a gondolier's song. It's all there waiting to be uncovered, actors lined up to go on stage.

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

But in reality the main theme of the song is that Italian yodel, the three-note turn, where the top two notes convey yearning. As they will years later in so many pieces by Brahms, where one note, hanging harmonically, cries out to be resolved into the note waiting below it, to be merged into its destiny, its momentum.

But Brahms will delay that resolution, sometimes forever, until you hang on every note the way a soprano might linger on some poignant moment in a song. In Brahms's Intermezzo, Opus 116, No. 4, a lower note inches yearningly upwards, while above it a treble melody sighs from a high note to a note five steps below. This is the language of longing, of yearning, of *Sehnsucht*, of outmoded emotions and romantic indulgences foreign to our less languid age; but a valid vocabulary of compassion from another era.

And so the melody of the piece, that sigh, is present from the very start, but in a Venetian carnival mask.

Heinrich Schenker believed that every note you hear leads you farther away from what the music is about. Notes are merely decorative, eye candy, a distraction to the underlying structure. Rather than leading you merrily into the structure, they shanghai you away from it. This is mentioned by John Rink in "The Barcarolle: *Auskomponierung* [embellishment, arpeggiation] and Apotheosis," in *Chopin Studies*, vol.1, edited by Jim Sampson, Cambridge, 1988.

Schenker would maintain that a composition exists not only in the present, as we're listening to it. It is more than this "foreground." It also has a backstory. The foreground, the various ornaments or embellishments of the story, distract from the core meanings, which Schenker called the *Affekt* or the *Ursatz*, the creative motives of the piece. It may have been Keats who said that by the time he had written a line, he had forgotten what it was about, and the words had taken over. This is what Keats called "negative capability," where a poet can remain in limbo, uncertain of meanings or directions, in order to remain open to emotion. A rush to judgment eliminates the delicious *frisson* of mystery, and puts an end to poetic gestation.

Keats felt that the impetus for a poem wasn't verbal, but more of a feeling, and that words gradually eroded that feeling. In a way, it's the observation principle—to express it is to distract from it. Keats's poetry originated in the ineffable and then became concrete through words.

In the Barcarolle, the apparent doodling, the improvisation, the surface filigree is in fact structure. The eye candy that charms you is in fact the underlying skeleton, the *memento mori*, the harbinger of death, grinning at you beneath the striped gondolier's shirt. Chopin improvised his pieces; what he wrote

down later often lost the spontaneity of the original. In the Barcarolle he has tightened up the notes, returning possibly sooner to the underlying structure than he might have originally.

It is Germanic to think that the skeleton is all; the French might say the opposite, that the filigree, the way of telling the story, is more important than the story. Critics have said that about the films of Tim Burton, that his surfaces are in fact the plot. Dylan Thomas said it about Joyce: that the genius of *Finnegans Wake* lay in the words themselves, rather than the direction the words took. My own teacher, Sherman, believed that when you concentrated on the horizontal drive of music, the timeline, you missed the static, vertical voicing of melodies hidden in the chords themselves. To bring this out, you had to slow music down, to concentrate on its tiny details, and not be overwhelmed by its momentum.

A real mountaineer will admit that the summit is just an excuse for being on the mountain, as putting an autographed ball in a hole is an excuse for being outside on gorgeous lawns normally off limits to ordinary people. Fishing is about standing in streams, outrigger canoeing is about riding waves, surfing is about freedom.

Saint Catherine of Siena said, "All the way to heaven is heaven." It's about being there, not getting there. It's about getting lost. It's not about the climax of the piece. All of that is already present in the first chord in the Barcarolle.

In some well-structured music, the whole is present in every part. The entire "Moonlight" Sonata is present in its first few measures. All of *Hamlet* or *Nozze di Figaro* has been set out in the first minute. A detail of Van Gogh's stars is the same as his sunflowers. The point isn't in the picture, but in the pigments. There are clever mystery novels whose solution is sometimes present on the first page.

The Chopin Barcarolle is about the tension between the formal structures of Bach and the freedom of French ornamentation. It is a war, a contest, between the steadiness of the waves below and the *fioritura* above: the *appoggiatura* of the sky (also called *passaggi*, *ribatutta*, that is, flourishes, riffs, *alankars* in ragas which compromise the descant, the digression above the grounding harmonies).

Most composers comment in the treble, in the descants, on an anchor theme in the central range of the piano. When comment happens below the main motif, it's called counter-point. When the comment is routine or unimaginative, it's called accompaniment.

In Bach such harmonization becomes a complex equation which increases the significance of the melody. That is, it isn't mere accompaniment, such as the Alberti bass in Mozart. The Alberti bass is just a broken-up chord, such as the C chord below the melody in Mozart's famous C Major Piano Sonata, K. 545.

Rather than just playing a three-note chord all at once, Domenico Alberti popularized the idea, prevalent to this day, that breaking up the chord into its three or four notes would make it more interesting. So a C chord (made up of the three notes of C, E, and G) is played not all at once, but rather the

notes come out one by one: C, G, E, G is the most well-known pattern.

Thus in Bach or Chopin, the notes that swirl around the main notes become not just hangers-on but friends, spouses, ghosts. They come to mean as much as the melodies themselves. This is certainly true in Rachmaninoff, where any note comes with an entire family of neighbor-notes which give it its context, so that any one note has to be seen relative to the universe which surrounds it, relativity in music. Einstein understood that our position in space is relative to the speed at which we and our surroundings are traveling.

