

Steve Glines

Painting before I was deaf

IT WAS TO BE A MAGICAL RECITAL OF RUSSIAN PIANO COMPOSITIONS. Women in furs, bedecked in jewelry as sparkling as a Victorian evening. Dressed for the theater I sat quietly in my seat. I could hear the murmur of the audience as we waited for the show to begin.

He walks in, black suit with tails. He stands, momentarily pausing in front of the bench before flipping his tails behind him. He sits, pauses again as if trying to remember the piece, or perhaps composing himself before launching into a flurry of arm and finger movements too fast to think about, pure muscle memory. Or perhaps he was just calming himself down, stage fright, removing the audience from his consciousnesses.

He presses a key, then another. He is playing *Prelude & Fugue in D-flat Major Op. 87, No 15* by Shostakovich. The sour sound of a badly tuned piano reach my ears. One key after another, flat, horribly flat. It's awful.

I am wearing hearing aids. I cannot hear above 4000 Hertz, normal hearing extends up to 20,000 Hertz. To compensate, my hearing aids compress the audio range between 30 and 10,000 Hertz down to between 30 and 3500 Hertz. Like Dolby compression on the old turntables I had as a kid. Normally I would compensate for the compression. It allows me to hear and understand normal voices and background music but it completely destroys the finer audio arts. I rip them out of my ears and hold them tightly in a fist. The piano is loud and each keystroke is in perfect tune, mostly.

Someone turns around and growls at me. An usher comes running down the aisle and my neighbor pokes me. I realize that my hearing aids, held tightly in my fist, must be squealing, apparently quite loudly, although I cannot hear them. I loosen my grasp and unlock the battery case on each, turning them off. I whisper "sorry," to my neighbor.

I close my eyes and concentrate on the piano thirty feet in front of me. It's a giant Steinway. When played at full volume it's loud enough for me to hear every note and nuance. I realize that the higher keys, say, the top twenty, still sound tinny to me. I'm thinking too much as my brain first looks for a, perhaps, non-existent melody in this piece. Perhaps that's not the point. Every keystroke follows the next in some kind of logical, but not, to my mind anyway, repetitive pattern. There is no discernible melody. Then there are the occasional very high keys. They still sound tinny.

The "why" interrupts the music. I realize that the primary tone of the higher keys are far above what I can hear. What I do hear are all the lower harmonics and they sound awful without the intended sound. What colors the sound of a musical instrument are not the discrete sounds, say middle C, but rather the primary note, again, say, a middle C, plus all the enhanced harmonics both above and below the principal sound. These are produced and encouraged by the shape and construction of the instrument. That's why an oboe sounds different from a piano when they play the same note.

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Satisfied, I return to the music. The piece ends, the audience politely claps, the pianist stands up, takes a short bow and sits down again. The pause this time is shorter. The program says this next piece is *Preludes Op. 32, No. 12* in G-sharp minor by Rachmaninoff. I've never heard any of these before, I think. I don't really know.

When I was younger, much younger and could hear, I would sit at my drafting table while the radio played WCRB, a classical radio station in Boston. It was background music and the quiet voice of Robert J. Lurtsema would intone the history of each obscure piece by a succession of Russian composers before playing a series of them to completion. I wonder if I have ever heard any of these compositions before? Would I recognize any?

This piece has more "umph" to it. It's darker, heavier yet still with some of the high keys that grate on my nerves. I wonder if Beethoven felt this way in his later years when he too was deprived of hearing properly? At least he could imagine what it was supposed to sound like, I cannot.

I close my eyes and concentrate on the music. Music reminds me of poetry. When I could hear I spent hours at poetry readings. I never heard anything profound, that I've always left that to the scholars, rather I would listen for clauses, phrases, short statements that evoked visual scenes. A butterfly poem that evoked Picasso, a deeply romantic poem that sounded like waterlilies.

My eyes are closed while the pianist pounds out this piece by Rachmaninoff. The roadrunner pops into view and Wile coyote plans to capture him by sitting on a fireworks rocket. It's the music for an old black and white movie played on a theater piano but with the deeper sounds of the Steinway. I giggle. Rachmaninoff should not be paired with the roadrunner. The work ends, I open my eyes. Next on the list is a piece by Stravinsky.

This work is more lively, it dances all over the keyboard. There are high notes and plenty of base. It's Bugs Bunny escaping from Elmer Fudd. Which way did he go? Still no melody that I can discern but each key seems to follow the last in some logical order. Nothing is out of step or out of place.

Next we have a sonata by Prokofiev. It should have a melody but I can't find one. I close my eyes and suddenly see paint flying across the scene in front of me in a Jackson Pollock frenzy. Sharps are red and yellow, base tones are black, brown and occasionally blue, dark blue. A staccato of inaudible high notes splatter yellow, oranges and white across my canvas. Layer upon layer, it builds in a psychedelic frenzy. Reds and yellows countered with great splashes of gray and black ending with a single note somewhere below middle C. The pianist lets it linger while the audience gasps. It's a dramatic ending.

Last on the program is *The Rite of Spring, Part II: The Sacrifice* by Stravinsky. I don't even look for a melody, just a few bars that force me to envision a large brush heavily laden with oil paints. A series of notes on the lower side, a long slow pass of the brush, yellows and sepia on one side, a dark blue to black on the other. It makes a stroke down one side of the canvas. Staccato brings short dabs of reds and yellow and greens and I can feel a throb in the music, not a melody but a throb that oc-

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asionally brings dabs of red and yellow, then black and browns and blues. Picasso, no de Kooning, no Rothko, no Pollock. A few bars before the ending I hear one misplaced note. I cannot tell you why it's misplaced but it falls outside of my programmed hearing. It's either the wrong key or a slightly off beat key. I can't tell. Finally, one last note is kept alive by the pianist and the piano slowly reverberates. I instinctively hold my breath as the volume diminishes, eventually falling below my hearing threshold but I imagine it diminishing still further and further, until I can hear and imagine nothing.

The audience erupts with applause and I open my eyes. Around me everyone is standing and clapping with enthusiasm. I stand and begin to clap. I still have my hearing aids in my hand. I close the battery case, put them in my ears and clap with everyone else.

I put my on my coat, and walk into the night. The sounds of the city are familiar and I hear what I need to. A horn honks and I hear the music of the night. There is a melody on the street, I prefer that now.