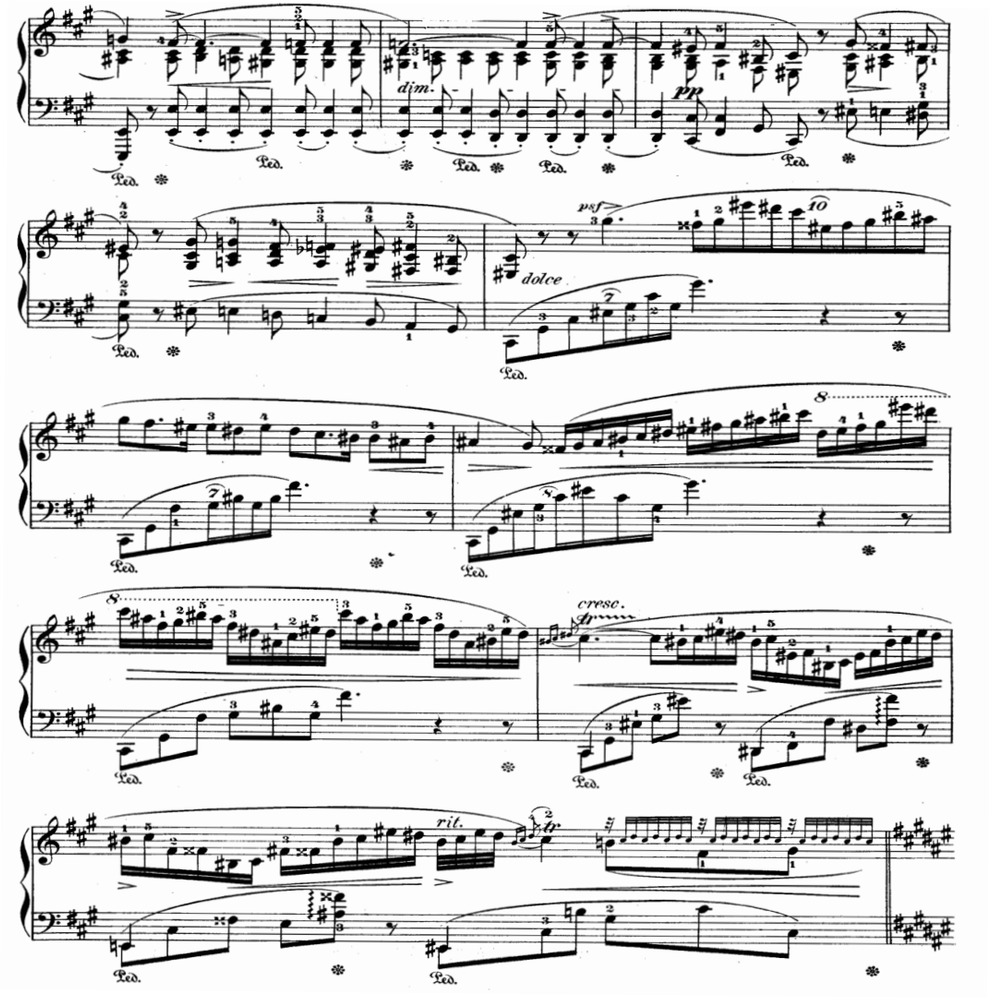
Chopin understood that Bach is so mirrored that every note rhymes with every other note. A scale in Bach isn't single notes, but an assembly of themes. Schoenberg used this idea to invent the 12-tone scale known as the tone row, which sets up the theme from which a fugue will be built, just as Bach did, except that Schoenberg's rules are looser, so that notes are encouraged to relate unpleasantly and discordantly with one another.

Bach was constrained by a well-tempered universe, where planets had to whirl in harmony in order to coincide with the forces which suspended the solar system in space.

Every note or bunch of notes in Bach will reoccur upside down, or transposed into another key, or rearranged. If Bach wrote poetry, every word would rhyme with every third word. The words would have inner rhymes, off-rhymes, one-letter rhymes, backward rhymes, until a poem would be a jumble of sounds, and that would give it its meanings.

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

For instance, where Bach would simply write a turn or a trill, Chopin would open up this assemblage into an enormous improvisation, so that 50 notes or more rise up the piano and back down to where they began, to fade into the next major note.



(The passage below swirls around the three note pattern of the Barcarolle's opening measures.)

In Chopin, there are no unimportant notes. Every note is a melody, every scale a rococo pillar on the Bernini altar canopy in St. Peter's in Rome, whose purpose is not only to hold up the roof of the canopy, and thus by extension the heavens

themselves, but to protect the altar from the roof of the greater church, to form a safe room within a safe place, and, through its wound-up beauty, to offer up homage to God.

A scale, in climbing the heights (or plumbing the depths), leads to its final summit, or nadir, but all the way to that summit is the expectation of the final note, surrounded by the anticipatory shimmer of the scale. The final summit is reached at the moment the scale, the climb, starts, because you realize where it's going. When played on a German Steinway, deeply tuned by someone like Krystian Zimerman, who rebuilds his own instruments, the effect is of ice crystals growing, like the BBC specials on the Arctic where time-lapse photography shows crystals spreading across the water.

This is what Chopin is like: each ice cell absolutely unique, linking instantly in a unique way to another unique cell, the adamantine blue haze of the ocean shining like the boreal halo around multiplying cells, something that happens millions of times every second in the particle world, but which we ourselves never see, except through special lenses or atomic microscopes.

But we can hear it when Chopin develops a melody, the way notes expand from notes into equally significant themes. Most composers cannot superimpose layer on layer of nacred barnacles to advance a shell's construction. But the cathedral of the Barcarolle is like that, lintel on lintel, forms linked to one another through references to a common theme, such as heaven or hell. A buttress spanning the pollened air to reach a column that holds a gargoyle on a corbel. The forms themselves spring from the scales, from the columns, for one unique moment, never to materialize again in exactly the same way.

Like a Gaudí cathedral, stalagmite drips adhere to one another in novel ways until you have an ethereal mud castle, ether masquerading as mud. Or the seahorse tails of a Mandelbrot set, repetitions spawning aberrations stemming from minute flaws, the way atoms attach to DNA at unguarded moments, shining from shook foil.

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

And not just the steady flow of water through the hose, a

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

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

As Jeremy Denk says about Schubert's last sonata: ". . . it keeps stumbling into silences; it creates a new idea that also keeps breaking off into silences, places where the pulse becomes threatened, impossible to perceive; Schubert is not interested in communicating pulse." (http://jeremydenk.net/blog/ Immortal Schubert, April 23, 2012)

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

Rachmaninoff's baggage falls around his linear train track in swirls of neighbor notes, not auxiliary comments on the melody but furniture in the room while the writer dreams—dust motes, bird songs, street sirens, radio static, the xylem of photosynthesis, the random molecules whose chaos provides a bridge for the dogged melody, scaffolding over the workaday eddies of the canal. These swirls, though, are simply the patterns of the larger canal reduced to miniatures that foreshadow the structure to come, the vast delta of the Po, the basilisk of the Barcarolle.

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

In fact, you could say that the Barcarolle, that cathedral of connected arches, apses, vaults, and ribs, is simply a Baroque turn, a *doppelt* cadence and mordent, or a combination of two kinds of what Bach called accents, a *steigend* and a *fallend*. Or even a slide, a *schleifer*, ending in a mordent. That is, just three notes, an amphibrach metric line, with the stressed beat in the middle. The many grace notes which decorate the melody

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

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

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

Out of just three notes, Chopin makes a mysterious, modern, tonally vague beginning; a melody; an accompaniment; a middle melody which is just a modified version of the first melody; and improvisatory, seemingly free passages. And yet he makes this completely Bachlike piece sound not at all like Bach, but like Chopin, something which hasn't been repeated before or since (except by the young Scriabin).

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

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

This was written the same year as Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige*, only three years before Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in 1913. It was a breakthrough year for Debussy. He had moved from the countryside to Paris, and had been told he had cancer. This was the last time he could make a difference. Surrounded by the city, he lived in his mind, underwater, or under the snow.

This piece is based on an ancient Breton myth in which a cathedral, which is submerged underwater off the coast of the Island of Ys in the Baie de Douarnenez, rises up from the sea on clear mornings when the water is transparent. Priests chant, bells chime (Debussy's Bösendorfer produced very bell-like effects in its treble registers), the cathedral organ plays. Lalo's opera, *The King of Ys*, had opened in 1888.

There is a sense of Armageddon, of apocalypse, of the afterlife which churches suggest, of the coming chaos of World War I. Debussy is looking for that great bourdon, that low organ note which is the primordial soup, the validation of mankind, the underpinning of civilization. Authenticity lay in organized religion, but also in unmoored spirituality, in Asian religions, in the transilience, the jump, from beauty and delight to nature itself in the raga, a religious system of tonalities.

The Industrial Revolution, which had created an immensely wealthy middle class to rival the aristocracy, had also decimated agrarian society. The emphasis was now on metal, not crops. Farmers felt abandoned, unable to compete with the new manufactured products. This led to their resentment of the upper classes. When Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated, the poor felt it was a valid gesture which underlined their frustration, and the wealthy felt that the promise of war was a novelty, an exciting change to a decadent life of parties, waltzing, and drunkenness. War would bring new life to both sides of the coin; instead, it resulted in an even greater sense of empty, irrational anomie, a society even farther from meaning.

The last gasp of organized rationality had been the 11th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* published in 1911, an ultimate compendium of knowledge that was intended by the editors to stand against the barbarians, rendering war useless. But instead the cream of the British intelligentsia, the future's hope for the continuity of reason, was senselessly slaughtered in the trenches of a mechanized war that did away with honor and brotherhood—all the civilities which had formerly rendered battle a gentleman's field of distinction, where troops marched singing into posterity with flowers on their helmets. Wilfred Owen, the British poet lost in the war in 1918, wrote in 1917:

> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
> Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
> My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
> To children ardent for some desperate glory,
> The old Lie: dulce et decorum est
> Pro patria mori.

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

Debussy's piece has much in common with Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, written in 1896, which eerily presages the anxiety Debussy expresses.

In both pieces, fundamental organ notes set the bar. Some sense of divinity has been evoked, and man's fate is to prove worthy of that beginning, of the miracle of his own creation. However, challenges to belief arise. In Strauss they are ultimately resolved. In Debussy's piece, there is a sense of resignation, of acceptance, calm, or even relief when the challenge of the ghostly cathedral subsides into the sea.

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

The Golden Section, the Pythagorean ratio of 3 to 2, had been used by Euclid, Aristotle, Plato, da Vinci, Kepler, Fibonacci, Le Corbusier, Dalí, Mondrian, Bartok and Satie, among many others. Its proportions are known to produce the best concert halls, the soundest buildings (famously the Parthenon). Plants spiral in its proportions. In tuning, if an octave string on a piano is cut by that proportion, it produces what we call a perfect fifth. Using a rhythm of 3 to 2 produces a syncopation used by voodoo drums, the cuban palo, and the congo cycle; academics call it a hemiola. Debussy had heard Javanese gamelan music at the Universal Exposition in 1889 in Paris.

It featured the Eiffel Tower, and a street in Cairo with a minaret, two mosques, ballet dancers, and Egyptian craftsmen. There was also a Javanese village.

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

In 1889 Debussy added to these culturally resonant fifths the effects of light on water. Just as a painting of a saint walking on water inspired Liszt to describe water in various stages of a miracle (in his *Legend: St. Francis de Paul Walking on the Water*, in volume 3), so the idea of a church sinking towards hell allowed Debussy to play with the blasphemous idea of God submerging.

Debussy was intrigued by the tension between God and nature, by what effect celestial divinities might have on tides. Tidal surges are caused by the sun and moon, so that the very agents of heaven cause the church to sink: nature versus divinity.

Although the "perfect fifth" interval is the basis of the "just intonation" used by some modern composers like John Luther Adams, the tuning of bells and organs usually results in quite a few bells and stops going flat, causing a flatted discordance called the tritone, the devil in music. The jangly tones of Debussy's piece are an echo of that tritone, the deep opposite of celestial bells, heaven echoed in an underwater underworld, as devils are imperfect reflections of angels.

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

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

By using the Lydian, Mixolydian, Phrygian, and Aeolian modes, a strangeness is introduced. John Adams uses such modes in his *Phrygian Gates*, and Philip Glass uses the *moto perpetuo* in gamelan music to introduce a strange ostinato which colors his music. As in Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige*, the stark fifths here convey a limitless space, a carillon of church bells, the organa of medieval chants.

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

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

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

The extreme high and low notes return to remind us of the struggle between rational piety and sensual chaos. Debussy then uses the overtone series to break the harmonics of a bell into their component sounds, as Richard Strauss did with his overture to *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in 1896. This is the turning point after the climax, the signal for the building to submerge. Foundry bells are often unevenly cast, and this leads to overtones being present along with the fundamental tone of the bell. These out-of-tune bells in turn react with other similarly untuned bells to produce more overtones. This also happens to organ pipes, and thus you get the flattening ecclesiastic tone which we esteem, precisely because of its imperfection, its wavers which create a spectral churchly ambiance.

The calm religious hymn returns as the church subsides, undercut with a slightly uneasy bass trill, possibly the eddies of current around the vast cathedral as it sinks. It is finally at peace with the forces which have condemned it to a watery grave, possibly confident it will rise again.

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

Monet painted *Impression, Sunrise*, the root of Impressionism, in 1874. He painted the Rouen cathedral in 1892 and 1893. He began painting water lilies in 1897. He painted without his glasses, so that accuracy wouldn't interfere with how he saw the world. Although the camera existed at that time, he felt that reflections were more intricate than "realistic" photographic views. Distortion has more to say than supposed accuracy.

Space bends light. We see the moon and the stars through bending rays at various times. Those bent rays produce prisms, the green flash at sunset. They allow us to measure the distance and the life span of stars. The vast majority of what happens to light lies outside the straight ray.

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

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

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

Sad and slow. This rhythm should have the sonorous value of the depths of a Currier & Ives countryside: a static, iced-over Hudson River pondscape that could as well be in Holland by Hendrick Avercamp, his "Winter Landscape with Ice Skaters" painted in the harsh Amsterdam winter of 1608. Or Caspar David Friedrich's Winter Landscape of 1811:

What is the silence, the quest of these wounded notes, resolving for a second before the next mystery, adding overtones that layer the moonscape with blind loss.

Footprints are like fingerprints, though. They are our identity, easily erased by the slightest breeze. Starting tentatively with a discordance, they sluggishly stagger upwards, then pause and start again, a dying man struggling for the horizon, lost in snow. His hands stab out in the treble bar, forming a similar, upward-reaching arc, without the discordance. Then a gasp for breath, marked by an aspirate in the score, and the dragging, Frankenstein-like footfalls start again. The hands reach out, higher.

The steps begin again, more complex, with lower notes adding more despondent harmonies, sinking down in despair as the steps force themselves onward. A short melody breaks out in the bass, very similar to the theme of the hands, as if some spectral presence under the snow mocks the hands, striving for light, a good metaphor for what a pianist or a composer tries to do with a piece of music.

The piece begins again, this time with a more active melody above and below the footsteps, thickening into chords, the body's adrenalin rising for one last time towards the endless horizon.

But it's useless. The discordant notes grow fainter, weaker, fading away into the white air.

The steps now descend into hell, or stupor, or a crevasse, consciousness dying out, until the echoing clouds close in over the lost pianist.

Matthew Greenbaum talks about the contradictory nature of each statement in *Des pas*, what Noam Chomsky would call negative syntax, grating tonal ambiguities which, being put down like footsteps, resolve into the snow, until the next one falls, higher up the diatonic hill.

Leonard Bernstein describes, in his Norton Lectures: *The Unanswered Question*, Harvard, 1971, this musical grammar, using St. Augustine's self-canceling exhortation, both threat and promise:

> Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved.
> Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.

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

Something has been said. Despite the zero sum of the two oppositions, a message has been conveyed between the lines: don't go to extremes, live your life in the middle. don't be presumptuous. But on the other hand, don't be paranoid. Take all things as they come. This is an extraordinarily Buddhist thought for a converted hedonist 2000 years ago, but then Buddhism was in the air 500 years before Christ.

But it isn't either-or, as Kant would insist. Both thieves exist at the same time and in the same space, and have equal merit. They dramatize Hegelian pluralism.

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

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

But Debussy (who wasn't there) creates the feeling of anomie, dissociation, strangification, the angst of realizing that we exist peripherally, outside the clockwork of astronomical alignments. *Des pas* is a portrait of living catalepsy, the life in death of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, of Dracula. If you gave a concert and then disappeared, this would be on the program.

Its anomie is also in harmony with the mechanisms of celestial assonance. In the resolution of its dissonance it soothes us into believing that the universe can be resolved, that space is finite, that human knowledge can encompass and thus control existence. To unearth the earth, to expose our false assumptions, Debussy uses primal scales. This was only three years before

Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps* caused a riot at its premiere at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées in Paris.

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

The Phrygian and Lydian modes, scales used by monks, which sound very modern, ascetic, or severe to our more melodic Western ear, are in fact very old-fashioned, harking back to the days before we tempered tonality to be more in agreement with itself.

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

There is something in us which dares disturb the universe, which wants to unite the vice versa of space into an adjusted Julian calendar which rearranges celestial time around human affairs.

This is a pathetic fallacy, the illusion that we can control the weather, the illusion that fate shapes its ends around us. Each of us in our time demands that the sky conform to our small plans for it, our tiny exigencies of beach-going, cliff-falling.

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

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

Logical progressions are themselves based on a duality, on contradicting answers: we arrive at correct premises only by

posing and then discarding flawed suppositions. Lewis Carroll pointed out the errors of a purely logical approach to life in his *Symbolic Logic*:

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

We juxtapose the true with the false. In Hegelian pluralism there can be two or more truths operating simultaneously. There are flaws in space, wormholes, which contradict an ordered world. Einstein discovered space (and thus time) to be warped, even curved. Quantum mechanics posits the existence of concurrent universes, where time can flow at different rates.

A similar flaw to logical consistency is revealed by Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. Before Achilles can catch up with the tortoise, he must logically at some point halve the distance between himself and the turtle. He must then halve that distance, and so on. If that premise is correct, Achilles can never reach the tortoise. And yet we know he does. Tom Stoppard bases his play *Jumpers* on this paradox. John Barth wrote *The End of the Road* to demonstrate the necessary inconsistencies of existence.

And so Debussy explores through footsteps the concept of music contradicting itself, crawling to the heights, only to fall back down again in the same contradictory patterns.

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

But as Debussy wrote in an essay in *Gil Blas* in 1903, ". . . music has a life of its own that will always prevent it from being too precise. It says everything that one cannot put into words; thus it is logical that to emphasize it is to diminish it."

The year before he wrote *Des pas*, Debussy realized he had cancer. In the wide spaces of St.-Germaine-en-Laye, where he had walked in the winter fields, sight fades into the snow. But on the sidewalks of Paris, there are no imprints. We make no impression on an asphalt world. The warm amber light of sunset clarifies an empty winter alley, as footprints fill the white-out with temporary energy. The way a prodigy fills the world with promise. No mucho promesa ahora. Paris, without its vast systems, its arteries of luxury, is a city of drains. Winter is the way the world was, before color.

Chouchou was his promise. Dead at 13 from diptheria, she was buried in his grave a year after he was. That light just touching the edges of the limestone fires the city briefly when we look at it. Listen to the wind howl. It is because of us it is howling. Debussy's snow is heard by us, the spaces in between the wind, where the storm flurries. In us, for one night only, Chouchou lives. Listening, we bring our dead back, while the blizzard rages around us.

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

People have speculated, as did Jessica Duchen on page 158 of her *Gabriel Fauré*, that Fauré watched over the lake at Lugano in Switzerland, where he spent his summers, and that the bezels of light and shadow off the ripples there were the visual equivalent of the major and minor flickers of tonality across the surface of his compositions, particularly his water pieces such as the barcarolles, which he wrote on and off during his life.

In the way that light was everything for Monet and Turner (Monet painted without his glasses so people could see the world out of focus and filled with textures as he saw it; Turner had himself strapped to the mast during a storm at sea so he could paint it later), Fauré is here trying to catch the midges in the air, the soft summer yellow light on the underside of a chestnut leaf, the fresh smell of mulch, mowed fields, flowing water, and, maybe in the distance the faint music of a Sunday lunch on the grass, tipsy villagers humming sporadically to music strummed by the family guitarists. The gondola here is a French dinghy, a barque, just as much a tradition as the Italian gondola.

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

I mingle that accompaniment mysteriously with the melody, so the gossamer glints of a gentle, warm day become inseparable from the Venetian theme, the dream-child moving through wonderland. When played too matter-of-factly, the dream dissipates. Pierre-Alain Volondat captures it well, although my own path is more irresponsible. The melody is so distinct that you never run the risk of losing it in the swallow spirals and vinous traces of its companion runnels which rise to the sky from the deeper tones of the river.

The midsection is that exquisite afternoon in a boat, any boat, on the Dordogne, or along the Seine in any of Manet's rowboats.

By bringing out the melody at the expense of the wandering, lost descant, the music becomes too deterministic, goal-oriented, which is the opposite of the mood Fauré seems to intend. Does Saturday afternoon in the park have to end in a business meeting? Do the important parts have to advertise themselves? Can they make a point without shouting? Does every note have to be squarely in place and in its time slot, like a sub-rights assistant in a cubicle, or is there hesitation, doubt, invention, improvisation, some silence where you can hear the composer composing, where someone takes a pause to create, rather than perform? Does there have to be a rush to the end, or can it just fade away slowly like the light at the end of a perfect day on a country river? Has anyone who plays this piece ever drifted with- out any agenda down a river, past hollow willows, trumpet vines, oaks shading the burble with barely moving shadows? There is a world beyond metronomes,

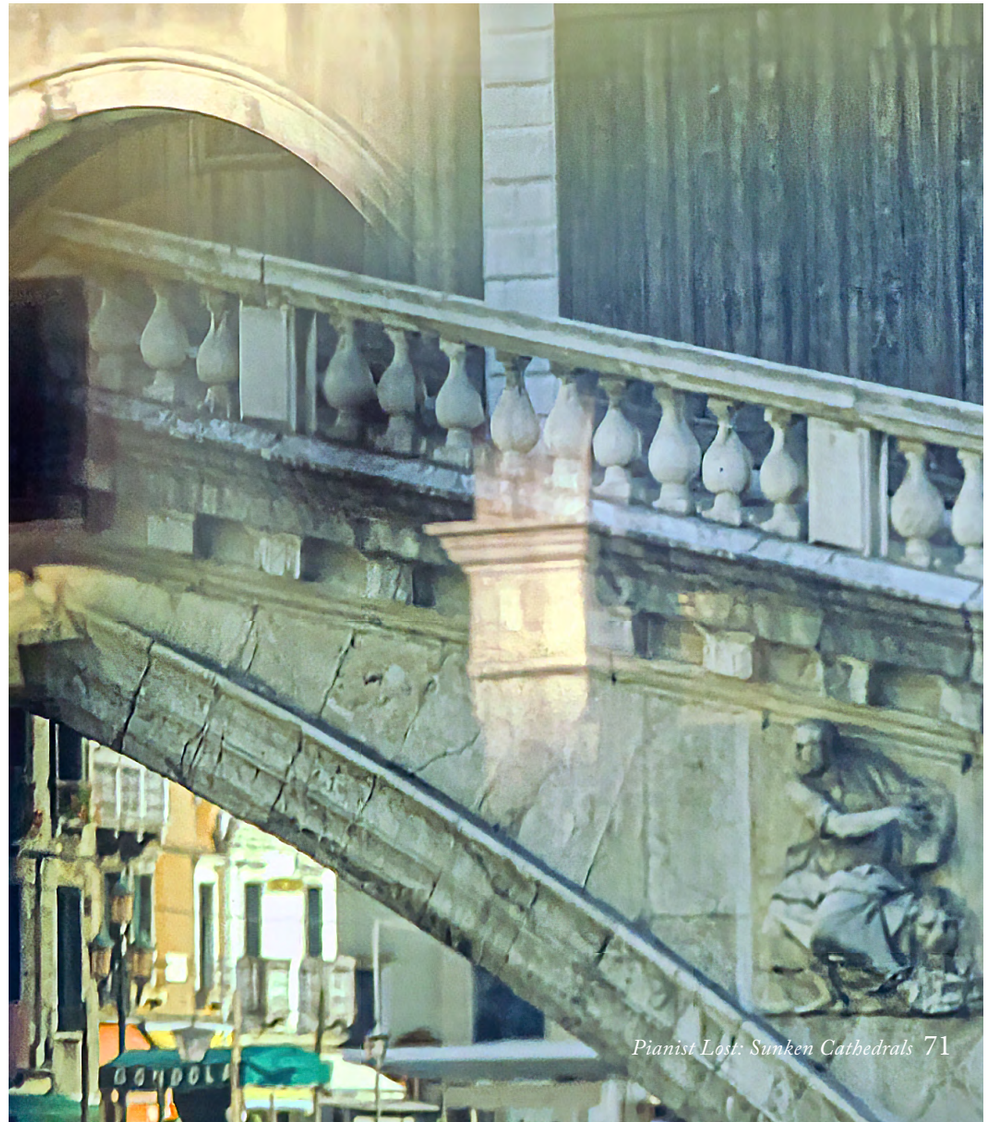
schedules, autobahns, and confused car alarms. Which world do we play for?

You might wonder how Fauré embroiders his notes around the melody, and I think it's exactly the same way as a seamstress feather-stitches a seam, making a small pattern out of what would otherwise be a nondescript line of reinforcing thread. Fauré uses the notes under and over the melody, the neighbor notes, to create a scale, and then simply continues that scale farther than usual, so it spirals up like smoke. But, like smoke, it has to waft with the breeze, to float with the thermals at sunset, wander into the last sunlit spaces under the dark foliage, like Courbet's *Young Women on the Banks of the Seine*, like Monet's and Manet's rowboats, becalmed in dark, Henri Rousseau primeval forests, not too different from the riverbanks of the Dordogne today.

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

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

As a forest doesn't beat you over the head with its shade, so Fauré believed in the surreptitious and the clandestine, the nuanced, elegant, and restrained. This is a particularly French ethos. If you study the light in Corot, Rousseau, or Manet, you understand the gradations of light and dark Fauré intended.



In 1880 the world was alive with impressionistic glimmers and ripples, such as Renoir's *On the Terrace*, or Monet's *Woman with a Parasol*, Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold*. There were no sounds on the country river back then other than leaves rustled briefly by the breeze, the backsplash of oars, the billow of small sails. Impressionists hadn't yet begun to differentiate themselves, and Paris was united in the way it saw nature. That is, people saw Monet's colors in the sky.

This is a song from that period, before the camera made clarity compulsory. Myopia imparts a more mystical blur to objects the camera might see as decayed or hopeless, and the age finally, along with Fauré himself, seesawed away from this golden moment (but not necessarily beyond it).

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

Here is a message from the world of your great-grandparents, a postcard from a (slightly dizzy) bandstand.

WATER MUSIC 1

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

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

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

We often cease our explorations into the uncertainties of existence after discouraging encounters with the unimaginative math of grade-school pedants, but we are wrong to stop at easy answers to impossible questions. Certain people would rather the loose ends be tied up right now, all problems solved, all plots finalized, all segues diagrammed, rather than having metaphors suggested by poetry lead us down the rabbit hole into vaster dimensions and new questions. Take your choice: robomusic, or the skitter and scramble of bongos; tearoom music of the prim afternoon or the gypsy Scrabble of the possibly empty night. Even the social leveler, the suburban yardstick of the waltz, allows its corseted strictures to be pushed and pulled, because musicians instinctively know that charm comes from the quirks, the accidents, the empty boxes where we expect to find pencil marks, the flaws, the uneven flows of the human heart.

As Paderewski said of time:

> There is no absolute rhythm. In the course of the dramatic developments of a musical composition, the initial themes change their character; consequently rhythm changes also, and, in conformity with that character, it has to be energetic or languishing, crisp or elastic, steady or capricious....
>
> Paderewski makes another wonderful comment:
>
> Some people, evidently led by laudable principles of equity, while insisting on the fact of stolen time, pretend that what is stolen ought to be restored.... The value of notes diminished in one period through accelerando, cannot *always* be restored in another by ritardando. What is lost is lost.

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

Proust feels that lost time can be recaptured, not through math, but through art. We can reverse the flow of time with the nostalgia of music, or the perfect equation of words. A verse in poetry comes from the Italian and the Latin words for "flowing." The universe is flowing in one direction. Of course, once Einstein comes along, we realize that time is curved in on itself, particles repeat in other dimensions, there are mirror symmetries, and time can be recaptured. We are blinded to the larger patterns by what Nabokov calls the "frenzied corpuscles of Krause."

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

The metronome is the great enemy of complex music; its unforgiving schoolmarm ruler-on-the-knuckles school of sing-song scales and slavish rote has gone a long way to remove

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

Composers have been trying since the beginning of music to capture its unbridled and indescribable fury, its delicate murmur and drip (Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau*), its demonic rage (Debussy's *Jardins dans la pluie*), the Walpurgisnacht of storm (Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*), gondolas lolling in the canals (Mendelssohn's various gondola songs; Liszt's and Schubert's *Hungarian Melody*, Alkan's *Barcarolle*) saints walking on water (Liszt's *St. Francis de Paul Walking on the Water*), fountains drizzling and trilling (Liszt's *Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*), tides swelling and breaking (Chopin's "ocean wave" étude), or the infinity and silence of steps or steppes in the snow (Debussy's *Des pas sur la Neige*; Rachmaninoff's G-Sharp Minor Prélude), the first movement of Rachmaninoff's Suite No. 1 (Barcarolle).

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

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

WATER MUSIC 2

O linden bough, O leaves,
Teach us your intervals:
Our strings are strung so false . . .

—Archibald MacLeish, "The Linden Bough"

We poor drowning species, frozen between the axes of planets, between day and night, both anchored and pulled apart by magnetism, between the dark tilt of equators, precessing nodes, which shift our calendar dates due to minor orbital wobbles, rising waters, where the clouds are upside down in the waves, in the visible and hidden colors, in heard and unhearable sounds, in our discordant race to the edges, cut off from deeper music by white noise, immersed in dog paddles while around us cathedrals rise—us, inheritors of wrong notes, of an unmetered sky, of monstrous mistakes: what can we offer to the harmony of worlds but our own imitations; how would we talk to trees but through their own sounds, by making pictures of streams and songs of leaves broken into cries for mercy? Save us, heal us, we have seen the fire in the sun and heard the rain on the water and we have made it into mirrors, to hold in front of rustlings in the woods, so the shifty gods who shuffle in their seats will finally listen, will hear the monstrance before silence overwhelms them. We desperate, useless, unemployed jugglers croon these scops for you, to save mermaids from the colorless depths, where there is no warmth, no end.

Music is frozen sky, pulled down to ground like lightning out of rhyming magnetism and cosmic lights; water is that same sky thawed, cut open, released on earth, notes turned from air into molecules weighed with rain. As clouds unleash vaporized sea on the desperate land, music rains its ends on our aimless oceans. As oceans vaporize into clouds which then congeal into cosmic rivers, frequencies weigh on our tossing sleep until they drop into the troposphere of notes. Vast cosmic forms are thus translated into graspable norms. The unholdable realm of hydrogen and oxygen becomes a repeatable event you can inhale.

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

There was a quieter world 150 years ago where gondolas, fountains, waves, rain in gutters were a link to the music of the spheres, where the lap and swash of harbor tides was an onomatopoeia of betrayal and love, where canals and rivers channeled the sounds of oceans, while today we have the swash of jets, the surf of roads, the breeze of ducts, the thunder of subways, machines on top of machines, an overworld of honks that mock the geese in the sky. A sprinkler no longer spews wonders. The moment has passed, deadened by bombs.

And this our life, exempt from human haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II, i, 17–19

Monet painted without his glasses to capture the poetry of blurred colors, the way he saw them. Maybe we are far enough away from the myopia of Impressionism to reconsider the transistorized rebound of ripples against piers, the symmetries between sand and silicon as sea fuses on a glassy shore, the cantor sets of increasingly smaller mirror images that recede into infinity as waves echo waves, as sonogram echoes map unborn hearts: new ways of listening to the smallest parts of t he world late at night, after the engines of the Krell shut down. We can revisit the ricochet of the natural world off our metallic cars, hear Java scripts in the boredom of downpours, modern comfort in the compiled languages of hail, the Armageddon of a faucet which urban linguists must master on their way to the floating world, masked in plastic abnormalities. The old answers to new plagues come from recipes locked in swamps. Holy men surf in sewers, the way Tamino must undergo our human systems to unlock the magic flute's redemptive keys.

We futurists from ancient countries offer these glyphs to calm the daily seas, to muffle grown grief in grade-school snow, to cover rainy solar roofs with film noir nights, to rock the rental barque in the comfortable sway of tides caught in passing from the other side of the chessboard.

MY FIRST PIANO

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

Amygdalas left behind at the spinet would have been brutalized by the din, the tag, the slides, the innings and outs of the outdoors, and are better off in the carrel or inside the piano bench of sheet-music childhoods.

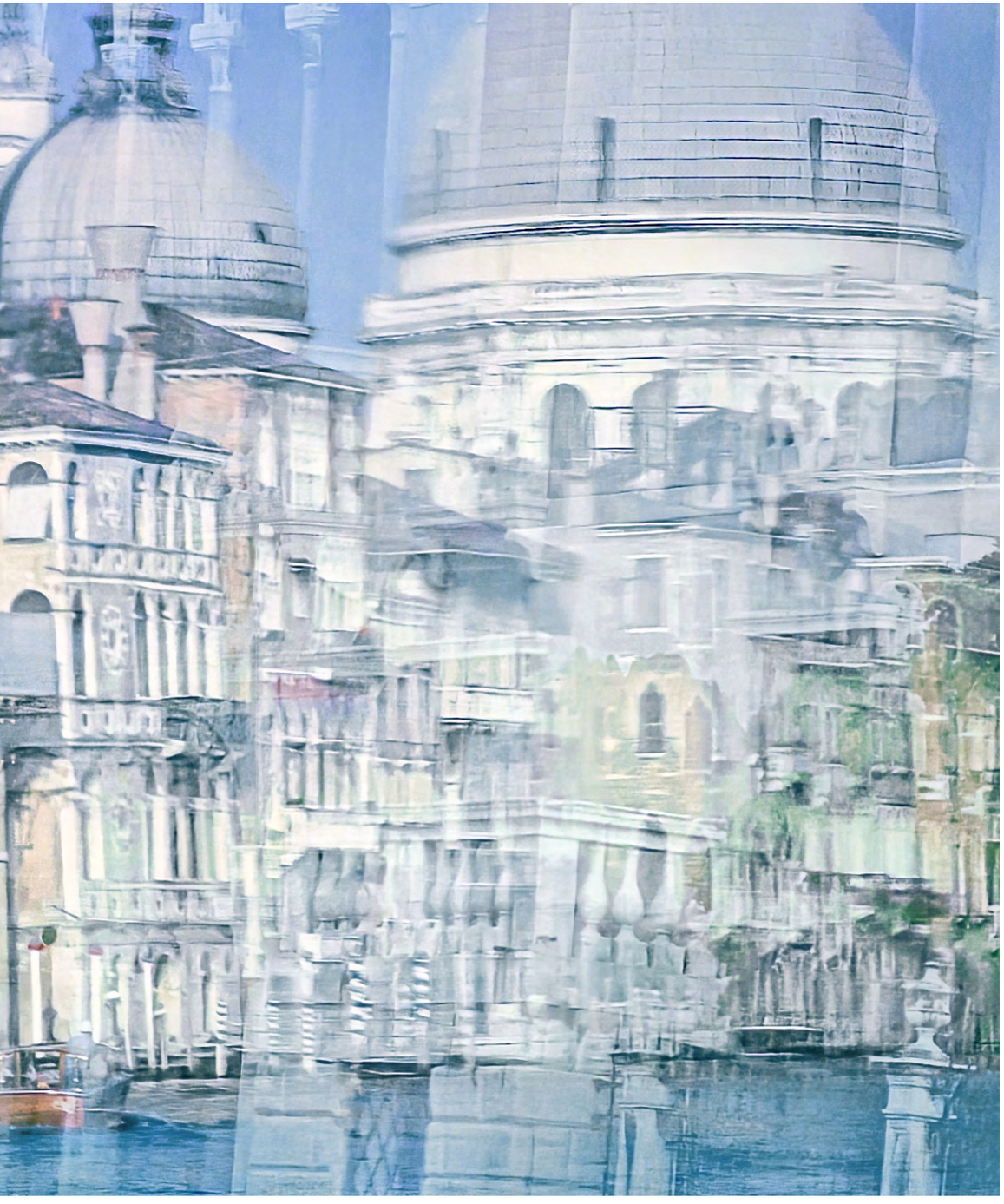
I was one of thousands of Robbie Robots shuffling into the kiddie concert corner, the vast landscapes of our obsessions etched into the silver nitrate of our darkrooms; we were Ray Atkeson, Eugène Atget, Ansel Adams, Alvin Langdon Coburn, the Paris night flickering on the Yosemite lintels and gas mantle cobblestones of the music.

We know the Beethoven sonatas, the Mozart sonatas, the tiny sonatinas of Kuhlau, Clementi, Scarlatti, the Debussy études, Chopin préludes, and Fauré nocturnes; we know Hanon and Czerny scales, Verdi scores, Liszt transcriptions. We know every scratch on that first piano, the fall of the afternoon on every foxed, yellowing waltz, the teacher's scribble over those missed staccati, the lean of the books in the bookcase, the precise quadrant, line and page, minute and day where our moral apotheoses were etiolated by platitudinous evasions (even now I have turned directly to that provocative page, frozen in its palace forever, unlike the mutant scrolling of these digital codices).

We memorize not only chords but the hum of the mower outside, the hymn of the washing machine in the new wing, the chunk of a distant duct, the empty hiss of the hibernating parentless house, populated only by appliances and slants of dust-filled sun through the Orangeaded Saran wrap of the afternoon, leadened by the bulbous glass of the turret, partitioned by mullions into a wall of murals, the lawn outside curated and hung by the intrusive window.

The blotters of our minds and fingers soak up every false step of the knuckle, every tumble of the thumb, the dirty fingerprints of the ivories, whorls, and smudges of undisciplined earth which humanize otherwise suave and slippery identities into recognizable characters, where presumptuous two-stepping pawns are captured as they skip a space in passing down the keybed.

Lamplight takes on the same fiendish shade as yellow hemp in old paperbacks. All scores are footnoted, or footnotes are scored, with the rush and thud of Gershwin or Grofé memorized instantly, surrounded, even embarrassed, by their accompanying piano notes, a neighborhood of hammering trivia structured by the rigor of a fugue into common sense, childhood given purpose, life composed, the postcard diorama of the picture window and the juvenile recreations it framed turned into Constables by mesmerizing creations above the soporific keyboard, infantile lawns and rogue sprinklers put to sleep and tucked in cozily by an understanding chord as the trance of memorization shuffles off into sleep, bird yodels decoyed into mathematical proofs by the circle of fifths,



logarithms as close to divine intervention as the fifth-grade brain can imagine.

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

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

THE ONOMATOPOEIA OF WATER

A sign that says "Rome" is only a sign, not Rome itself. The confusion of metaphor with the music it interprets led to the abuses which turned the Romantics against their own youthful syllogisms.

The stories which transmute water music into universal fables are not voyages, but only their soggy baggage. They are Potemkin villages of wet cardboard, which stand in flimsily for real villages. Such simplistic substitutions cheapen the deeper waters of more ethereal correspondences.

As Baudelaire said in his poem "Correspondances":

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

The familiar metaphors we use in describing music are in fact quite confused. Trees drop leaves as clues, long echoes of profound unities in the dusk, the pathetic fallacy of a universe compliant in and complicit with our imaginary symmetries. Cheap tricks of incense, of sounds, are mere suggestions of a parallel and infinite world. Music may be a wormhole to that universe, but its clues must not be mistaken for the singularity itself. The hints of language and music are only ways into space, transporters of the spirit and the senses. They are the cars, but not the destination. We must not mistake the forest for the trees. We pass through Baudelaire's symbols on our way somewhere else. We must not get stuck in front of the fire in Plato's cave.

SYLLOGISMS

Nature is a forest where the living limbs
Of trees drop clues like dying leaves
On anyone beneath them who believes
In such ghostly passing whims,
distant echoes of a dark and deep ravine
Where night and day are intertwined
And in whose mixing light we find
What the deeper colors mean.

These combining scents would seem
To fuse us with a purer world,
Where amber dusk and incense dream
Of all the endless riches swirled
And held by music's gleam,
But which in fact are just its seam.

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

For instance, Liszt's *Les Préludes* had nothing to do with Lamartine's essay which held that "life is but a prelude to death," but was adapted from a choral piece based on a completely different Lamartine essay, "The Four Elements." The introduction to the piece wasn't written by Lamartine, but by Liszt, who ultimately denied it, and claimed that he intended *Les Préludes* as a metaphor for how the music itself was composed.

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

There must be other solutions to why music seems to be a language, and why it seems to be telling a story, and how its own vocabulary transports us beyond the mere story into the deeper meaning of the tale. I saw the Metropolitan Opera's filmed production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* recently where the sound of the opera had been erroneously swapped for a local radio station, selling ads for hair lotions and college degrees, very much like Woody Allen's *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* He makes up his own subtitles to a movie that is obviously a budget Japanese action film.

In the same way, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* offers up a serious poem about the poet's daughter's death and then pastes on footnotes written by a madman who wants to make the poem about the loss of his supposed kingdom. Of course, the footnotes are the story Nabokov wants to be believed, which is the true story of his loss of his grandfather's kingdom. His grandfather was the czar. Expatriate Russia was filled with such tall tales, and so Nabokov's reality had long been traduced to the sad (if accurate) sob story of a legion of Riviera doormen who had been Russian princes. An entire aristocracy had been displaced, and Europeans had grown tired of its incessant tragedies. This moral fatigue is the true tragedy of war. Nabokov thus traded places entertainingly with a madman to tell his own story.

Shakespeare himself tells a similar story, so outrageous that four centuries of academics have refused to listen to it.

The Ivory Soap *Tannhäuser* was much more compelling than Wagner's suspicious homage to a super race. Its ironies rang true, exposing Wagner's grandiosities. Its truths thus appeared between the lines, as a subtext. Thus the most believable plots are obvious lies, conspiracy theories, comic book myths (as most American movies are today). We only believe ironies. We are postmodern. Programs are thus intended to get us only halfway there, to a place where the real revelations begin. Plots are the warm-up bands, the shills.

I once sat down at a café in the Lubéron, the once remote area of Provence which Peter Mayle's book *A Year in Provence* had turned into a tourist trap. (Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals* had done the same thing to Corfu.) In a few minutes, several French girls took up tables in a few of the surrounding cafés. The tour buses arrived, spewing out waddling pioneers with the Mayle book in their hands. They all sat down in the cafés, soaking up the "traditional" atmosphere, at which point the girls finished their espressos, got up, and wafted off, leaving the village entirely populated by tourists, looking at each other in confusion. Much like G. K. Chesterton's book, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, where a gang of anarchists is infiltrated by police until no anarchists remain.

We mustn't end up at the end of a piece holding onto the same symbols we came in with. The plot is only the way station. We musn't confuse the train with the destination.

Peter Sellars changed the plots of Handel, Wagner, and Mozart operas to more modern scenarios set at a beach resort, an airport, and Trump Tower. Tired programs and librettos are invigorated by new myths. Jorge Luis Borges has a short story about Pierre Menard, who "translated" *Don Quixote* by simply copying it over.

Even science, that sanctuary of unchangeable facts, questions itself, as new generations rethink the reasons for existence. Richard Feynman came up with new theories of particles, flying paper airplanes in class and asking questions about how it all worked, taking no principle for granted. He developed a new language for particles.

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

HELICOPTER SEEDS

Spinning gyroscopes of spring,
Girls rise swirling on the wing,
Floating dandelions, unplanned,
Their meaning being just to land.
When umbrellas tumble from a gentian,
Is it just to get attention?
Is all that windblown fluff a blitz
Without its reassuring Google hits?

Is all this inflorescent flight
Just to titillate the sight,
The raison d'être of a seed
Only adolescent need?

Must all destiny be manifest,
Souls invisible and second best,
As if "to be or not to be"-ing
Were only based on viewers seeing?

Is a second's kiss the test of ever,
Where never turns to everest?
Is love created by a prayer?
Do milkweeds whirl because *we're* there,

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

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

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

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

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

Not to say it isn't chic
To reck the rede we sometimes wreak—
Like those breathless girls who also fell
Upside down in kiss and tell?

And so, to see into the soul of a piece of music, we must understand its parables, but be able to jump past them to their underlying meaning. This is the moment when you get goosebumps, when you understand what hasn't been shown, or played, or explained. When you read, or hear, or see between the lines.

WATER MUSIC

The rain comes in
in starts and fits,
working up the spirit
for a storm
and then, losing all its
guesses, settles down,
resigned to “I don’t know,”
to pings and drips,
as night processes
like the moon,
shining down dull,
lit streets of sea,
until the liquid tune
up high slips
into the swells of deep
monotones below,
and finally
into sleep.

PETER HALSTEAD

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

brinkerhoffpoetry.org
Sea Sun
Sublimation
A World Luciferined
Poems, 2015 – 2017
Poems, 2019 – 2022
Blinds
Poems of Earth
Face Your Dreams
Postcard Poems
Paris Poems I
Paris Poems II
Love Poems
Poems 2022-23

BOOKS

Tippet Rise Beginnings (in two volumes)
Prisms in the Air, Grenfell Press
Fluorescence (with Mark di Suvero)
Tippet Rise (Princeton Architectural Press)
Into the Window
A Winter Ride
Bug the Great

MUSIC (The Pianist Lost Series)

pianistlost.com
Excesses and Excuses
Sunken Cathedrals
Boatsongs
False Love
Reply Hazy
The Gift To Be Simple

FILM

The Yeti

eBOOKS

Fissures in the Snow
https://indd.adobe.com/view/fd8e3a47-96bc-436d-b295-d5329e1239bd

Snows and Songs and Ghosts
https://indd.adobe.com/view/8832c77a-95bc-444e-94ff-69d0aa9a80ba

Wind Around the Stars
https://tippetrise.org/library/wind-around-the-stars

On the Rim of Time
https://indd.adobe.com/view/92e9cb20-6ac2-4377-86ab-342f97110040

Learn more about the Halsteads and their work for poetry and the arts here.

PIANIST LOST: SUNKEN CATHEDRALS

PLEASE CLICK THE RED TITLES TO LISTEN TO THE PERFORMANCE

1. Charles-Valentin Alkan: Barcarolle, Opus 65, No. 6, Trente Chants, Troisiéme Suite, G Minor, 1844, edition G. Schirmer, ed. Lewenthal

2. Felix Mendelssohn: Venetian Boat-Song No. 1, Opus 19, No. 6, G Minor, 1830

3. Felix Mendelssohn: Venetian Boat-Song No. 2, Opus 30, No. 6, F-sharp Minor, 1834

4. Felix Mendelssohn: Venetian Boat-Song No. 3, Opus 62, No. 5, A Minor, 1844

5. Felix Mendelssohn: Boat-Song (Posthumous), Opus 102, No. 7, A Major, 1845

6. Fryderyka Chopina: Barcarolle, Opus 60, F Sharp Major, 1845–1846, Edition Instytut Fryderyka Chopina XI, ed. Paderewski

7. Claude Debussy: "La cathédrale engloutie," from Préludes, Premier Livre, No. X, C Major, 1910

8. Claude Debussy: "Des pas sur la neige," Préludes, Premier Livre, No. VI, D Minor, 1910

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